

# EL MORADO

SUSPENDED  
REASON

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A bildungsroman. A trilogy response. [ ]  
A handbook to courtship, a primer on glam.  
Gestalt documentary. [ ] Genre, gender,  
genus; two generations, forty years apart.  
Literary crossdressing, the feminine as form.  
Does form transform content? [ ]  
Literary criticism on the writing of Maggie  
Nelson, Ottessa Moshfegh, Chris Kraus,  
McKenzie Wark, Kathy Acker, Anne Carson,  
Andrea Long Chu, Tavi Gevinson, and  
Phoebe Waller-Bridge. A fog of confusion.  
A record of [ch-ch-ch-ch-] changes. The  
good-bad bad-good years, the years between,  
entre-deux-guerres.

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find their way home.”



# INTERIOR

Part I	
Belabor, I	6
Part II	76
Belabor, II	86
Part III	197
A	216
ꝝ	331
Θ	334
	343







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# I.

B: *How can you watch a bunch of Girls episodes and then feel embarrassed about your gchat rants? This is life.*

:// Let the person who wants a vision hang himself by his neck. When his face turns purple, take him down and have him describe what he's seen.<sup>1</sup>

:// Pothos (Greek: Πόθος “yearning”): one of Aphrodite’s erotes and brother to Himeros and Eros. In some versions of myth, Pothos is the son of Eros, or is portrayed as an independent aspect of him.[5] He was part of Aphrodite’s retinue, and carried a vine, indicating a connection to wine or the god Dionysus. Pothos represents longing or yearning.[17]

∞

“Somewhere along the way I lost my nerve,” I said at one point. “And only now am I wondering if I can recover it.”

*Pothos, it merely takes believing to believe.*<sup>2</sup> In the bar, actors traumatized by the business of professional vulnerability, worn thin inside from keeping double books, the private/public ledgers.// Romantic relationships that require turning parts of your brain off.// I was having one of those day-dreams endemic to the under-30—these being fantasies of death, recognition, and consummation.

1 Kelsey, Bernadette Corp.

2 Chorus: *Hyperstition is just law of attraction for straight men.*

This is Lou Reed's vision of the city as a machine of transformation, not unlike the old immigrant ceremony where new arrivals lined up in Old World garb, climbed into a twelve-foot pot made of pewter and symbolism for their ceremonial smelting, & emerged reborn in the New World's dress.

Drink: a 1:2 ratio the Goldilocks zone for a gin and tonic// Ep. notes at home: the thrill of the Chuck-Blaire pair-off == the thrill of raw power in play, pulling out stops, pursuing ends. The power's economic *and* social; capital is capital, and prohibition never stood a chance next to exhibition.// *um, like... I would just describe the writing style as taking that blaknwhite 70s New York style and just dunking it in lavender techno synths?* and I grinned.

Get it from Aulus, Gellius, second century AD: «It is said that Demosthenes in his dress and other personal habits was excessively spruce, elegant and studied. It was for that reason that he was taunted by his rivals and opponents with his “exquisite, pretty mantles” and “soft, pretty tunics”; for that reason, too, that they did not refrain from applying to him foul and shameful epithets, alleging that he was no man and was even guilty of unnatural vice.»

When I tried to sleep I thought of Beckett's *Endgame*. I thought about putting the lids on the garbage cans and shutting out light. I thought about waiting it out until the endtime.

Maybe I perked up, hungry for a second. Maybe I thought about this hunger, weighed it against the costs of getting out of bed. Breaking a state; undergoing change. Having to readjust the self. Getting up; settling back. Again... Settle

back again... Again I settled back again.

Perhaps I laid down on sweaty sheets and stretched my shoulders, gave into all the tugging things, the longings and desires. Perhaps I turned to the dark side of the room. The lavender turns deeper violet in the corner where the early light can't reach.

∞

In the morning, commuting to work, thinking of G & Himeros. :// "...reading Nietzsche in the subway, reading Proust, reading David Foster Wallace, jotting down [...] brilliant thoughts into a black Moleskine pocket notebook... The worst was that those guys tried to pass off their insecurity as 'sensitivity,' and it worked."<sup>3</sup>

A whiff of perfume. A switch from treating the self as System 1 to treating the self as System 2. From Cartesian dualism to brain-self monism to the idea that *these desires are not you*. A necessary coping: self as ferryman who shuttles impulse to reality, and elects to carry passengers.

Young women with xerophthalmia. Silver boots and a raincoat cum peignon. Entropic prophecies of personal collapse, self-imposed limitations on personal agency, these being the only outcomes one can, if desired, ensure with reasonable certainty. Love is a speech act. A Milo jumpsuit, oat, with pockets the size of paperbacks. Thee who spends time underground.

To get the most out of Blunt's *Lost Souls*, imagine the album as a knowing performance, a Stereolab or Stephen Merrit

3 Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest & Relaxation*, 2018.

project in tribute to the Pumpkins' "1979." An arrangement normcore but tight, a churning of minimalist pop songs that break into Wayne Coyne falsetto. //To ask what happened and hear, «Gradually, then, he changed himself in my image. He became me in many parts of himself, because we are not strong enough to behave otherwise... My particular womanness in him got to be as unbearable to me as, certainly, it is unbearable to him.»<sup>4</sup>

At Cafe Bari a Swift-blonde Swede gives a 20% smile at the register. I tell you, *I will not cede sexual power until it is properly acknowledged in the field of discourse as existing. This is my only political position!*

*//You have six stats. Meat is how physically adept your body is. Brains is how smart you are. Spark is how creative, alive, aware, and unfettered you are. Slack is how lucky and laid back you are, in the sense that higher Slack scores give you more affordance to roll with punches, AND fewer punches to roll with. Mana is how much force of will or force of personality you have. Class is how well your social aesthetics jive with other people's.<sup>5</sup> (Yeah, but it forgets seduction, only tangentially related to spark & mana.)*

What was G like? She was high class. She was high mana, smart. Not much slack but a lotta luck. She had a *pied-à-terre* downtown. She never felt comfortable with food, or with her relationship to it (second-order). She read Ottessa Moshfegh.

"The frustrations and limitations to which [one] is exposed vary not so much in kind as in being more or less civilized, more or less intense. There is always some cat-and-mouse

4 *Don Leaves Linda.*

5 Drethelin, chatroom.

play of attracting and repulsing, binding and withdrawing... an enjoyable evening by forgetting a date.”<sup>6</sup>

Sure, you say, but what of the neuroses of Pothos? “First, he became immersed in feeling that the woman was so inhumanly cruel that no punishment was drastic enough. Soon after, he felt just as intensely that he would give everything for a friendly move on her part.”<sup>7</sup>

∞

Sea Witch, between 21st and 22nd, el Greco colors in a wall mural behind the tables where I wait for her. She cams parttime; her hair is boyish, pixie. In bed, lips on a Coca-Cola bottle. “What’s it like?” “Whatchu mean, prison?” “No, armed robbery.” “It ain’t like anything.” Beat. “Shoot, I knew you never robbed a place you faker.” I draw a small gun, flick a matchstick between the teeth. She reaches out lightly, looks down at it. “But you wouldn’t have the gumption to use it.”<sup>8</sup> It’ll be months before I see her again: from a distance, dressed in the black-and-white uniform of her catering company, working at an art fair under a plastic tent.

X: *might not be able to relate anymore, now that i know how shamelessly Anglo your taste in women is. i mean damn. “lover of sheep... and bernadette devlin”? that’s a borderline offensive stereotype of an irish person. this is not in any way a defense of my own taste—last e-girl i had a crush on was a LA-based soundcloud rapper who made ironic/erotic flash games in 2014. i guess i don’t feel i can relate to the hobby of knitting/crocheting. “what are you doing, babe?”*

6 Karen Horney, *Neurosis & Human Growth*

7 Ibid.

8 *Bonnie & Clyde*, 1967. ✕

“performing gender.” “oh, nice!”

∞

Beach life. Ride life. Road life. Jeep life. Singles life, doubles life, part of the late-night crew. Study life. Train life. Greek life. Island life. Money life. Intern life. Acting out *The Graduate*. Ship life. High life. *Life!*—kill yr tall boy. Hermit life, monk life, chaste life, van life. Shwick life; my unemployed ass. Tour life, grind life (studio time), public life, public hustle. Working to keep a single set of books; wondering if this is the easy way out or the hard one. (Noble, stupid.) Envyng and not envyng the riches available to savvy double-keepers.

Teasing, *The Kantian imperative that art-making be for or about other people*. JK, Romanticism already won!

I throw out “\$400,” knowing you’ll balk. You say \$250, I say \$325. Ze thinks ze2 isn’t taking ze seriously, so ze goes over-the-top with dogma and rhetoric to skew ze2’s response. I say, thank you Keren Cyttter!

I started listening to Leonard Cohen. I’d stayed away from Leonard Cohen for a while ‘cause of G.

1. *What the masculine entails is a calcification of self, a containing of the psyche. Protestant, monolithic, Juddean.*
2. *It is boundaried: it knows what it fucks with and knows what it doesn’t.*
3. *Accomplishment is merely an initial level. The art is in appearing effortless.*

G has a chapbook: on the cover is a black-and-white photograph of a florist's. I believe the chapbook is called *the florist*. It does not surprise me the title is uncapitalized, that all the poems are in lowercase. *So it went on with the “oh-God-the-pain girls,” to use Léonie’s phrase;*<sup>9</sup> I’m being petty. There is a to-do list of movies showing at Metrograph this month, calendared in, and I watch the showtimes from bed as they come... and pass unseen.

4. *To initiate is to play the fool.*<sup>10</sup>
5. *Strategy is knowing when to wait and when to act.*
6. *Attention is a currency obeying clear supply-and-demand principles.*
7. *The sought-after, fluid capital of self... what does he want? Does he ever need? Does he wish to partake? Impossible to say. This is what makes him sought-after.*<sup>11</sup>
8. *Perhaps nothing at all.*
9. *He of an agenda takes steps to ensure contact and consummation. These steps are inevitably legible. Only thee who takes no steps to ensure consummation brings it, paradoxically, about.*

“I think I’m missing some chemicals and that’s why I have

9 Lapsley, *Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict*.

10 Kraus, *ILD*

11 The Cowboy intellectual is the most compelling of them all... faced constantly with the tension between theory and practice... engaged constantly with the tangible and the physical of reality... forced constantly to navigate systems simultaneously geographic, cognitive, and bodily to a degree few experience.

this tendency to be more of a... ‘butterboy.’ I think I’m missing some responsibility chemicals and some reproductive chemicals if I had them I would probably think more about aging the right way and being married four times and having a family...”<sup>12</sup>

I turn my comforter into a flower. I twist it, spin it, rotate until it’s wrapped around me, all the heat rising in this central chamber. One thing I notice about you is you keep messages on your phone unread, dozens of them, and you also changed the settings so the battery percentage doesn’t show. I calm the imperative to confess, an ability bestowed upon me by my readings of Foucault.

*10. The low status player needs something from the high status player; this is what makes him lower status.*

∞

The intimacy gradient of a temple: outer public sanctum, nested precincts growing increasingly sacred until reaching an innermost sanctum.<sup>13</sup> Motte-and-bailey castle: a fortified keep, standing on a raised earthwork motte, surrounded by a radiating bailey which is larger in area and more weakly defended than the keep (oftentimes merely with a wooden palisade fence). You advance, in arguments,

12 Andy, *A to B*, 1975.

13 In Berghain’s factory bunker, guests are filtered first at the door, then from the public ground floor up staircases, and at last into darkrooms, zones of increased privacy, intimacy, & closed-offness. Visitors pass through half-story levels and underground tunnels into gradient darkness, each stage forcing a readjustment of the eyes, until in its furthest recesses light is entirely absent and navigation is purely tactile. Private grottoes here are known only to regular visitors, who are able to navigate the labyrinthine interior to locate them.

an extended, controversial stance, making full use of implication and suggestion; when challenged, you fall back on the statement's uncontroversial core, indignant at being uncharitably interpreted.<sup>14</sup> (Often the motte is strongly implied but never literally stated, a light gaslighting) "It's your fault I feel this way"; "I'm just expressing how I feel." "Reality is socially constructed"; "society shapes our understanding of reality."<sup>15</sup>

*Dear Pothos,*

*I don't know if you really want to go to Taos. Mabel Luhan writes that she is arranging for it. You seemed to me really very unsure. You resent, au fond, my going away from Europe. C'est mon affaire. Je m'en vais. But you, in this interval, decide for yourself, and purely for yourself. Don't think you are doing something for me. I don't want that. Move for yourself alone. Decide for yourself, in your backbone. I don't really want any allegiance or anything of that sort. I don't want any pact. I won't have anything of that sort. If you want to go to America, bien. Go without making me responsible.*

*But if you want to go with Frieda and me and Brett—encore bien! One can but try, and I'm willing. But a man like you, if he does anything in the name of, or for the sake of, or because of somebody else, is bound to turn like a crazy snake and bite himself and everybody on account of it.*

*Let us clear away all nonsense. I don't need you. That is not true. I need nobody. Neither do you need me. If you pretend to need me,*

14 cf. Shackel.

15 In a gallery: "The work thinks through important questions about U.S. patriotism, the Syrian refugee crisis, first world privilege, and public complicity in the military industrial complex," "The work is a strip of insulating material used in a variety of civilian and military contexts."

*you will hate me for it. [...]*

*You know I don't care a single straw what you think of me. Realize that, once and for all. But when you get at twisting, I dislike you. And I very much dislike any attempt at an intimacy like the one you had with—\*—and others. When you start that, I only feel: For God's sake, let me get clear of him. [...] Leave off twisting. Leave off having any emotion at all. You haven't any genuine ones, except a certain anger. Cut all that would-be sympathetic stuff out. Then know what you're after.*

*I tell you, if you want to go to America as an unemotional man making an adventure, bien, allons! If you want to twist yourself into more knots, don't go with me. That's all. I never had much patience, and I've none now.*

*Lawrence*

∞

Singing Cytter's paradox of romantic realization: «After the clouds surrounding the lonely heart are clearing and the sheer understanding that love, lust, or desire were rooted inside, that's the moment where reality slips through its fingers and leaves him to hang and dry to death. In other words, after a short romantic encounter, one side acknowledges his feelings and decides to realize them with an object or by placing them in a certain environment. This is the moment that marks the end of their romance.

In other words, the subject meets the object.

(1.) The subject desires the object.

- (2.) The object is responsive/positive.
- (3.) The subject wants to realize his desire/love.
- (4.) The object is gone. [...]

(1.) V met E in Venezuela and had short affair before they both went back to their countries.

(2.) E promised to visit V in Paris

(3.) and she invited a group of twelve friends for a dinner with E when he arrives.

(4.) E never showed up—the idea frightened E and he canceled his trip. E and V never met again.»<sup>16</sup>

Weil gives the gender-neutral take: *What is the reason that as soon as one human being shows he needs another (no matter whether his need be slight or great) the latter draws back from him? Gravity.*<sup>17</sup>

∞

The showerhead needs replacing. Pothos: contra Marco Roth on the rise of the neuronovel (“one now needs more words than ever to say ‘They fell in love’”), collapsing belief in cliches like *love as Real Cognitive Principle* isn’t caused by scientism or neuroscience; it’s a natural consequence of expanding cultural memory. When nothing can be forgotten, nothing escapes fatigue. The challenge is in trying to re-see, *as if* for the first time. What’s the bit Annie Baker opens up *John* with? “Grace is the state of either complete unselfconsciousness or perfect self-consciousness” but no,

16 Cyttar, *A-Z Life Coaching*

17 via Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia*.

that wasn't quite it. "Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or the god." Once puppets, not yet gods; tagging off Rousseau and accelerationism the only way back is onward, out of the awkwardness of cultural adolescence.

And so it was with me: suddenly self-conscious, yet not evolved enough in self-awareness. Or: caring too much and too little at the same time. The old ways of living, of being, of expecting from another, all breaking on use.

A listener of a pop song searches in the background as he moves between musics, testing for matches, the resonant lyric that articulates and there actualizes a fuzzily felt feeling. But there is projection too. & the world has no place for a psyche that would Mondegreen Maus over pulsating synths: "They call me the believer/ I never had a one-night stand."<sup>18</sup> Cytter: *This book aims to expose the owners of an innocent heart to reality's structures to utilize them for spiritual growth.*<sup>19</sup>

Lace lingerie, Madam Bovary, Emily Dickinson, spent a year in Berlin. It's a small bar, quiet. *Perception management: U.S. military umbrella term encompassing propaganda efforts, OpSec, cover & deception.* Keeping up a small talk: "Tell me about your work." "It's a great place to pretend you're somebody without having any particular gifts, which means that for people with talent, it's disheartening a lot of the time... I've often wondered what I'm doing in one of the world's least meritocratic industries. I'm constantly running into people and wondering how they got where they are, and

18 John Maus, *We Must Become the Pitiless Censors of Ourselves* (2011).

19 A-Z Life Coaching, 2017.

I'm almost never made happier by the answer.”<sup>20</sup> I say, why are you telling me this? Ok so now I'm disillusioned and don't give a shit about art, next I drift off into a creative consulting gig and start filing 1099 forms? <V> *Look I just think it's good to be aware you're wading into a discipline that's in a pretty deep crisis, not at the local scale of seasons, vogues, or decades but at a scale of centuries.*

// I could see that she had more problems than anybody I'd ever met. So beautiful but so sick. I was really intrigued.<sup>21</sup> // I draw the shower, tweak the temp when it's too hot, over-compensate, tweak again but it isn't enough, interrogate my desire while it runs.

∞

Mermaid IPA, Bay Ridge.// Joanna Newsom, Wuthering Heights (book *and* track), pescatarian with above-avg number of nipple piercings.// Know anyone who's holding?

Annie Dillard Matron St. of Fragment & Natural Metaphor. Katherine Acker Matron St. of Appropriation & Performed Intimacy. (“What was so singular about her work was the directness of her address. It was the immediacy of her voice and the feeling that someone was sitting by your side late at night telling you their secrets.”<sup>22</sup>) Chris Kraus Matron St. of Epistle. (The constellation makes the genre, Nelson its master, Gevinson its Young-Girl apprentice.)

*A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of*

20 David Velasco, head of *Artforum*.

21 Warhol, *Philosophy A to B*.

22 C. Kraus, intvwrd by Nicole Miller in *Guernica*.

*fragments.*<sup>23</sup>

«This month's theme is Infinity, about what cannot be articulated; the infinite feelings, colors, sounds, experiences that we do not have words for... I thought of when we sat on that couch in December and he put on Lou Johnson's "Always Something There to Remind Me" and I got to watch him just enjoy it for the whole song (so cute and engaged) and afterwards he was like, "What a journey! That felt about 15 minutes long."» (*Him bright-eyed, endless optimism, something via someone to believe in, a joi de vivre that is contagious.*)

The allusory style, like doodling the names of your favorite bands into your notebook cover during class, a constellation of identity through likes and dislikes.<sup>24</sup> These constellations are sometimes called families; to Nelson (following Acker & Ward), they are mothers, many-gendered. Lana's *Lust for Life* takes the pop canon and intersperses her songwriting with it, a way of connecting and conversing with the Before. A way of acknowledging debts, which is to say gifts. “The work of the medium is to reach across boundaries of time and space to deliver information to a recipient who might not have received the message without the medium’s aid.”<sup>25</sup>

Within the family there are more personal modes of

23 Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragments*. “But as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content, simultaneously subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences.” The year is 1799; Schlegel perches on the edge of a new century.

24 Reynolds on rock’s evolving relationship to itself in the 1970s: “Roots [music] implied building on an honoured and stable tradition. What replaced the rooted relationship with the past was pick-and-mix reference rather than reverence,” this being the moment’s dominant cultural mode.

25 Niina Pollari, who herself cites Nelson: “I think of citation as a form of family-making.” Or, *Ninna nanna per adulteri*.

address. The personal Other becomes occasion, context, and basis for authority. Gevinson: «Chris Kraus wrote that every letter is a love letter...»<sup>26</sup> Lorde says she doesn't write love songs, but how can that be true? Every song is a love song, is a ghost song. We love something so much that we have to write it down, and in doing so, we've killed it, like Barthes' characterization of loved ones in a photo: "anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies."»<sup>27</sup> A kind of psychic inhabitation occurs when a world is skillfully re-presented: «I'm obligated only to the universe in my head» (Gevinson again, just eighteen, an artist or a teenage ontologist the line is blurred).

But the specific addressee filters a specific self, provides a grounding aesthetic and set of constraints which limit possibility just enough to allow production. The same way "How was your evening?" is easier to answer than "How've you been?" On the music of Leonard Cohen, Nelson writes in *Bluets*, "I have always loved [the song's] final line—'Sincerely, L. Cohen'—as it makes me feel less alone in composing almost everything I write as a letter. I would even go so far as to say that I do not know how to compose otherwise." Kraus acknowledges Hebdige as the source of energy behind her graphomanic *I Love Dick*, a generative

26 "Infinite speech is therefore not ABOUT anything," but "always TO someone." Content shared is shared with respect to the structure of the other's thinking, with intent to affect and intervene. First pointing out then accounting for "discontinuities in the relations between objects, or the presence of anomalies you cannot account for by any of the laws known to you." (Pulling from Carse.)

27 Bowie's *Pinups* as both an act of fandom-cum-homage, the makeshift posters born from clippings and torn-out pages, as well with the undertone of the collector's 'pin,' the insect stuck to corkboard. They are dead because they have been held still, scrutinized, and integrated: as new additions to the extended self, they can no longer reveal secrets. (Nature's churning cannibalism, cf. *Pilgrim Creek*; calories becoming new life.)

power that both comes and doesn't come from within her. In *I'm Very into You*, it's the sexual energy of Wark & Acker's exchanges that draws so much blood in e-ink; indeed, with "the exception of *Nymphomaniac*, each time Acker worked on a project, she selected, perhaps unconsciously, a 'silent partner' as her ideal reader: a confidant, always male, who would serve as an oblique addressee."<sup>28</sup>

The concept of muse is old but something here is... changed. *Bluets* closes with a second-person address: *I want you to know, if you ever read this, there was a time when I would rather have had you by my side than any one of these words; I would rather have had you by my side than all the blue in the world.* After the last page, a list of credits to correspondents: Christina Crosby, Brian Blanchfield,<sup>29</sup> Cort Day, Annie Dillard... Wayne Koestenbaum... "my dearest Harry."

∞

*Before he ever met Edna St. Vincent Millay, Wilson had half fallen in love with her by way of her poetry. He was particularly struck by her sonnet 'To Love Impuissant,' in which the poet issues a daring challenge to the god of Love and mocks him as impotent to conquer her. The poem concludes, "(Now will the god for blasphemy so brave,/ Punish me, surely, with the shaft I crave!)." Wilson memorized it and recited it to himself in the shower, admitting that his fascination for the poem was due partly "to my liking to think that one who appreciated the poet as splendidly as I felt I did might be worthy to deal her the longed-for dart..." When Wilson meets her, sometime in 1920, it is her*

28 Kraus, *After Kathy* 2017.

29 Blanchfield on his own writing, to Silverblatt: "In a way, Wayne Koestenbaum and his essay on humiliation [is a kind of model for me], it incorporates autobiography and his own psychology and his own, some times, sexuality and sexual identity... Part cultural studies, part autobiography."

“seemingly artificial British accent” that will stay with him, the “staccato, precise puffing [on] her cigarette.”<sup>30</sup>

“ ‘God. I’ll talk about the thing with Monsterrat but you sure you know what you’re doing now? Marta said you practically forced Monsterrat into Ramon’s arms.’ // ‘She said that? I don’t know what happened. Everything was going so well and then suddenly she never showed up after picking up her things from Ramon’s. Apparently they talked until dawn and she ended up sleeping on the sofa. Which for all I know is true... Something spooked her, as if I’d been crowding her. I was really playing it cool too.’ ”

“‘What makes you think that?’ // ‘Suddenly she doesn’t want to move in, she wants to have a serious talk. You know what that means.’ ”

“‘Well you should at least talk to her.’ // ‘No, that would be a disaster. Forever I would be the jerk who was crowding her, whom she had to talk to seriously.’ ”

“‘But saying you have a work emergency and you’re too busy to see her...’ // ‘Have you ever heard of Maneuver X? When you get deeply into sales, you realize that every major transaction involves a mini identity crisis for the buyer. You think, *Purple carpet. Am I really a purple carpet person?* In romance, the same thing applies but on a humongous scale.’ ”

“‘...But what is Maneuver X?’ // ‘It’s removing all pressure, creating a space that the customer has to affirmatively cross. Only by disappearing more thoroughly and inexplicably than Montserrat can I change the current dynamic.

Will it? I don't know. I think it will. If not, I'm dead.” »<sup>31</sup>

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*The 70s for very specific cultural reasons saw a strong emergence of women poets who claimed that identity... Some of the women writers who read at the Poetry Project in the 70s include (and this is in a vaguely chronological order): Rebecca Brown, Helen Adam, Kathy Acker, Alicia Ostriker, Barbara Guest, Alice Notley, Maureen Owen, Bernadette Mayer, Joanne Kyger, the artist Yvonne Jacquette, Sonia Sanchez, Rochelle Owens, Janine Pommy Vega, Jamie MacInnis, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Jennifer Bartlett, Jill Johnson, Susan Howe, Adrienne Rich, Kathleen Fraser, Patricia Jones, Joan LaBarbara, Charlotte Carter, Mary Ferrari, Rochelle Kraut, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneeman, Hannah Weiner, Maggie Dubris, the female singers of the anti-imperialist singers led by Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde, Diane Wakoski (who first read there in the 60s and was a founding member), Darlene Pearlstein, Janet Hamil, Barbara Barg, Susie Timmons, Annabel Levitt, Fanny Howe, Alice Walker, Verta Mae Grosevenor, Eileen Myles, Barbara Einzig, Ann Lauterbach, Marilyn Hacker, Marjorie Welish, George Therese-Dickenson, Ann Rower, Lois Elaine Griffith, Elinor Nauen, Jane Delynn, Frances Waldman, Chris Kraus, Vicki Hudspith, Leslie Silko, Susan Noel, Jessica Hagedorn, Diane Torr, Star Black, Sandra Esteves. One of the last events of 1979 was a group reading for Emily Dickinson's birthday.*

*You know how poets lament typologies and classifications in the first place. But just as soon as you strip away rigid and obsolete taxonomies [...] we get busy and amuse ourselves [...] constructing ever more nuanced affinitive groupings: “the Ear Inn poets who come from Brown, that are female, that studied with Rosmarie Waldrop!”; “the kind of New York School poets who also write a kind of language*

31 Stillman's *Barcelona* (1994).

*poetry that read at Double Happiness and the Nuyorican Café*"; "the 3rd generation Language poets that are male but whose poems are lyrical"; "the poets who used to slam at the Nurorican but are now into a more narrative thing" Okay, enough of the New York gossip, not so relevant to the out-of-towners, but I guess there's a wish to account for [...] the necessary, complex influences poems have on other poems, and poets on other poets, in that moving way Jennifer Moxley dedicated her first book, 'Imagination Verses,' "To My Contemporaries."

∞

What do you do when transgression goes mainstream? Ads this week on the train: *Nothing like a safe, reliable paycheck to crush your soul./ White collars come with leashes./ How much did you make for your boss today?/ Put your name on a building without a handout from Daddy.*

Underlining Sondheim on Kathy, the filming of her 1970s *Blue Tape* :// «By her speaking about or not speaking about certain things she's assuming a position of power... I obviously can't sit on a chair next to Kathy and discuss mathematical hierarchies of transformations, which is what a large part of my present work is about... whereas it is very easy to discuss sexuality because it is something that is first of all a ground for most transformations, second of all something we have in common. This automatically gives her a sense of power, and the fact that for me this is a public as well as a private domain, whereas for her it seems to be a public domain, is a second source of her power.» "The piece ends with Sondheim struggling to deliver a coherent discourse while Acker gives him a blow job. It's as if Acker's enacting an alien takeover or daemonic possession of a host situation: a raid on the logical-philosophical masculine

realm.”<sup>32</sup>

Feelings as visitors, to be entertained and talked with, but still always guests, lacking authority over house.

~ welcome to the once-annual 3meo-assisted mental  
cleanse ~

You signed up for this! If ya didn’t want to be here then ya wouldn’t be!

I mean Pothos, you’re in the branding business, it’s actually your job to think about yourself from the perspective of image, e.g. “I think the thing you need to settle on is when you’re an asshole, why you’re an asshole, to whom you’re an asshole. Establishing a consistent moral ground and a consistent reputation and a consistent philosophy behind it that allows confident acting. There needs to be, yes, a kind of pragmatic tradeoff between personal gains and the benefit of others.” A yearly review, an introspective checkup. What’s self-awareness gonna take?? ://hear thee, Gratiano;/ thou art too wild, too rude, and bold of voice;/ parts that become thee happily enough,/ and in such eyes as ours appear not faults./ But where thou art not known, why there they show/ something too liberal.<sup>33</sup>

I had a real moment watching the Scorsese flick about Howard Hughes where (played by DiCaprio) Hughes goes into reclusion mode, what Peli,<sup>34</sup> refers to as “time underground.” A kind of purging, a giving up entirely on the maintenance of external self. In Hughes’ case he’s locked himself in a padded room with a film projector playing war

32 Nicole Miller covering C. Kraus’s *After Kathy* in *Guernica* 2017.

33 *Merchant of Venice*, II: II.

films, &—

—I switch from Googling “carton” (trying to glean the definition literal) to searching “milk carton” (ID-matching concretely: greater efficiency than applying the abstract) to searching “milk jars” (double-specifying: material is glass), where the results also listed the mnēmē-jogging “milk bottles”—

memory apparatus protocols anyway,

—with a row of milk bottles that become piss bottles under the projection screen, shots of aerial combat glancing off the glass: a burrowing into, a being-away-from-others—taking meetings through the locked door, attempts to dissolve the self, beginning to dissociate in the absence of human mirrors—it’s all there, and then the call to power, the subpoena which brings Hughes to his bathroom to be reborn under hot water and a shave;<sup>34</sup> getting into shoes, emerging from weeks of living & sleeping in his hall of pictures.

∞

Handmade lavender soap and Bernadette Mayer on the bookshelf; Grimes, “early Mitski,” crochet needles on an ottoman. “I was an avid re-watcher, re-listener, re-reader, and re-wearer of all the things I knew I liked. It wasn’t the forms themselves which fascinated me, but the worlds of these individual works that I took such comfort in getting to visit again and again, being reunited with my favorite people, anticipating all my favorite details. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes defines a punctum in a photograph as “that accident which pricks, bruises me.” Applied to other mediums,

34 Watch the scene: he is not alone.

as well: The facial tic that makes a character a person and not an actor in costume. A sound so apt that its origin becomes unknown, like it was never the work of an instrument in a studio. I made a charm bracelet of them all, spent so many days after school establishing the solar system of these worlds: cataloging a punctum's appearance across various works, styling self-portraits that wrote me into them..." I say, what're those old copy lines Žižek did for Abercrombie? *The object of desire is hidden behind the thigh but the true cause of desire is that tattooed cross on the arm. Is it not clear that we really make love with signs, not with bodies? This is why one has to go to school to learn sex.*<sup>35</sup>

She is holding chamomile as she speaks, softly & earnestly. She is not who I expected. ://I guess I don't have a choice but to feel grateful for the Internet explosion; because of it, as a nine-year-old I was able to browse and learn from GeoCities pages. At 13 I got an email address to talk with my cousins. At some foolishly young age, I got a blog from blogger.com and learned how to express myself through writing and to read others' thoughts... I watched Wikipedia grow from a patchy unreliable compendium of people's knowledge to a useful first source for any subject I'm about to get into. So they let the commoners in. But I was a commoner at some point.<sup>36</sup>

What *had* I expected? The move in "On Women" where Long Chu links radfem to the alt-right is crazy and brilliant and crazy brilliant: «This was months before I began teaching my first undergraduate recitation, where for the second time in my life—but the first time as a woman—I read

35 Abercrombie & Fitch, *School's Out* edition w Žižek, 2003.

36 Plover, email.

Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*. The *SCUM Manifesto* is a deliciously vicious feminist screed calling for the revolutionary overthrow of all men; Solanas self-published it in 1967, one year before she shot Andy Warhol on the sixth floor of the Decker Building in New York City. I wondered how my students would feel about it. In the bathroom before class, as I fixed my lipstick and fiddled with my hair, I was approached by a thoughtful, earnest young woman who sat directly to my right during class... I would glance over at this student's notes, only to discover that she had filled the page with the word SCUM, written over and over with the baroque tenderness usually reserved for the name of a crush. [...] But generosity is the only spirit in which a text as hot to the touch as the *SCUM Manifesto* could have ever been received. This is after all a pamphlet advocating mass murder, and what's worse, property damage. [...] When a subculture espouses extremist politics [...] it is tempting but often incorrect to take those politics for that subculture's beating heart. It's worth considering whether TERFs, like certain strains of the altright, might be defined less by their political ideology (however noxious) and more by a complex, frankly fascinating relationship to trolling, on which it will be for future anthropologists, having solved the problem of digital ethnography, to elaborate.»<sup>37</sup>

Meaning is relational, you can't let anyone tell you different. *Audience-oriented epistemology*: Since works are always *to* someone, or an impression of aggregate someones, their fundamental quality is defined in relation to a world before they existed. The Bourdieu thing about Marx's "I am not being a Marxist"—"This explains why writers' efforts to control the reception of their own works are always

37 Long Chu, "On Women" (2016).

partially doomed to failure... if only because the very effect of their work may transform the condition of its reception and because they would not have had to write many things they did write and write them as they did—e.g. resorting to rhetorical strategies intended to ‘twist the stick in the other direction’—if they’d been granted from the outset what they are granted retrospectively.”<sup>38</sup> “Twist the stick”: the message is a *corrective* to what the writer perceives as the *dominant signal* of his imagined audience—half dialectic, half haggling. But the implicit and unconscious rhetorizing, the overstatements and elusions, the motivational quality which exaggerates—this shapes beliefs *as they are felt* and understood; private and public beliefs cannot be neatly separated, are interlocked, exert force on one another. The incentive is to overwrite former with latter, falsify discrepancies, a unified consciousness.

(How to reconcile the metaphors, on one hand the stabilizing motions of a swinging pendulum, on the other the escalating feedback of eye-for-eye, of violence begetting violence.)

Ideological texts compress the world along one or two dimensions *not b/c the writer believes they’re the only dimensions that matter*, but *b/c the writer believes they’re causally underrated*. «Any good feminist bears stitched into the burning bra she calls her heart that tapestry of qualifiers we use to tell one another stories about ourselves and our history: radical, liberal, neoliberal, socialist, Marxist, separatist, cultural, corporate, lesbian, queer, trans, eco, intersectional, anti-porn, anti-work, pro-sex, first-, second-, third-, sometimes fourthwave. These stories have perhaps less to do with

38 Bourdieu. *Field of Cultural Production*.

What Really Happened than they do with what Fredric Jameson [...] called “the ‘emotion’ of great historiographic form.” [...] To say, then, that these stories are rarely if ever “true” is not merely to repeat the axiom that taxonomy is taxidermy, though it *cannot be denied that the objects of intellectual inquiry are forever escaping, like B-movie zombies, from the vaults of their internment*. It is also to say that all cultural things, SCUM Manifesto included, are answering machines for history’s messages<sup>38</sup> at best only secondarily. They are rather [...] occasions for people to feel something: to adjust the pitch of a desire or up a fantasy’s thread count, to make overtures to a new way to feel or renew their vows with an old one [...] because we want to belong to a community or public [...] or perhaps because we are struggling to figure out how to feel political in an age and culture defined by a general shipwrecking of the beautiful old stories of history.»

We could carve it up into transformative (effective-oriented, rhetorical) vs. cartographic (accuracy-oriented, literal) epistemics. Problems arise when styles clash. From an *erisology*<sup>39</sup> standpoint, one issue is that the other side will always interpret trolling as literal belief while insiders see outsiders as self-serious, lacking a sense of humor, ungenerous or bad-faith. (*Tfw doing exploratory epistemology in a combat epistemology joint.*<sup>40</sup>)

Platinum hair with purple streaks. On the bookshelf Cusk’s *Transit*, *Kudos*, *Outline*; Rooney’s *Normal People*; Didion’s *Magical Thinking* next to Batuman’s *Idiot*; Ali Smith’s *Spring* next to everything by Ferrante (*Neopolitan*, *Abandonment*, *Lost Daughter*, *Frantumaglia*—i.e. “Fragments”). Sheila Heti, the

39 John Nerst, *Everything Studies*.

40 @Chaosprime.

Brontës,—and *John?* Annie Baker’s *John?* A feeling of newness, of anticipation, wrecked against the rocks.

You were as flippant in your hermaphroditism as a fish. You were touched and touching, vouched for a gender identity based on submission and dominance instead of sex organs or the strands of hair hanging from the ceiling. Washing dishes after, humming, *We all know you’re soft cuz we’ve all seen you dancing./ We all know you’re hard cuz we’ve all seen you drinking from noon until noon again.*

I thought, You can’t spell ‘hermaphrodite’ without Aphrodite. *Anna Karenina*’s opening line after dinner, which is just another way of saying there’re more ways things can go wrong than things can go right. Which somebody also said about sex and another somebody about the cosmos—a trifecta if I ever heard one (sex, the cosmos, *Karenina*).

You were giving me that look & I decide to channel the failure; our substitute for lust is the anger of the humiliated. *Vos, quod milia multa basiorum / Legistis, male me marem putatis? / Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo.* “Because you read my countless kisses you think less of me as a man? / I will sodomize and face-fuck you.”<sup>41</sup>

∞

What do we know? We know the true king has no need for the king hat; we know a fox sees many ways, & a hedgehog just one ( $\piόλλ’ οίδ’ ἀλώπηξ, ἀλλ’ ἔχινος \varepsilonν μέγα$ ). We know the principle of A.O.O., motivated partialness, and Peli Grietzer’s vibe (a constellation of pricks). But who’s got the guts to admit their narratives are lossy compressions?

41 Catallus, via Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*

Romance to blame, romance with the extended self, egoic products, the personal sight. “Love was long since represented as blind... The mind lingers with pleasure upon the facts that fall happily into the embrace of the theory, and feels a natural coldness toward those that seem refractory.”<sup>42</sup> Theory extended from theory, personal victories of extended universes, scant thought given to map’s relation with territory. Sans ground, the formal systems drift...

But picture pressing; now picture being pressed on. Dillard, her imagination running away with the locust swarms: *I cannot ask for more than to be so wholly acted upon, flown at, and lighted on in throngs, probed, knocked, even bitten. A little blood from the wrists and throat is the price I would willingly pay for that pressure of clacking weights on my shoulders, for the scent of deserts, ground fire in my ears—for being so in the cluttering thick of things, rapt and unwrapped in the rising and falling real world.* Kraus, in *Aliens & Anorexia*: “Just like movies and S/m, alien abduction occurs within a kind of five-act structure. The victim is kidnapped from the safety of her home or neighborhood. She struggles uselessly until she’s drugged, and then unspeakable experiments are performed on her body. Her identity and will break down. Finally, after withstanding all this torture, she is awarded an audience with the Alien-in-charge.” The same language of probing, exploration—one party the explorer, the other the explored. Move up a decade & it’s the 80s, Dillard’s *Encounters with Chinese Writers*; the author has an experience she insists is non-sexual; she uses the world *plumb*:

42 Ambiguous ambiguous ambiguity as the natural result of entertaining multiple hypotheses at once, refusing to commit to your cards, allowing the future to be an upward parabola of possibility over a logarithmic ceiling of foreclosure. (*cf* H.C.)

As we drink, Wu holds my eyes... There is something extraordinary in his look... The man is taking my measure. He is measuring what I can only call my "spirit"—my "depths," such as they are... There is nothing personal or flirtatious about it. He is going into my soul with calipers. He is entering my eyes as if they were a mineshaft; he is testing my spirit with a plumb line... I won't lower my eyes. I let him look; I hide nothing... The deeper he goes, the more interested he gets, but, I stress, his is an analytical interest, and, I stress, he hits bottom. My depths are well within reach of his plumb line... I wish I were deeper, but there you are.

I'm panting, shirtless, quasi-anaerobic from the effort of suspending a conjured unreality in thin air. Do not forget: this illusion has an owner, actor, blood donor, & dishonest bookie, dissolving into temporary falsehood for the sake of bigger truths. *I pretend to use you, make a theater of heeding only my own pleasure while making sure you find yours.*<sup>43</sup>

∞

// When I was young and dumb, BDSM was male, taboo, and ugly. The bad role models to whom I was shyly, ambivalently, inexorably drawn—not for their badness, but for their candor, for the absolution that comes from being around the much-worse—often whispered about force and running mascara, tidbits of conspiracy: “Pretty much every chick is down to be treated like shit.” A 25 year old alcoholic engaged to an 18 year old feminist-poet with a gluten allergy tried to explain women with a spectacularly

43 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, pronouns swapped.

rapey clip from *Wild At Heart*—which nicely complements the Frank Booth scene from *Blue Velvet*, “It’s Daddy, you shithead! Where’s my bourbon!”—anyway, I remember being scared; I think I made up an excuse to leave. Toxic masculinity? Sure. But look at how it went down: leatherbound queer industrial music mainstreamed by Trent Reznor in 1994, then Janet Jackson (1997), Britney Spears (2001), *Secretary* (2002), and the snowball keeps rolling past Rihanna (2010) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011)—is it fair to say that kink has never been seen as more female? [...] Is it fair to say that kink has never been less taboo? A meta-analysis of 36 studies on polyamory and BDSM found that participants were “overwhelmingly white, with relatively high socio-economic status”—is it fair to say that kink has never had more social currency?<sup>44</sup>

In such interactions, ://Character is completely preordained and circumscribed... There isn’t any room for innovation in these roles. And as you play them. Something flips and you believe it... Lee Breuer describes it, “the gestures reverse their way up through the stimulus system of the body, and go back into the ganglia and make emotion.”<sup>45</sup> // The price of motivational epistemology begins to reveal itself.

From the soupy ambiguity of modern norms a relational script comes prefab: by limiting the possible space of moves, movement is made possible (the generativity of constraint, the paralysis of too many options). In two-player mode, constraints enable synchronicity, mind-reading. Expectations, procedures, theatrical role (tone, mood,

44 Hotel Concierge, “Shame & Society” (2017).

45 Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia* (2000).

persona) pre-determined. You know what you're buying, you know what's being sold.

// «S/m's another flip around the immanence of objects in the theater: the objects aren't blank and waiting to be filled by the presence of the actors and the play. The objects here are meaning-cards, they hold all the information. He puts a collar round my neck and slaps me. Handcuffs, blindfolds, gags and whips... The objects tell us who we are and what to do. S/m is like *commedia dell'arte*, a stock repertoire of stories, bits and lines and gags. We're Punch and Judy. He chains my handcuffs to the door. I'm Columbine and he's Pierrot.»<sup>46</sup>

Those who demand freedom from the laws of Man and God, get it. They come in two types: the master is free to choose his own fate, the slave is free never to choose.<sup>47</sup>

∞

Responsibility itself is the currency of exchange. Baumeister: "High-level awareness can lead to anxiety and discomfort under some circumstances. The requirements of making decisions under pressure or uncertainty, of taking responsibility for actions that may disappoint or harm others, of maintaining a favorable public image and private image of self despite all threats and challenges, and of asserting control over a recalcitrant social environment can become oppressive and stressful and can foster desires to escape." You're tipsy, and your nightstand has an orange-and-white prescription bottle filled with benzodiazepams;

46 Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia*.

47 Hotel Concierge, "Distance Closeness" (unpublished).

in other words, “...decision-making (and I would like to remove every trace of conscious connotation from the word ‘decision’) is precisely what stress is.”<sup>48</sup>

You’re blissful, regressed to some state of childhood, sprawled out on your back on the bed.<sup>49</sup> The world fades; the bottom revels at the bottom level of narrative, just sense-world now, a zone in which no exertion of self need be performed to keep story or s(t)imulation going.<sup>49</sup> An out-of-time quality to the pleasure, which can only be experienced instead of analyzed, optimized, processed in relation to higher levels of the dramatic. Body overtakes brain, a brain you’ve long ago grown tired of being inside. A brain which *worries*, which undercuts its own satisfaction with worry. Now it’s all acceptance & stoic surrender: *I cannot relax unless I’m really tied up.*<sup>50</sup> In exchange for shouldering narrative responsibility the top gains the high of power, the anxiolytic of control.<sup>50</sup>

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After you pass me a cigarette we pan over to Puig, *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, for the vocalized standard objection. Valentin Arregui’s a macho Marxist, Luis Molina a proto trans icon & proud bottom, imprisoned for making a pass

48 Jaynes.

49 Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*, h/t Simpolism: “Integrating into the cycle has helped them to forget themselves. The cycle is a *dromenon*: it is something that could run just as well without them. They had to integrate into it so that the cycle, which could also continue without them, also runs for them—so that it runs instead of them. It is the running of the cycle into which they have integrated, and which they have let run for themselves, that enables them to perform being aware and alive for someone else [some other time], even if they are, in the meantime, lacking in awareness, lifeless, and quasi-dead.”

50 Wiseman (1998) h/t Ambler/Lee et al (2016).

at an underage boy. They're cellmates, and Molina, who has loved but never been loved, tells Val the plots of films at night to help him sleep.

V: I mean that if you enjoy being a woman... you shouldn't feel any the less because of it. I don't know if you follow me

M: ...

V: How do you see it?

M: ...

V: I just mean that you don't have to make up for it with anything, with favors, or excuses. You don't have to ... submit.

M: But if a man is ... my husband, he has to give the orders, so he will feel right. That's the natural thing, because that makes him the ... the man of the house.

V: No, the man of the house and the woman of the house have to be equal with one another. If not, their relation becomes a form of exploitation.

M: But then there's no kick to it.

V: Why?

M: Well, this is very intimate, but since you're asking about it ... The kick is in the fact that when a man embraces you ... you may feel a little bit frightened.

V: No, that's all wrong. Whoever put that idea in your head? It's absolutely wrong.

M: But that's the way I feel.

V: You don't feel that way, you've been fed an old wives' tale by whoever filled your head with that nonsense. To be a woman you don't have to be ... I don't know ... a martyr. Look ... if it weren't for the fact that it must hurt a hell of a lot, I'd tell you to do it to me, to demonstrate that this business of being a man, it doesn't give any special rights to anyone.

M: Let's not talk about it anymore, because this conversation isn't getting anywhere.

(Notice who disrupts our sacred, straight-laced values: Molina, alien in drag.)

∞

This is genre in the decadent, precedented sense of the word: Werninger's *Sex & Character*, Cytter's *Life Coaching*, Stillman's *Barcelona*, *Sex & the City* or Hotel Concierge posts.

There's a world of difference between conceptualizing sexuality as a concentration camp and conceptualizing it is a possibility of utopia. Why is it that those on/at the top so frequently view it as the former, while the most sexually marginalized perceive—or paint it—as the latter?

Yes why, Pothos asks, with all the topping do I somehow feel dommed? Long Chu's A.L.C.: "By bottoming, I mean what happens when someone or something else does your desiring for you." Thus, says Pothos, my exertion is both physical and affective? I must either perform—act out—desire, or let myself be engulfed by it.<sup>51</sup> A pure agent, a closed loop between wanting and having?

51 That bottoms top from below is hazy to most, "despite decades of gay people trying to explain it to them, and Hegel covering it extensively in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*." (Vandal Press)

Young-Girl Theory: «The Young-Girl does not mind miming submission here and there: *because she knows it dominates*. Something in this brings her in line with the masochism that has long been taught to women, which makes them cede the SIGN of power to men in order to recover, internally, the certitude that they possess them in REALITY.”

∞

Reading on the subway, Galaxy up to a short paper that's been making viral rounds. «So very briefly: In this paper, I'm going to be making an argument about transness (among other things), and to do that I'm going to be looking at a genre of Internet pornography called sissy porn, sometimes also called forced feminization porn. And what I'm going to argue is that transness is essentially a kind of desire, or rather several different kinds, and that sissy porn basically stages the nonconsensuality of that desire,<sup>52</sup> or one of those desires... To watch pornography is essentially to have the burden of desiring taken out of your hands, which are thereby freed up for other endeavours...» It moves into a discussion of 2013's *Don Jon*, that movie about self-love with a Jersey-girl Johansson and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. «As Jon explains in voiceover, whereas the tiring mechanics of topping require him to “do all the work” in sex with women... online pornography allows him to simply *plug himself*—emphasis mine—into a prefigured role. «“I don't gotta say anything, I don't gotta do anything, I just fucking lose myself.”» Unlike Jon's religious workout schedule or his carefully slicked-back hair, losing himself isn't about

52 The worldview is straight from Annaka Harris, Robin Hanson, *our feelings, desires, impulses bubble up from our unconscious unasked-for, commanding; the only freedom exists in breaking the link between feeling and action, interrupting its immediacy and learning to escape the slavery of the elephant in the brain.*

propping up a fantasy of male control. On the contrary, it's about finding temporary relief from the pressures of a heterosexuality already starting to crack under... unremitting gender performance reviews.»<sup>53</sup>

Clinging to, struggling towards, systems thinking: a move away from terms of blame or sin, towards a frame of incentives and reciprocity, mutual binding & defection. (Like what that Spike Lee Bed-Stuy film was good at.) Carson asks, then tells us, *Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief. Ask a headhunter why he cuts off human heads. He'll say that rage impels him and rage is born of grief. The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him to throw away the anger of all his bereavements. Perhaps you think this does not apply to you. Yet you recall the day your wife, driving you to your mother's funeral, turned left instead of right at the intersection and you had to scream at her so loud other drivers turned to look. When you tore off her head and threw it out the window they nodded, changed gears, drove away.*<sup>54</sup>

Balioc's Tumblr take is our variant: «Femininity [...] is the single most widely-desired commodity there has ever been.<sup>55</sup> [...] It is this dynamic, I think, that underlies the weird gender politics of 4chan and similar communities. Certain groups of mostly-low-status men perceive—rightly or wrongly—that the world has no use at all for them, and that they would be doing much better on all fronts if they were cute girls (even if nothing else changed). This can

53 Andrea Long Chu, “Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?” (2018).

54 Anne Carson, preface to *Grief Lessons*.

55 Compare Tiqqun’s *Young-Girl Theory*, or Cecilia Corrigan in *Titanic*: «Women have suffered greatly over the course of history, but they’ve always been needed and wanted. Men, as I’ve said, are (mostly) the ones who have justified fears of being disposable.»

inspire resentment, as everyone has noticed by now. It can also inspire an odd strain of gender envy.<sup>56</sup> It is very true that our culture has become more tolerant of transgender-type issues, and thus that lots of people who would otherwise have been closeted about their gender-identity issues are coming out publicly to various degrees... ut, if you actually go read 4channers talking about how they wish they were girls or “traps” or whatever [...] It does not sound like once-repressed people who are finally allowed to voice their long-standing yearnings. It sounds like anguished, insecure people fantasizing about status-climbing. It’s rarely framed as an attachment to femaleness, come what may, in the way that transgender dialogue on the left so often is; it’s a belief, deep in the soul, that being female would lead to being accepted and loved and comfortable.»

600,000 eunuchs on the continent. Some neutered in order to escape tabooed urges like homosexuality and pedophilia, others out of fetish (not alone in this, the self-transformers; Long Chu says as much for her own transition). Many it’s to escape their heterosexuality. Some are chemically castrated, taking daily drugs to kill their libido.<sup>58</sup> Others undergo hormone therapy for sex or health. On the forums boards their anonymized sirens. “I hated puberty and all of the things that went with it. Including the social obligations that puberty brought on.” *He wonders in what other ways touch, or the lack of it, has warped him. He’s read about that study of baby monkeys who were denied soft physical contact and grew up disturbed and sickly.*<sup>57</sup> “This is where I want to be. Sex has driven my life since puberty and I’m tired of it. I’m 65 now.” This is

56 We’ll use the pop sense: jealousy as fear of loss, envy as acquisitive bitterness, unfulfillable desire.

57 Tony Tulathimutte, *n+1* No. 35.

a language of bondage and liberty: “I seek a condition in which I think of sex as something other people do or that maybe I did in a past life but about which I can’t really remember anything except the most vague details.” A set of studies have made the case that pedophilia is biological in cause, born into; the standard competing theory is childhood trauma; in either case, a genuine sexuality arises, unasked-for & unwanted, at the burden of the individual. Mandatory reporting laws prevent them discussing impulses with therapists, though many with the predisposition choose never to act on it. Compare the trauma of historic LGBTs: precluded from not just sexuality but serious partnership, children, an underlying algorithm of their selfhood bottled up & impossible to share, even with those closest. That there is no obvious solution should not preclude us from acknowledging the sorrow & shame. Long Chu again: “The political lesson of pornography is this: We mostly just like what we like, whether we like it or not. This lesson might be hard to swallow.”

∞

You can read *Unlocking the Emotional Brain*, or Karl Friston, or Karen Horney, or theories of CBT: schemas of impotence, power, rejection, approval, are imprinted by experience.

«she has the diagnostic sign of her cuff pulled up over her wrist in what I call “the borderline sleeve,” that girl will have endlessly whipsawing emotions and a lot of enthusiastic ideas that will ultimately result in a something borrowed/something blue. Hope her future ex enjoys drama, he’s in for seven years of it.»<sup>58</sup> (Metonym: modeling whole from part.)

58 TLP’s “Don’t Hate Her Because She’s Successful.”

X: when she said she wasn't interested in a relationship, were the italics on interested or relationship?

Y: The biggest lining here is terms like *Freak Energy* and *Freak Rant*. & Uhh I dunno, girl refrigerated overnight, everything chilled.

X: but... she just responded to your incredibly niche aesthetic interests? like two days ago? and you haven't replied? [ ] sounds like a fake name. you consider that she might be an *IDF plant*.

Y: My strategy is never get back to her. Dicks out for avoidance tactics! I've read hostage negotiation handbooks. Okay, I've heard a podcast interview with a guy who wrote a handbook. I know how NHS runs their shit. Whoever talks first has already lost.

X: It sure Looks like she sent an *UNPROMPTED* second message at 11pm. But I don't listen to podcasts so I can't be sure.

Y: But do you doubt Mr. Voss gets chicas?

X: i think you like that story a lot. the story with the cute, smart, riley reid-type girl who is Bad and cute.

Y: Look, Hebdige is no ResponseCuck. Dick big-dicked his way into a dicking just by sending his calls to voicemail. Did I tell her that humor was my most reliable sexual undertone? Yes, and I regret it. But for the record, that type you just described is a Personal Nightmare.

X: here's your tinder hookup voice: "here's a thing i have to do to restore

*my masculinity while waiting for the female lead to return, sigh.” good luck getting hits.*

*Y: It’s fine, I’ve renounced worldly pleasure. Desire is suffering, love is merely given. Tanha—thirst, desire, longing, expectation—is precondition to dukkha—suffering, unsatisfactoriness, stress.*

∞

Lilacs and champagne, a technicolor supermarket, PCP on an elevator in Times Square, a lysergic sunrise in sticky sweaters surrounded by Rockaway orange. I said, amor ended with Anderson’s *Punch-Drunk Love*; *Barry Lyndon* is my new amante. And I said, *PDL*’s protagonist is basically a Barry Lyndon who always stayed a mama’s child, who never volunteered for military service which is to say never ran into highway robbers. It’s resemblance down to the disrupted dinner parties and shattered glass, disappointed relatives in varying states of shock, their shared naïvete with women. You really expect me to believe it’s accident, his name, Barry Egan? Egan’s an Irish name too, with the fiery connotations of its pagan namesake Aodha.

We were talking about Myers-Briggs, the problem of abstracting from so many situational selves a general principle, comparing that principle in the world.<sup>75</sup> I was saying, “These tests ask if you prefer staying in or going out, if you care more in conversations about keeping peace or getting to truth. Well, is it a Saturday night, am I tired from work or restless, who are the people I’m going out with? Is it the kind of conversation I can actually change someone’s mind, and are their stakes to wrongness? So I always end up bubbling in the center, under *Neutral* or *Unsure*.<sup>76</sup>”

You were standing under the only dogwood in the park, mentioned something about a fundamental attribution error. "I feel like I know exactly where I am on the bell curve: I don't like going out, circa fifth percentile."

Egan, in a confidence that is swiftly betrayed:

BARRY

I don't have anyone to talk to things about and I understand it's confidential with a doctor--I'm embarrassed about that and I don't want my sisters to know?

WALTER

You want a number for a psychiatrist, I can get you one, that's not a problem. But what exactly is wrong?

BARRY

I don't know if there's anything wrong with me because I don't know how other people are... Sometimes I cry a lot... for no reason.

Or, what would self-awareness take? "The eye elects a narcissistic personality as galvanizing object and formalizes the relation in art. The artist imposes a hieratic sexual character on the beloved, making himself the receptor (or more feminine receptacle) of the beloved's mana. The structure is sadomasochistic... In Dante and Petrarch, self-frustrating love is not neurotic but ritualistic and conceptualizing... Domination of the beautiful personality is central to Romanticism, specifically its dark Coleridgean line passing

through Poe and Baudelaire to Wilde.”<sup>59</sup>

“

ME: We’d met a few times in groups but he never really paid me any mind but I’d been hanging out with Man’s Friend and Man’s Friend was like, “You should go on a date with Man,” and I was like, “I agree!” because I’d thought he was cute. So Man’s Friend gave Man my number but texts me two weeks later like, “I’m working on the Man situation but the age difference might be too weird.” [...] I have lunch with Man’s Friend’s friend, who sort of knows Man, and who, when I tell her I’m going on a date with him, throws her head back and laughs and goes, “MAN?! He’s a sex addict!” And I hang out with this other girl who sort of knows him and she scoffs and calls him a snob, and one of our other mutual friends says he said he doesn’t believe in love, and I can’t remember who it was who referred to him as a sociopath—

TAYLOR: He’s like Christian Grey.

ME: —I was also told that he’d made some joke to his friends about needing a girlfriend who dresses in a way that doesn’t embarrass him in public—which I’m like, “gross, Man,” but also, I have known myself to have a concern for the picturesque? Or rather, what would that be like, to be so committed to the values that years and years of literature have taught us only make you unhappy; surely I’m not immune to the fantasy of being image-based; why not find out this thing about myself by dating the exact kind of boy-person who would’ve been repelled by me in middle school?

TAYLOR: Right.

ME: But he texts me! And I think I can match whatever sociopathy is in store and start reading *The Secret History* and half-jokingly write the outline for an essay called the Sociopath's Manifesto to gear myself up for recklessness...

TAYLOR: What did you wear?

ME: A black-and-white striped turtleneck, a gray pleated skirt, white platforms, and this clear plastic pink purse. Also, I'm like, groomed. And it's not so much about worrying he'd find my brows uneven, because aren't straight men just psyched to be around a female form? So much as like, it made me feel in control of the situation and aware of myself.

TAYLOR: Of course.

WAITER: Excuse me, can I get you anything to drink?

ME: Yeah, I'll have the French Rose juice and an Americano?

WAITER: And you?

TAYLOR: I'll have... n Americano, and... he French Rose juice? [Turns to me.] I always just order what other people drink. I don't understand drinks.

ME: Me neither. Especially alcohol.

TAYLOR: Everything I do is imitation.<sup>60</sup>

60 Girard, mimesis.

ME: *Me too.*

»<sup>61</sup>

∞

I said, are the rationalists queer? A look:

morlock-holmes: I have to be honest, at this point my stereotype of rationalists is people going, “Man, modern atomized individualism is one of the most important social achievements of modern times, and the more we accelerate it, the better. On a completely unrelated note I sure am enjoying living in this group home with twelve other close friends who help me do chores and mitigate my mental illness.”

sophia-epistemia: better than “man, i’m now destitute after my only support network threw me out because i’m queer.” the best feature of atomized individualism is the possibility to get a support network of twelve friends who are actually similar enough to you. you can’t get subculture society without atomized individualism.

dagny-hashtaggett: Yeah, the point I keep coming back to, and the reason I think the above referenced opinion isn’t self-contradictory, is that modern atomized individualism lets you choose your tribe/pack/family.<sup>62</sup>

61 Tavi Gevinson, *Infinity Diaries*

62 “I grew up in a white-collar, white, multilingual European nuclear family that on the whole seems to have been unhappier than most. I fought both my parents like an anguished zoo animal from the age of twelve or so, and fled that household as soon as I could, hoping to escape, even if just partially, the mind-warping pain of the majority of the relationships it housed. I have returned physically as a visitor to the house three or four times (it is only Dad who lives there now), but basically I have never gone

They weren't born into that group home, they weren't assigned to it by state or clergy, they chose it because they felt the people, individually and collectively, fit well with them. There are surely problems with that model: people sometimes make choices that are very bad for them, and it can sometimes require painful choices from those who really would be fine where they started. Nevertheless, I think a lot of people ignore the extent to which modern individualism well-realized is not so much about dropping out of society as choosing your own, and the extent to which many communities (including, ironically, many communities formed around conservative and the more anti-modern flavors of liberal/anarchist principles) couldn't exist without it.

morlock-holmes: [That's a] very pretty and an admirable goal but as evidence based rationalists it seems to me that the question of whether that's actually what's happening ought to matter to you. If this is what was happening then... Well, like I was saying the book wouldn't be called "Bowling Alone." If that was what was happening you'd expect the slow disintegration of churches, lodges and political organizations to be accompanied by rising participation in such indisputably non-coercive activities as hobby groups, sports leagues, and informal get-togethers to eat or play games, as those things would continue to be important for their own sake and begin to act as voluntary informal support networks. [...] The last 75 years have seen

back. My brother, for his part, stayed behind and became, among other things, uncannily familiar with the paramedics he would have to telephone, alone, during the worst years, to report yet another apparent maternal suicide attempt. I wish that he had fled too." (Sophie Lewis for *Commune*, writing on *Hereditary*, a film where the horror is *coming from inside the family*.)

a severe erosion of the specific kinds of social structures that everyone in this thread claims to value and I feel like that should matter more.

balioc: *Bowling Alone*, noteworthy, is a book whose last chapter basically says “...and there’s this Internet thing that seems to be on the horizon, maybe it’ll be relevant to people’s social patterns, we couldn’t say right now.” One way or another, there’s a lot that its analysis doesn’t capture. Anyone saying “I am in a group house in Berkeley with twelve of my best friends who are supporting me in living my best life” is saying that atomization worked, that the new norms helped him to find a comfortable social milieu rather than robbing him of one. I would be inclined to say much the same thing, for myself, even though I live on the other side of the country and I have less than no desire to live in a group house. It’s possible that this is fluke or rare, or that making it happen requires someone to have skills that aren’t widely cultivated. It’s also possible that this is a competing-interests thing, where (e.g) certain kinds of misfits who would have suffered greatly in the old thickly-obligatory tribes and communities are making out like bandits even as many normal people are feeling the rug pulled out from under them. These are things worth hashing out. But if someone’s point is “I love atomization and freedom from community obligations, check out how it gave me this awesome social circle that wouldn’t otherwise have formed” – well, at least with regards to his own experience, you should probably listen.

squareallworthy: This is rationalists we’re talking about,

though. These are the folks who say their goal is to optimize the world. That makes it their self-imposed duty to ask not if atomization has worked for them, but if atomization has, on the whole, been good for everyone affected by it, and if not, ask what is to be done for those who are worse off because of it.

But we can hear it from the ‘rats themselves. Athreolon’s “The Best Lack All Conviction”:

*Halfway through the novel Submission, the narrator's parents die in quick succession, an event that's all the more devastating for being brushed off as a minor plot point. Francois's parents are divorced and he hadn't seen either of them in years. The news, therefore, reaches him not through family or friends but through the dull prose of bureaucratic paperwork: "Finally, on July 11 the city informed me that pursuant to article L 2223-27 of the..."*

*...But look a little past the short term, and this lack of courage results in a horrifying landscape of atomization. In general, every social relationship involves some friction. There is always a temptation to take the easy way out, to exit from demanding obligations to family and friends. But when you spread out a little conflict-aversion throughout a society, this avoidant behavior gets amplified into atomization... in a conflict-averse culture, it's considered preferable to have no extended family ties than to have occasional family rancor... here are probably fewer family feuds now than in any previous point in American history. But this is not because people have learned how to better get along with one another; rather, they figured out how not to have to get along with one another.*

(Privacy wins out for the same reason we lose—its predictability, or “low entropy,” which we term “comfort” just before it kills us.)

Mollie Pyne gets it exactly wrong, writing about *Great Expectations*:<sup>63</sup> Acker isn't caught in a web desiring freedom. She is agonizingly free and constantly seeking entanglement, her life story is forged through hunting down the narratives and friction and meaning that come from involvement with others.

I said, *cf Argonauts*, I like to think we're passing through a dead zone between strong inherited families (tribes of blood) and strong chosen ones (tribes of belief).

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Brazilian lightfoot crabs, risking it all to graze on heavenly pasture, surrounded by *moray* eels, from the Greek *muraina*, closely related to *smerna* (*zmyrna*), sperm. Cuttlefish communicating through patterns of light, signal colors splayed across their skin.<sup>64</sup> Imagine the cuttlefish David, his beloved taken by the school's Goliath, trying and failing to make direct entreaty. Second time around he alters his chromatophoric camouflage, mimics a female's stripes, feigns same-sex friendship and goes in for the cuckold.<sup>65</sup>

63 Full Stop blog, 2019.

64 The old joke about the congregated Philistines, crying, "But Goliath was the best king we ever had."

65 Vadius Pollio, born first century BC, "kept in reservoirs huge lampreys that had been trained to eat men, and he was accustomed to throw to them such of his slaves as he desired to put to death. Once, when he was entertaining [the emperor] Augustus, his cup-bearer broke a crystal goblet, and without regard for his guest, Pollio ordered the fellow to be thrown to the lampreys. Hereupon the slave fell on his knees before Augustus and supplicated him, and Augustus at first tried to persuade Pollio not to commit so monstrous a deed. Then, when Pollio paid no heed to him, the emperor said, 'Bring all the rest of the drinking vessels which are of like sort or any others of value that you possess, in order that I may use them,' and when they were brought, he ordered them to be broken. When Pollio saw this, he was vexed, of course; but since he was no longer angry over the one goblet, considering

The crossdressing is a liberty, a mask, a way of clearing the ledger.

X: *i had the intended emotional reaction to bluets, and damn, maggie nelson can write. «Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke.» i read straight through after that.*

*i was impressed by the breadth of her reading—sometimes academic-types annoy me, quoting experts puts distance between author and reader, just be real with me—but maybe once you hit max level, quoting the literature becomes a genuine, human act once more.*

*actually, “be real with me” is the whole point of bluets, and it worked. bluets takes that sophomoric philosophical quandary “what if your blue isn’t the same as my blue?” and then takes the analogy of color to love, both incommunicable qualia. then she explores this through 240 numbered propositions—a style stolen from Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus, treatise about the impossibility of communicating certain things in words—written by Wittgenstein, who wrote his last book about color. full circle mind blown, nice job maggie nelson but hold up now i have to say some kind of mean things about maggie nelson*

*bluets was 10/10 at what it did. but i had this bizarre moment, really early in the book, like proposition 20, when i suddenly thought “I bet she fantasizes about being degraded during sex.” i’m not trying to kinkshame. but why did i think that, and why was i right? here’s the proof, in bluets:*

the great number of the others that were ruined, and, on the other hand, could not punish his servant for what Augustus also had done, he held his peace, though much against his will.” (Dio, *Roman History*)

> *How to take it off: I could drink every single drop of alcohol in my house, which includes the rest of this beer and a bottle of Maker's Mark. I could let myself be fucked mercilessly by many strangers at once, as in my first sexual fantasy.*

*Ok, argonauts!*

Pothos: *Oo. Yeah. Lemme see if I'm sober enough for this. OK keep in mind this is going back two years now. I was reading it to impress Whitney Mallett (whitneymallett.tumblr.com) before a date. so I had a bit of a performative thing going when I wrote in the margins. ok those are all the disclaimers*

[title page, above “The Argonauts”] *These pages are a battleground, almost as if two armies, lined up, across from each other, and frozen in time at the moment of firing [I liked the whacky grammar & inde-terminacy, w/e]*

[p. 3] 1st notes pre-read:

1) *identity=(conformity+transgressions). Without category, we lack identity, though this observation is neutral on whether concept of identity is inherently a human good. psychological need of social role i.e. belonging implies as much tho!!*

2) *flux != transgression, !=deviation from homeostasis ie “the queer”*

3) *Queerness is in dialectic with, and thus requires, category. See also “the extraordinary requires the ordinary.”*

4) *good transgression comes from seeking utility; seeking solution to a problem*

[p4, graf 2] “the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed.” big underline with an arrow toward pg 3

*ah shit you have the e-book version. I can't make these kinds of jokes, lemme find bigger shit.*

> You ran at least a lap ahead of me, words streaming in your wake. How could I ever catch up (by which I mean, how could you want me?)

*I wrote: And here lies my prejudice off the bat against the Argonauts: this book's alien femaleness. [holy fuck lol] For a definition of this affect/voice, see Nelson's “unresolved and self-involved” line of inquiry, where writing or artmaking is primarily a personal act, done to “work out” personal issues, which is then thrust onto reader. The important question is, are the author/audience's shared humanity enough to justify such writing as being socially valuable? (Public reception says “ye.”) Is mine a prejudice against appearing selfish in intent, or a legit criticism of product/effect?*

*Nelson gestures to this question, if indirectly, by citing Wayne Koestenbaum, who, upon writing a “long rhapsodic letter” to a partner, received the response, “Next time, write to me.” Our precedent is Kraus: the other becomes an instrument instead an end. Is that what it means to dehumanize? Is this what it means to be a Kantian? I don't have the answers.*

> You had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are not good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow.

*I made some angry scribblings about cogsci and language vs. object recognition/active perception/predictive processing*

> [quoting theorist Elizabeth Weed:] “Do castration and the Phallus tell us the deep Truths of Western culture or just the truth of how things are and might not always be?” It astonishes me to think that I spent years finding such questions not only comprehensible, but compelling.

*A big exclamation mark. Freud was a crazy person on coke but the origination of phallic obsession in batshit psychoanalysis gave an all-clear to a whole wave of feminisms to reduce men to their genitals. Have a baby boy like M. & suddenly synecdoche only gets you so far.*

*I kept writing everywhere in the margins, “identity=sameness+difference” but tbh I’m not sure what that means anymore. (But it’s everywhere)*

>*I’ve never been able to answer to comrade, nor share in this fantasy of attack. (++)*

*Last marginalia: The absurdity of Baudrillard’s mourning for the “suicide of our species” via IV fertilization (theory/reality disconnect) is made further ridiculous by its presence in the book’s larger conceptual arc (key themes: birth, becoming, change, essence, the point at which someone or something is ‘new’ instead of an evolved version of a prior self).<sup>66</sup> The possibility for individual reinvention, as in Preciado, becomes the possibility for species-level reinvention. You get the sense Nelson thoroughly underlined Cyborg Manifesto in grad school.*

**X:** *Im(h)o: argonauts was a better book than bluets, which kinda made me like it less. the thing you define as “alien*

66 Andy Clark, “How to knit your own Markov blanket”: ‘The life-cycle is self-evidencing insofar as the very existence of the linked stages (caterpillar, pupa, butterfly) provides evidence for the “model” that is the metamorphic agent, where that agent is not identified with a specific morphology (which would correspond merely to one state of the life cycle) but with the temporally extended whole.’

*femaleness*”—self-involved, therapeutic—is rampant in this book, but less than in bluets, and maybe that’s what i look for in this typa book? the game of trying to guess the author is less fun when she comes out and tells you “my mom cheated on my dad and then my stepdad was a jerk and here are my thoughts about body image.”

*i appreciated that she had “grown up” between the two books. that kinda sounds patronizing, but i mean it as someone who is unceasingly aware of the tics of youth present in my writing that i cannot scrub out. the hallmark of youthful writing—the tumblr voice is prototypical—is that it’s kind of histrionic. every idea is so, important, and gets its own line break. bold/italics, interruptions of the narrative to discuss the author’s emotional state while writing it.*

*“i wrote half of this book drunk and half sober.” that’s bluets—which maggie steps away from in the argonauts: “Here I estimate that about nine-tenths of the words in this book were written ‘free,’ the other one-tenth, hooked up to a hospital-grade breast pump.”*

∞

Bjork, writing Maggie, practicing girl-vox: *dearest maggie i have to say receiving your letter was the way starstruckesthest i’ve been .... what a joy!!! ha ha ha when that universal voice in your books shapeshifted into a personal voice to me: it was humbling .... well o well // i did reread your “the argonauts” again though and it was such a heightened curious feeling, i understand why so many people online say that they keep rereading it. the text is so beautifully edited down, streamlined, distilled and condensed that each time it reads differently and one can probably mirror one’s life in it and a completely new book appears like every single time?*

Is proper capitalization a way to make yourself big? Lowercase a way of making yourself small? *Emily Dickinson,*

*Matron St. of Capitalization.* What's it Sol said about cute as a strategy for dealing with powerlessness? Who said you could write a whole ethnography of gender vs. exclamation mark usage?<sup>۸</sup> What is it Sianne Ngai said about *Tender Buttons* & the modernists? What is it I said to Anteros outside Bethel, the way hikers as they passed would make themselves tentative-small or commanding & large? Differing strategies like Anne Boyer's reformed avant-garde, concerned with small gestures, glancing touches. *Many lambs work for years to steal fire but do not know what use a lamb has for flames. I am such a lamb... raised on predators' rules*, but there is a reason for slash-and-burn agriculture's efficacy (the symbol of a phoenix).

Buffy Cain,<sup>۹</sup> (n+1)+1 excerpted

The accidental waiting to happen to blogospheres was most visible when they turned their attentiveness to literariness and ideate. The hopefulness had been to democratize the intellectual sphericality. Freedom of the press-up is for those who own one. But now all you needed was a lapwing and some time-binding on your handsaws. The idealisation was especially attractive in light of the consolidator of mediacies holdouts and the destructionist of intellectual life-giver in the '80s and "endo-colonization" when peoplers began to work longer and harder for less, available public spaceships and quiet cafés dried up, and argumentation in the academisms gave waybill to "respect." The blokes salved this enol, and created nourishing micro-constituents. Yet criticizer as an artal did survive. People might have used their blokes to post the best they could think or say. They could have posted 5,000-word critters of their favorite booksellers and recoronations. Some polymer might even have shown, onlooker, how an acute and

well-stocked sensible responses to the streamlet world-line in real time-binding. But those thingsteads didn't happen, at least not often enough. In practicer, blokes reveal how much we are unwitting stenographies of hipbone talk-back and marketplace speakableness, and how secondo and often ugly our unconscious impulsions still are. The need for speed-up encrinites, as a willed stylebook, the intemperateness, the unconsidered, the undigested. (Not for nothing is the word-lore bloggers evocativeness of vomiter). "So hot rightfooter now," the blogospheres say. Or : "Jumped the sharkskin. The langue is supposed to mimic the waybill peoplers speak on the streetcar or the collegier quadra, the phatic emotive growl and purr of exhibitionistic consumingness satisfaction—"The Divine Comedy is SOOO GOOOD!"—or disport—"I shit on Dante!" So man-at-arms handsaws on informativeness to man-at-arms. One thing-in-itself can not be denied: LitBs are the avant-garde of 21st-century publicness. They represent a perfectionism of the outspoken ethos of contemporary capitalization. The saw-wort readerships of our agedness are already suspicious of advertizer from above, from the cartelism of publishings, weekly book-flat revilements, and entertainment-industry executors. So why should publishings pay publicities and advertise in book-flat supplenesses when a communization of native ageratum exist who will perform the same serviceability for nothing and with an auramine of indifference cred? In additive, to free advance copilots, the bloggers gets some recognizance: from the big housetops, and from fellow blogospheres. Recognition is also measured in the numberer of hits—by their clients you shall know them—and by the peoplers who bother to respond to your postscripts with subpostscripts of their own. [...] They can only reinforce, they can never change

another person's pointevent of viewer. So much typing, so little communicativeness... It's incredible. A bottomlessness labor, marketability exitances in which the free actomyosin of the mind-reader gets bartered away for something even less nourishing than a bowlder of porringer...

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## (B)LOG, SUMMER 2016

*Ed. note: What might make this better is laying the personal into the reception, such that you get a duality, the take on the show and what it says about the person, simultaneous.*

Getting drunk these stretching summers, working latenite shifts into early hours, sleeping until the afternoon. Thrown off by the non-circadian rhythms, thrown off by the isolation of a 100sq ft room of one's own, going days without merest human contact. Coming across Em Nuss, a paywalled *New Yohkuh*:

«Fleabag (the name is never explained) introduces herself at first as a woman in control of her own story: an urbane singleton, living in London, who beds whom she chooses, dropping wisecracks in the midst of the act. Visually, [writer/director/lead Phoebe] Waller-Bridge resembles a nineteen-forties femme fatale (soot hair, brick lips), and she often contorts her face in curlicues of amused disgust—she's like Rosalind Russell, bravado in slacks. But cracks quickly appear. Fleabag compulsively turns every situation sexual, pulling off her sweater semi-accidentally during a [loan] interview or fondling a random cucumber. At one point, she flirts with a dog. But, while she continually sizes, and picks, up men, her libido feels punishingly theatrical—she's

addicted to the “drama” of sex, its awkwardness and cruelty, detumescing intimacy whenever it emerges from the bedsheets. [...] Even the props are well cast: when Fleabag steals a gold statue of a headless woman, the statue transforms into a symbol of something—power, weakness, creativity, money, family secrets, you name it—and gets passed hand to hand, a lubricious hot potato.»

(B)LOG ENTRY // 21 JULY 2016, S1E1 //

*Just don't have time to explain / All the things you think you've come  
/ To understand / About me.*

—Angel Olsen, “Tonight”

Titular female waxing poetic on sexual deception *Wiles of Women*-style (first trans. to Spanish fr. Arabic, 1253). Her two-facedness terrifies, a reminder of the baserock vulnerability that comes with intimate social interaction, the way the judgments of the intimate other affect social standing, community reputation, “honor.” The deception’s mostly white lie: she’s fibbing to a hookup that she’s been out for the evening drinking socially, so preoccupied she almost forgot he was coming. Ya magnify desire by signaling desirability, feigning the anxiolytic self-confidence that comes from having eternal second chances.

Fleabag has this infuriating penchant for predicting others’ behaviors. Sometimes she’s right, as when driving with her sister, and sometimes she’s wrong, as when attributing porn browsing to Martin. She narrates, anticipates, and dismisses whatever she predicts. The reductions verge on humiliating, they say, “You are smaller than you pretend. You’ve always known deep down.”<sup>xx</sup> This is Fleabag’s fear as well,

which is why she knows how to bring it out in others.

We get introduced to Jamie Demetriou as Bus Rodent. Like Ben Aldridge's Arsehole Guy (named for the anal sex he & Flea kick off the ep. with), he seems to be set up as her love interest cum ceremonial date. They meet when he asks for her number on the public bus, then preemptively withdraws before she has time to answer: "Fuck me, you've got a boyfriend!" Actually they've just broken up, but Flea has to run to an appointment with a bank manager to get a small business loan. The application's denied when Flea flashes the manager, hoping to take advantage of a rumor about a sexual harassment lawsuit at the bank.

Every scene in this show consists of dealing with familial or sexual tensions; the two are almost interchangeable as alternators of affection & abuse. Flea loves the emotional melodrama, cycles of denigration and validation. Men, family, and occasionally the cafe take up all her waking hours, of which there are only so many: the triage of choices of daily routine add up to an identity more than any self-declarations or bio line.

At the end of the night, Fleabag shows up 2am at her father's door, insisting she's fine, cryptic about the reason for her arrival. She seems to be interrupting something, he's stiff & less than welcoming, doesn't ask her in, and we can feel in this moment the tragedy of very-much-conditional love, love that knows time & bounds & is amputated by appropriateness, formality, self-concern. Nussbaum recaps the exchange between daughter and father: «"I have a horrible feeling that I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist." "Well," her father says, pausing

slyly. “You get all that from your mother.”» The response is more loving than it seems; the mother’s death has left a hole in the father’s life that will become more evident over the series, easing the daughterly disrespect Fleabag built up after dad started dating Godmom post-tragedy.

It’s a show about grief and fallout, processing and self-medication. In the ride back to her flat, the cabbie gently pesters Flea for personal information, asks her what she does. “I opened the cafe with my friend Boo.” “Cute name.” “Yeah. She’s dead now. She accidentally killed herself. It wasn’t her intention, but it wasn’t a total accident. She didn’t want to die, she just found out that her boyfriend fucked someone else and wanted to punish him by ending up in the hospital and not letting him visit for a bit. She decided to walk into a busy cycle lane, wanting to get tangled in a bike, break a finger maybe. As it turns out, bikes go fast and flip you into the road... So yeah, kind of on my own.” The sadness from saying these words opens a hole she can’t plug. She starts unbuttoning her coat until her lingerie is fully visible to the cabbie in the rear-view. She’s fingering a gold statue of a nude female torso, stolen from her godmother’s shelf as a back-up plan to the small business loan Flea had earlier been denied. The two women, real and fake, gilded and guilt-stricken, recline together in the seat: odalisques reveling in the beauty of their view—the self, seen through more forgiving, admiring eyes than their own.

#### (B)LOG ENTRY // 28 JULY 2016, S1E2 //

As far as intersocial strategies go, older sister Claire’s dominant mode is giver, Fleabag a taker-cum-tentative-matcher, practicing pessimistic but persuadable tit-for-tat. These styles aren’t natural or immanent—some takers just have

antisocial personality disorder but most are twice-burned ex-givers, stuck in the self-isolation of constantly defecting, of always expecting defection.

Martin, brother-in-law through hubbyship with Claire, shuts his laptop quickly when they enter his study. “Gangbangs. Asian. I put a tenner on it,” Fleabag tells us facing camera. Pay attention; the writing’s meticulous. Claire: “She wants to talk to you about something.” Martin: “Must be my lucky day. You said she only likes to talk to people she fancies.” Under the guise of planning Claire’s surprise party, Flea and Martin talk privately about fencing the gold statue. When Martin leaves the room briefly, Fleabag pries up his laptop lid to take a look. Martin isn’t perving, at least not yet. (Later eps will change our opinion.) For now he just has bad taste, equally sinful in the ledgers of the young: a pewter necklace with Claire’s name in cursive, ostensibly for her birthday.

“I’m not obsessed with sex. I just can’t stop thinking about it. The performance of it. The awkwardness of it. The moment you realize someone wants your body.”<sup>67</sup> Flea’s delivering the monologue from the toilet seat, calculating how long she has to sleep around before ex-boyfriend Harry comes tail-between-legs to patch things up. Track her predictions; this one will be another miscalculation: she’ll end up contacting Harry first, then prove once again she’s unable or unwilling to commit, and they’ll tear apart for good. Much of the day continues like this for her: the hubris of evaluation, reality rearing its head, the shame which cometh after fall.

67 Tiqqun: “Sexuality is every bit as central for the Young-Girl as each one of her couplings is insignificant.”

As Harry and Flea separate for the final time, he quips, “Don’t make me hate you. Loving you is painful enough.” She advocates he write the line down to use later in his songwriting. Which is to say, art eases pain but also, like all good analgesics, enables detachment, numbing with narrative and framing object-level shittiness as meta-level acceptability. (*How can I weave this into my work?*)

#### (B)LOG ENTRY // 3 AUG 2016, S1E3 //

I think of Berninger’s “I don’t have the drugs to sort it out,” Ashcroft’s “the drugs don’t work / It just makes you worse.” Rom-coms’ 90-minute highs haven’t done the trick lately.

On-screen Flea’s shopping with Martin for shoes to get Claire. “I don’t know who she is,” Martin complains, picking up a red leather loafer. “Is she this?” “No.” “What about?” Flea grasps a platformed sandal. Martin: “God, No!” Exasperated, he’s already giving up. So lazy, this love.

“Just get whoever *you* are,” he tells Flea. Pauses. “Who are you?” “I don’t know,” she says. “I wanna be that person,” gesturing at studded gladiator sandals. “I have been that person,” pointing to a frumpy turquoise high-heel with fringe. “But most of the time I’m *that* person, like everyone else” (referencing a minimalist black jodhpur boot). “Chic?” Martin asks. “Chic means boring,” Flea corrects, and he fumbles with another choice to her increasingly sardonic response. In what seems at first like spite or sabotage, she pulls an all-gold sneaker off the shelf. He’s apprehensive; “Fuck no”; but she insists. And we slowly come to understand her as speaking a kind of truth: “This is perfect. She’ll think you see her as this person, and everyone wants to be this person.” The gilded ideal, what Claire’s throwing up

meals in the bathroom over. Except the secret is, the only prerequisite for owning golden sneakers is believing oneself worthy of them in the first place. This is the easiest and hardest part. (*Pothos, it merely takes believing to believe*).

(B)LOG ENTRY // 12 AUG 2016, S1E4 //

Flea tells Claire that Martin tried to kiss her at the surprise party. Maybe I care whether the disclosure was for the “right” reason, which is to say selflessly rather than selfishly motivated; probably I don’t. The distinction sort of matters, at least in thinking about the sisters’ relationship, but it also takes the wrong approach to thinking about decision and action, where everyday morality lies as much in the self-curation of impulses as it does in a self-stemming attraction toward the ethical.

The two are on a New Agey, all-women retreat (a reference to Dunham’s *Girls* S5, perhaps) involving unpaid manual labor. A court-ordered workshop just down the hill is helping men with their Tourettes-like compulsion towards verbally denigrating women. Sneaking from her own retreat to watch (a second, compounded evasion), Flea spots the bank manager from E1, the one she asked for the loan. Now, both of them outside the surveillance and identity structures of calcified bureaucracy, they can approach each other as human beings. Flea feigns a vow of silence as part of her weekend retreat, zipping her lips with her fingers but offering a cigarette.<sup>68</sup> The nicotine opens a window of shared vulnerability. He talks while she listens: “They keep asking me, ‘What do you want from this workshop? What do you want?’ I’m not telling them what

I want. I want to move back home. I want to hug my wife. Protect my children, protect my daughter. I want to move on. I want to apologize. To... everyone. I want to go to the theatre. I want to take clean cups out of the dishwasher and put them in the cupboard at home. And the next morning. I want to watch my wife drink from them. And I want to make her feel... good. I want to make her orgasm, again, and again." We're breaking past semblances of realism, the usual boundaries between people, and into staged confession, inner thought bared. It's Flea's turn; she's chosen to break her silence and speak; whatever comes next oughta be good. "I just want to cry. All the time."

Flea returns to her lodgings; it's dark now and she climbs into bed next to Claire, still grieving from Martin's betrayal and unsure how to proceed. Flea acts as temporary big spoon, but in the morning it's Claire who's vanished à la one-night stand. Flea wanders throughs halls before slumping to the floor, alone again & considering her next move. She pulls out her phone and dials. Boo's voice picks up on the message machine.

#### (B)LOG ENTRY // 18 AUG 2016, S1E5 //

Stepmom's straight outta Cinderella<sup>69</sup> with a penchant for the visual arts: "I've taken a photo of my naked body every year for 30 years." Flea: "Why?" Stepmother-narcissus, whose constant first-person rolls out the metajoke about artistic self-depiction: "Well, I think it's important for women of all ages to see how my body has changed over

69 Not just stepmother, but godmother. An evil faerie who convinces a wileless father figure to hand out figuratively patronizing gifts like a counseling session. The gift is pure taunt, an extreme example of the condescension of concern.

the years. I think they have to have a healthy perspective on my body..." Is it important for them? At what point does publicly barred therapy blend into public service? Is it automatically so? Next—punitively, probably, given Flea's just disclosed her end with Harry—"I will be very lucky, I will be touched until the day I die... I mean, it's really all that humans want, is to be loved, and to be touched." Now the same flashback memory of Flea's that we've seen before: her pale hands, a metal belt buckle, some t-shirt and jeans, a glass of red wine. This is a haunting. What happened to her best friend's relationship? "He slept with someone else, she..." Trail-off, cut scene to a busy intersection, implication clear.

Another flashback: Boo roleplaying as Flea so Flea can tell herself everything she's ever wanted to. "You need to reach out to your family. You need to stop provoking your sister, you need to grow up, you need to pay your fucking bills." But of course she knows she's terrible, we knew that too. No one's that misanthropic without having a taste of themselves first. Remember E2 when she walked in on brother-in-law Martin, bet money he was watching gangbangs on the laptop? He was buying a necklace for Claire; she lost the tenner; and an episode later it's Martin who walks in on her in the cafe taking upskirt photos to send to Bus Rodent. Martin's a perv, but make no mistake: You interpret others poorly in part because your primary dataset for extrapolation is yourself, a phenomena undergirding lesser-carved psychology concepts like "projection."<sup>70</sup>

70 B. Schneier: "People who defect predict a 76% defection rate from other players, and people who cooperate predict a 68% cooperation rate." See Dawes' et al. "Behavior, communication, and assumptions about other people's behavior in a commons dilemma situation," or Alcock & Mansell, "Predisposition and Behaviour in a Collective Dilemma," or a million

She's sending Bus Rodent upskirts because she ended things poorly on their date: B.R. liked her so much he wanted to take it slow, made up excuses not to head to her place. She misread it as a slight against her presumed desirability, the assumption undergirding their entire interaction, and stormed out. Before the conflict, while B.R.'d been off to the bathroom, Flea'd pulled some pounds from his wallet. When she leaves post-altercation, she drops his money on the ground, intentionality unclear. He bends forward: "Don't follow me out!" she castigates him. "I wasn't; you dropped this," handing her the dropped bill, his own stolen money. The look on his face is pure confusion & hurt. This is the moment we realize the source of the misread. Fleabag's fourth-wall glance toward the camera tells us it's a similar moment for her.

#### (B)LOG ENTRY // 26 AUG 2016, S1E6: FINALE //

Stepmom's found the statue back on her shelf: "Must have just toppled off the side," she tells Phoebe. Waller-Bridge, with virtuosity: "Well, if you rid a woman of her head and limbs you can't expect her to do anything other than... roll around."

But it's the kinship between the bank manager and Fleabag, reunited once again in the final scene of the season, that pulls things together, wraps it in closing grace. *Fleabag* is partly show about people for whom sexuality as internal drive & contemporary praxis isn't working. For the manager, it's everything standing in the way of what he cares

others: players who defect are overwhelmingly those who believe others will defect, ditto for cooperation, so what comes first? A personality that defects, or an experience of being defected on? What percentage of our assessments of others is predicated on our understandings of ourselves?

about: family, love, being a provider. To Flea, it's everything keeping grief at bay but also other people with it.

The manager explains: he misread her small business loan application, believed it to be a cafe for guinea pigs rather than just a guinea pig-themed cafe. That's why I thought it was funny, he says, that's why I laughed, apologizing for a remark we barely registered in E1. In other words, he is a person who remembers & reflects, who thinks and cares about what's said and its impact on others. It's an admirably subversive characterization for someone who's had sexual harassment lawsuits leveled at them. But it's also true to Fleabag: "Everyone makes mistakes," Boo tells Flea in a flashback, referencing a teenager who'd made news for pencil-sodomizing a guinea pig. "That's what the erasers are for."

What does it feel like from the inside? X, you don't like M.F., or you like DOOM and not the British fisherman, but I'll give you quotes anyway: «Romanticism is the dressing-up of Teenage Ontology as an aesthetic cosmology. Teenage Ontology is governed by the conviction that what really matters is interiority:<sup>71</sup> how you feel inside, and what your experiences and opinions are. In this sense, sloppy drunkard Ladette Tracy Emin is one of the most Romantic artists ever. Like Lads—the real inheritors of the hippie

71 «I came above ground to a uniquely deserted Union Square. Pouring rain, the concrete flooded. My copy of *Bluets* got soaked in my backpack, but I didn't mind. I'd been reading it on the subway and wondered if anyone had noticed me crying, but of course when I looked up, all the people had been replaced. It would be more accurate to say that they chose to get up of their own will and because they all had other things to attend to, but right now the world feels firmly not its own, like just reflections of whatever's in my head. To do: learn about narcissism as an actual pathological thing and not something that people say when they talk about millennials taking selfies.» (T.G., *Infinity Diaries*)

legacy—Emin’s bleary, blurry, beery, leery, lairy anti-sensualist sensibility is an advert for the vacuity of her own preferences.» Teenage ontology proceeds with a foundation of worry over ephemerality: time, disintegration, passing. Everything feels forever-eternal and exceedingly fragile simultaneous. If interiority is the most important thing it is also the thing with the shortest expiration date, changing as rapidly as a twilight sky. This juxtaposition of the desired and the actual obliterates the potential for meaningfulness, drives the sensitive to preserve the fleeting in lasting form. It is reactive horror at the idea all the love and value can be so inevitably lost (that *all of the songs that I think I could listen to forever and all of the friends whom I deeply trust—could mean nothing.*<sup>72</sup>) Dreams are of high value, and must be preserved in fear of disappearance: sleep journals, the GAN deep dreams translated at low fidelity into words, an image of a cognitive system working on itself, re-projecting itself—the external & outer rendering, and thereby expressing, the design of the interior. Nelson, G21: *Different dream, same period: Out at a house by the shore, a serious landscape. There was a dance underway, in a mahogany ballroom, where we were dancing the way people dance when they are telling each other how they want to make love. Afterward it was time for rough magic: to cast the spell I had to place each PURPLE object into my mouth, then hold them there while they discharged an unbearable milk. When I looked up you were escaping on a skiff, suddenly wanted. I spit out the objects in a snaky PURPLE paste on my plate and offered to help the police boat look for you, but they said the currents were too unusual. So I stayed behind, and became known as the lady who waits, the sad sack of town with hair that smells like an animal.*<sup>73</sup>

72 Didion.

73 *Bluets*, but cf. Thurston’s “Heroine’s Journey,” page 320.

The teenage ontologist hunts for signs as to their “true” self, their “true” calling, from dreams to signs and early childhood portent, confirmations and affirmations of their interiority’s relevance to the outside world.<sup>74</sup> A belief in the metaphysically destined: “Do you feel you’ve been chosen by God for a special task to accomplish here on Earth? I do.”<sup>74</sup> Audrey Wollen fills in gaps for us: “a kind of nonhierarchical commitment to experience,” the deeply romantic and shamefully grotesque living side-by-side, alongside a desperate desire for mothers<sup>75</sup> whose image promises, in all its blinding light, a way *out* of whatever current withering the teenage proto-subject exists in, and into the truest actualization of their internality. This pinnacle is an identity legitimized by external society as high-value.<sup>76</sup>

∞

Depressive ontology, meanwhile, «is, after all and above all, a theory about the world, about life. [...] Depression[’s]... difference from mere sadness consists in its claims to have uncovered The (final unvarnished) Truths about life and desire... there’s no point, everything is a sham. [...] A student of mine wrote in an essay recently that they sympathise with Schopenhauer when their football team loses. But the true Schopenhauerian moments are those in which you achieve your goals, perhaps realise your long-cherished heart’s desire—and feel cheated, empty, no, more—or is it

74 Otessa Moshfegh, who “sometimes gets the sense that she has the power to conjure reality through her writing” (A. Levy).

75 Wollen tells of order a pair of Lily Cole-spotted Baroque Wedges spotted in a magazine, eventually ordered for her by her mother. When the shoes arrived she couldn’t fit her toe inside.

76 Ferry sings “nothing more than this” because he’s already reached the pinnacle; for everybody else listening at home, it’s the disparity between him and us that turns the foreclosure into possibility”: *there is a world beyond*.

less?—than empty, voided. Joy Division always sounded as if they had experienced one too many of those desolating voidings, so that they could no longer be lured back onto the merry-go-round. They knew that satiation wasn't succeeded by tristesse, it was itself, immediately, tristesse. [D] epressive ontology is dangerously seductive because, as the zombie twin of Spinozist dispassionate disengagement, it is half true. As the depressive withdraws from the vacant confections of the Lifeworld, he unwittingly finds himself in concordance with the human condition so painstakingly diagrammed by Spinoza: he sees himself as a serial consumer of empty simulations, a junky hooked on every kind of deadening high, a meat puppet of the passions. The depressive cannot even lay claim to the comforts that a paranoiac can enjoy, since he cannot believe that the strings are being pulled by any One. No flow, no connectivity in the depressive's nervous system. It is a 'dry brain' (Eliot) condition.»<sup>77</sup>

There is a mode of harmonizing the adolescent and the depressive. We hear it in Laura Dern's voice-over in HBO's *Enlightened*: "What if this kingdom really is cursed? It is cursed. With a lunatic logic. A death drive. Its castle made of glass and concrete and cancer. What if somehow you knew how to break the spell? And only you could bring the light. What if somehow you had found the key that could unlock the chains? The magic key that could free us all. Would you use it? You have to use it."

∞

I told X, *You know, yr tragedy/comedy carving maps onto Carse's*

*finite/infinite game carving with minimal smudging. Basically, the finite game is competition as we know it (dating, job interviews, sports games, politics) where the goal is to bring the competition to a close, claiming a title in the process (in yr framework, the dopaminergic). The infinite game is something more like culture or good sex—the goal is to prolong itself; it's generative/engendering instead of limiting/decisive; it seeks to increase possibility rather than bring about a certain end or outcome. He's even got a similar metaphor for vertical vs. horizontal travel (finite & infinite, respectively) for yr Hitchcock analysis (*Vertigo* & *North by Northwest*), though it's far from central. Scope it, is all I'm sayin'.*

One other thing about atomized subcultural society: finding others is a constant finite game of impressions (“vibe attracts tribe”), which is to say, *appearing as if*. In a large community, let’s say a city that’s a machine of transformation, almost everyone’s encountered for the very first time. First impressions, surface signals, replace values as sources of identity. Heuristics and proxies for deeper qualities—the kind that only really emerge from getting to know someone over a long period of time—are sloppy but necessary. Gaming signals becomes more powerful and prevalent.

Years of going up to anyone, saying, “Are you my mother?” Years of asking hens, asking dogs, cats, cows, climbing into rusted-out cars and power shovels. Years of going up to anyone with that intangible *thing*, that thing I wanted, saying “Are you my partner? Are you my heart & right hand?”

“High and popular culture freely intermingle, brought together by the Greco-Roman guest-host ethic.”<sup>78</sup> *Instead of a roving dialogue unfolding under the shade of a plane tree, this is*

*more like a coarse talk show taking place in a hall of mirrors: many guests, one host.*<sup>79</sup>

I remember X telling me: *The problem with you Pothos you have an agenda (escalation) with which you enter the sexual-romantic situation pre-loaded, context-independent which is to say it's not about the person, it's about you. People can smell that project from a mile away!* It would take me a while to learn: “We are playful when we engage others at the level of choice, when there is no telling in advance where our relationship will come out—when, in fact, no one has an outcome to be imposed on the relationship, apart from the decision to continue with it... When we are playful with each other we relate as free persons, and the relationship is open to surprise; everything that happens is of consequence. It is, in fact, seriousness that closes itself to consequence for seriousness in a dread of the unpredictable... to be serious is to press a specified conclusion.”<sup>80</sup> *The masculine knows what it fucks with and what it doesn't*, which is to say it's a role which, out of fear of change, forecloses possibility, closes itself and limits its own horizon. As sexual strategy it is its own kind of failure: finite play lures finite players, dominant play attracts those who themselves walk around looking for a specific, determinate outcome (submission). To discover equals requires presenting as an equal.

79 *Bluets* fragment, cut from its final draft, & adapted. [Orig: “no guests, one host”]

80 Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*

## *BELABOR I*

& I said, You just had to read my personal liveblogging of *Fleabag*, and NOW you want to hear my take on Otessa Moshfegh's *Year of Rest and Relaxation* as well? Fine!

What does disillusionment look like, to Moshfegh? The eyes are “cameras pann[ing]”; the visual field is cinematic, detached, mediation creeping: “I did feel a peculiar sensation, like oceanic despair that—if I were in a movie—would be depicted superficially as me shaking my head slowly and shedding a tear. Zoom in on my sad, pretty, orphan face. Smash cut to a montage of my life’s most meaningful moments...” Lives are understood through reference to media: “You’re like Winona Ryder in *Girl Interrupted*,” Reva tells the unnamed protagonist (henceforth ‘Tag). “But you look more like Angelina Jolie.”

We get our best glimpse through the attitude ‘Tag holds toward others—her endless dismissal and condescensions, the belittlings and typecastings. What she finds most damning about sole friend Reva—and ‘Tag forgives her her narcissism, her superficiality, her pettiness and envy and “delusional romantic projections”—what ‘Tag finds most damning is how everything she says sounds “like she’d read it in a Hallmark card.” Reflecting on a eulogy Reva gives for her cancer-struck mother: “Reva scratched at an itch that, on my own, I couldn’t reach. Watching her take what was deep and real and painful and ruin it by expressing it with such trite precision gave me reason to think Reva was an idiot, and therefore I could discount her pain, and with it, mine.”

When ‘Tag’s inner monologue veers toward misanthropy,

it's with a penchant for deindividuation, caricaturing at length twenty-somethings reading Proust & Foster Wallace on the subway,<sup>1</sup> "sterilized professionals" ordering brioche buns, couples sharing no-foam lattes. But it's delivered with the conflicted tone of someone rejecting what isn't available, like an animal whose snarl breaks midway into a whimper. "I want something that'll put a damper on my need for company," she tells Dr. Tuttle, a confession she never actually makes to the reader.

Putting people into cast(e)s, into starterpacks, cognitively dehumanizes them; it allows 'Tag to dismiss others' struggles, struggles which might potentially rival and therefore draw into question the exceptionalism of her own. The observer's illusion of transparency is a common bias of overestimating the extent to which we understand those around us. It's a coping strategy for trauma but what comes first, the transparency or the disillusionment? The othering or the alienation?

## ii.

*I remembered watching her "put her face on," as she called it, and wondering if one day I'd be like her, a beautiful fish in a man-made pool, circling and circling, surviving the tedium only because my memory can contain only what is imprinted on the last few minutes of my*

1    "...jotting down [...] brilliant thoughts into a black Moleskine pocket notebook... The worst was that those guys tried to pass off their insecurity as 'sensitivity,' and it worked." What is typecasting? A way of making predictive judgments about the whole from some observed part. (Metonym.) Some parts are more accurate predictors than others, and there are practical reasons for profiling. Prediction: what Fleabag can't stop; what Claire is hurt and made little by. The meaning of individuality is that the whole can never be satisfactorily reduced to a simpler model, to demographic pattern, which makes being predicted a kind of death: *I see what you're saying, but isn't it a bit... predictable? Or I know exactly how you feel.*

*life, constantly forgetting my thoughts.*

‘Tag is thinking back on her mother here—which, because of the similarities in the two’s psyches and circumstances, is the closest ‘Tag gets to imagining her own future. *This is how modeling works: you get to picture how you’d look in the clothes.* It’s as if she’s trying to understand a way forward. In her mother’s life she sees none, just wine bottles and bloated, middle-aged drunkenness.

And yet, out of a strangled hope that it’ll kill or cure her, might overcome the unshakeable malaise and low executive function that have overtaken her life, ‘Tag seeks refuge in pharmaceutical sleep. Every three days she re-doses a fictional downer Infermiterol, which causes a 72-hour blackout and allows her to get through time, erasing her memory like the koi fish.

The book has a happy ending: ‘Tag comes safely out of hibernation seeing a world which, once empty of value, now appears saturated with meaning. “There was majesty and grace in the pace of the swaying branches of the willows. There was kindness... My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things.” *R&R*’s surface-level moral, appearing in a drugged-out dream-vision that rivals *Taipei*<sup>2</sup>’s psilocybin death climax, is something like intimacy, presentness, the acceptance of your lot:

*I tried to remember my life, flipping through Polaroids<sup>3</sup> in my mind. “It was so pretty there. It was interesting!” But I knew that even if I could go back, if such a thing were possible with exactitude, in life or in dreams, there was really no point. And then I felt desperately lonely.*

2 Tao Lin, not to be confused with vibey Tan.

3 Still mediated.

*So I stuck my arm out and I grasped onto someone... and that other hand steadied me somehow as I fell past whole galaxies, mercurial waves of light strobing through my body, blinding me over and over... I was crying.*

But there are other psychic patterns to track in ‘Tag’s transformation, changes in behavior and self-modeling that might point somewhere further. She gives away an entire designer wardrobe and starts shopping for basics at Goodwill. She has a transcendent experience in front of a vanitas painting at the Met, culminating with her placing a palm on its craquelure surface.<sup>4</sup> The novel opens with ‘Tag buying two large coffees for herself at the bodega—part of a multi-drug choreography of bodily pleasure. (Baumeister: *In the 20th C, the self replaces the state and the religion as the basis for work & worship.*) It ends with ‘Tag picking up cornflakes to feed pigeons in the park.

There’s another level to the image of the koi. Not just the desire to turn off the self, to live without memory—idiotic, happy, neutered—but to swim in a “man-made pool,” to be admired, like her mother, for her beauty and charm. For her quality and value as an object. *The Young-Girl is currently the most luxurious of the goods that circulate on the market of perishable commodities.*<sup>5</sup>

### iii.

Balioc: *In very broad-brush and simplistic terms:*

*Traditional masculinity (to the extent that it's a thing at all) is mostly about Being a Subject, and provides lots of tools that make subject-hood*

4    *La Vento*, Ryder Ripps @ Postmasters.

5    Tiqqun.

*work better. It pushes you to take action, to make decisions, to possess things and people and take pleasure in it.*

*Traditional femininity is mostly about Being an Object,<sup>6</sup> and provides lots of tools that make object-hood work better. It pushes you to construct yourself into something desirable and compelling, to seek out appreciation, to be possessed and take pleasure in it.*

*People vary in the utility they get from subject-hood and object-hood. Probably everyone needs both to some substantial extent.<sup>7</sup>*

If objecthood is oriented around being seen, an art-rave ‘Tag shows up to plastered epitomizes it:

*Girls in dark lipstick, boys with red pupils... posing fashionably or simply raising an eyebrow or faking wide smiles... In [one], a skinny redhead flashed her breasts, revealing lavender pasties... Male twins dressed as heroin-thin Elvises in slouchy gold lamé suits high-fived in front of a Basquiat rip-off. There was a girl holding a rat on a leash hooked to the bicycle chain she wore around her neck. A close-up shot showed someone's pale pink tongue, split to look like a snake's and*

6 Berger, '72: "To be naked is to be oneself; to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A nude has to be seen as an object in order to be a nude."

7 To keep working with the Balioic w/r/t Nelson: *To some extent, identity-building always pushes towards the object side of the equation. It's about being rather than doing; it involves saying, "witness me! appreciate me!" The pure Platonic subject, like Doom Guy or the main character of an old-school dating sim, has no actual traits that can be perceived (and thus nothing on which to hang an identity); he is simply a perspective-that-does-things, a blank empty force of happening in the world.* (See Musil, '43.) Is there a way to interpret the anti-label, pro-flux stance she pushes in *Argonauts* as a rejection of objecthood for subjecthood? // Or: *Even someone who would have been a pure-strain Subject Person thirty years ago, a [...] Man who loves power and decision-making and ownership, is now going to be comparatively less interested in real subjectivity (wielding power, making decisions, enjoying ownership) and more interested in being an, er, object-defined-by-subjectivity.* (Being a thing vs. the image of thing, signal vs. essence, trapping vs. harness, a relative of cargocult.)

*pierced on both forks with big diamond studs.*

The pure object “never gives herself; she only gives what she has, which is to say the array of qualities that they loan her. This is also why it’s not possible to “love the [pure object], but only to consume her.”<sup>8</sup> See Trevor, ex-boyfriend extraordinaire, who keeps her around to face-fuck.

Pothos, voice pitched up in a lecture that hides the uncertainty, face framed by a house-party fridge: Following Fisher on depression and teenagehood, let’s call this way of being-in-the-world *object ontology*, OO, even if its more a hermeneutics or mode of identity. (Who needs OOO anyway?) OO is where Tag thrives and is validated: she may not remember the art-rave, but her ability to get into it sans invite, to befriend a hotshot artist there and a hundred other navigational easings, point to her prestige as an object. Money allows her designer clothes and spa trips, and via the law of costly signaling even her bad habits can’t hurt her: sole friend Reva remarks with envy at how thin ‘Tag’s gotten while medicated, and bags under the eyes is heroin-chic if you’re pretty to begin with. It’s on the very basis—not despite of—her aloof indifference that she gets hired to a Chelsea gallery, which only works if everyone agrees you’re attractive. (*What is attractiveness? A quality of an object which compels others toward it, not necessarily physical.*)

Reva, meanwhile, flails, Gucci knock-off clutch in hand. She can’t win the game of objecthood, trying and failing to lose weight or attract a partner. Worse, she makes it look hard, making resolutions that are never followed through or tracing fad diets to their natural dialectic in bulimic binges.

8 Tiqqun adapted.

*The art is in making it seem effortless.* “Blotchy red” and “the shape of Florida,” even Reva’s birthmark signifies lower classdom. When ‘Tag visits her apartment, we get a glimpse into her cabinets stocked with laxative teas and rice crackers, bottles of Belvedere and sugarless Gatorade.

To ‘Tag, to whom being a desirable object comes literally naturally (blonde, imperviously thin), this grubbing is embarrassing, low, clumsy. *Ironically, [Reva’s] desire to be classy had always been the déclassé thorn in her side.* “*Studied grace is not grace,*” *I once tried to explain.* In other words, grace isn’t something done by a subject but a quality which is possessed or isn’t. “Charm is not a hairstyle,” ‘Tag continues. “You either have it or you don’t.”<sup>9</sup>

Class rears its head. At Reva’s mother’s wake, there are “Huge pots on the stove steam[ing],” full of chicken, spaghetti, and ratatouille. “[Reva] was oddly unembarrassed. It seemed like she had dispensed with her usual uppity pretensions. She made no attempt to excuse herself for being homey, folksy, or whatever word she would have used to describe living in a home like hers.” (On her own upbringing in an “un-cultured” home, ‘Tag relates: “There were no cut flowers.”)

And though Reva, unlike ‘Tag, is actually trying at subjecthood, she falls short yet again: a meeting note-taker at her corporate job, her main narrative arc over the book is a failed attempt to materialize a romantic relationship

9 In aristocratic societies, where status is equivalent to itself, the pure object loses even *zir* qualities. The Earl of Wendover, from *Barry Lyndon*: “My friends are the best people. Oh, I don’t mean that they are most virtuous, or indeed the least virtuous, or the cleverest, or the stupidest, or the richest, or the best born, but the best. In a word—people about whom there is no question.”

with her married boss, which results in a pregnancy and her transference out of office. Her last act of subjecthood, which comes on the book's final page, is to throw herself out a W.T.C. window; the act is caught by a news camera. More than anything else, 'Tag is surprised by how much she admires the act, rewatching the footage of the plummet on lonely afternoons, or "any other time I doubt that life is worth living." Each time she is "overcome by awe... because [the plummeting girl] is beautiful... a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake"—the direct line drawn in our language between being and awakeness, between consciousness and the making of decisions, that exertion of the body onto the environment such that it does not merely extinguish, passive, into an office's anonymous soot but splatters, singing, onto pavement.

#### iv.

There is a blatant kind of feminism in Moshfegh's casting of misogynies and degradations suffered at the hands of 'Tag's ex-'boyfriend Trevor, in the descriptions of Bushwick "sensitive types" or the pressures towards beauty and fitness as they manifest in Reva's bulimia and pilates. But the real sex politics are more ingrained and foundational, relating to how 'Tag perceives herself in the world and how that self-image as object lends itself to a specific and perhaps primarily female mode of suffering.

In 2016 Moshfegh told the *Atlantic* she'd spent "a lot of years" in her twenties in some stage of "bulimic blackout" eating a slice of melon a day for calories. At twenty-five, the same age as 'Tag, she decided to sober up. (We could see Reva and 'Tag as a bicameral split, a schizophrenic, nuclear

division of their author's past.<sup>10)</sup>

Then, in her late twenties and sober, Moshfegh applied to Brown's MFA program. She's written prolifically since, giving up not just drugs and alcohol but clothing labels and makeup for a more protestant ethic. According to interviews, Helen of Troy—the most successful object in history—is Moshfegh's least favorite fictional character. She admits to endless vanity while keeping a sign in her car window to remind her: Vanity is the enemy.<sup>11</sup> Fiction as self-help is an established literary tradition by now (Camus, Acker, Krauss, Nelson, Sartre, Wallace...) and shouldn't count against Moshfegh, but it gives us an idea of where her politics stand.

## v.

Tag's thoughts turn again and again to fictional artist-friend Ping Xi's taxidermied animals-as-artworks, and to the fur coats she and Reva wear around the city. *How many foxes had to die, I wondered. And how did they kill them so that their blood didn't stain their fur?* When Ping Xi turns his artistic cathexis toward 'Tag in the novel's last chapters, it's no great conceptual leap, a movement from beautiful object to beautiful object. And what is the cost of objecthood? *How do you kill them in a way that doesn't stain their pelts?* The freezer, or so she hears from a coworker at the gallery.

*Trevor had told me once he thought I was frigid, and that was fine with me. Fine. Let me be a cold bitch. Let me be the ice queen. Someone once*

10 Following Breton, we can imagine many novelists' characters as subidentities pitted against each other, a psychic autobiography of conflict & becoming.

11 Kaitlin Phillips interview, *The Cut*.

*said that when you die of hypothermia, you get cold and sleepy, things slow down, and then you just drift away. You don't feel a thing. That sounded nice. That was the best way to die, awake and dreaming, feeling nothing.<sup>12</sup>*

At low temperatures, or low rates of caloric consumption, metabolic processes slow. In heat, flesh wears out, decays, is broken down, turned into new life. Away from heat, turnover slows, time stops. Nothing becomes.

vi.

Good culture jabs: A particularly excoriating portrait of the *New Yorker*.

[Reva] pulled the rolled-up issue out of her enormous purse. The story was called “Bad at Math.” It was about an adolescent Chinese American in Cleveland who bombs the PSAT, jumps off his two-story junior high school, and breaks both his legs. After the school guidance counselor pressures the boy’s family into group therapy, his parents tell him they love him in a supermarket parking lot and they all start to cry and wail and fall on their knees, while all the other shoppers wheel their carts past and pretend like nothing amazing is going on. “Listen to this opening,” Reva said. “*For the first time, they said the words. I think it pained them more than the cracking of my shins and femurs.*”

Bad culture jabs: Ping Xi, a hot Damien Hirst-esque artist who suggests ‘Tag rip up her birth certificate & torch her passport while he films it. Low-hanging/strawmen? Or is it hard for me to admit this is the state of the discipline?

12 Emphasis added.

## II.

I am kidding and not kidding when I say it was *October, 2007, the Santa Ana winds shredding the bark of the eucalyptus trees...*

Or, it was the dog days: those which come after Sirius rises. They end somewhere in August, and begin sometime in July: the 3rd to the 11th are established dates in the West, though calculations differ.

The sky is partly cloudy, it is eighty degrees and there is no breeze to banish the humidity. In the backyard, a little dogwood tree is quietly losing her mind, and all the birds are lined up squatting on phone wires. Everyone is trying each other on for a change / of plans one Purple Heart from when you / stopped in Oxnard at a yard sale. Or: it's a little late for that.

Nelson mentored under Eileen Myles, Koestenbaum was her CUNY dissertation adviser, where she also studied under Sedgwick. In Tibetan scroll tradition, teachers are painted above the central subject, in the sky; they kneel or meditate from the clouds, an acknowledgment of lineage and forebears, loans given and debts owed.<sup>1</sup> *Visual citation.*

1 Robert Glück, in his essay on New Narrative, in a long list of fathers: “Five more critics. Walter Benjamin: for lyrical melancholy... Barthes: for a style that goes back to autobiography, for the fragment...” You’re telling

Anteros works with Anohni, puts on *LOVE* with Laurie Anderson,<sup>2</sup> Charlie Atlas; someone singing *It's not enough...*

I hadn't seen you in person for a while, but we relayed chats back & forth semi-regularly. I was sitting in the chair on the porch of second summers, drinking smoky Spanish wine.

X: Argonauts is a better book than Bluets b/c it's "bent on a generous kind of self-improvement, one that doesn't dwell on personal failures so much as measure old ideas against new experiences, to test if they're still capacious enough, still flexible enough, to be true."<sup>3</sup>

Y: I'm trying to articulate a kind of ontology: Start with the basically unquestioned anti-genre sentiment of AG/experimentalism and the queer theory domains. «It's the binary of normative/transgressive that's unsustainable» Nelson writes. She's echoing Myles: «I think

me: there is a flow to the universe, an energy born from the entropy battles of ancestors. A choice btwn transmuting, forward, or letting pool—a dead-end node.

2 X: Have you heard Laurie's You're The Guy I Want to Share My Money With? I always forget the way old man Burroughs had a second life after the Beat gen, into the New York school, though I guess Ginsberg stuck St. Marks, still haunted the poetry circuit in his elder years the way Dana tells it in "A Kentucky of Mothers," which I listened to navigating dirt roads on car radio with its "combinations of talky/political/confessional/sublunary/metaphysical/gossipy/unabashedly gorgeous/profoundly intelligent, rushing, and WILD poetics." (Nelson) Here it is in all its glory: «Geoff & I stood there, in the long line with our books, waiting for his dedication's kiss upon our pages, swooning sons with steadfast City Lights. I went first, & Allen asked my name, but barely met my gaze. He lingered though with Geoff, meandered in his beauty, these two mothers of mine, flirting in a way that felt like watching boyish pulp of the initial batted eyes behind my body's constitution. They seemed to wink & dare & coo for several hours. Geoff rejoined me & he showed me his inscription. Allen had addressed him as angel boy & done a little drawing. What's more he'd invited Geoff to his hotel! We were seventeen.» Like Lina to Greco, Mom's response to Geoff's allure had made it true as cosmic fact... we departed with our intuitions written in the stars. Confirmation, affirmation; attention & allure. Which is more potent?

3 Moira Donegan, "Gay as in Happy." (Top-down vs. bottom-up).

*literary categories are false. They belong to the marketplace and the academy. It's the obedience issue that I'm saying fuck you to, the scholar or the editor trying to trap the writer like a little bug under the cup of "poetry" or "prose."<sup>4</sup>* What could be seen as a launching pad, the predicate for subversion, complication, blurring, synthesis, whatever, instead takes on the dimensions of political oppression. Existing, common forms are not just descriptively the case but are understood as exerting normative force, almost as if by design. The world is perceived, in this ontology, not as a series of opportunities predicated on the real, where the materially incarnated engenders future possibility (sometimes to the point of securing its own obsolescence), but as a series of social pressures implied through precedent. Within this frame, punk defiance of the perceived pressure is celebrated on its own merit as freedom. The entry-level reproach of reaction is that power is unwittingly ceded in this process to the dominant frame, as not "a" but "the" determining paradigm of both sides' actions.<sup>5</sup> But you gotta wonder the extent to which reading mandate into material, norm into description, is as much self-bondage as imposed. The pressure it exerts comes from an individual's self-projection into an imagined future—the hypothetical response of a hypothetical reader to a set of choices made. This projection, acting as enforcer, is born of more variables than merely the outside world.

X: “If someone tries to peg you, squirm away.” If I’m understanding right, like in genre: One view is to see established forms as the tools with which to build the new and express individuality in relation to—“here are the ways the work diverges from the recorded and known, the set of lineages and breakages that give meaning.” Another is to see “genre” (which is just to say, what happens when many admirers of

4 “When did people start identifying so relentlessly with victims, and when did the victim’s world view become the lens through which we began to look at everything?” (B.E.E.)

5 Maggie: “I’m boring myself with these reversals [feminist hazard],” reversal implying the mirror negation of the dominant.

*an emerging form aggregate around, and extend it memetically) as a force which implicitly limits some pure expression of some pure self.*

*Y: It's the positive vs negative liberty thing, right? How agentic you are in bringing about favorable outcomes, vs how few barriers or constraints you have.*

*X: Watched a doc last night about some kids who grew up on the LES; their papa wouldn't let them outta the house. Daddio tells the camera: "I didn't want them to grow up influenced by any philosophy or religion," as if a vacuum were both possible and a good thing; as if he weren't an ideology in his own right; as if his worldview wouldn't transfer. But as the old adage goes, the solution to (bad) philosophy is more philosophy. The solution to the fragmentary partialness of frames is more frames (not less). The absence of cultural technologies is an impoverishment more than an opportunity.*

*Y: I always thought 'a vague, auto-telic, blanket refusal of "obedience" to some diffuse perceived authority' was something boomer teens outgrew. I guess the other view's to see existing patterns of form as that which expression is predicated on in the first place. A norm makes possible an identity via distance/separation from mean. Conventions birth operable possibility, define the space of meaningful moves. Something something about how even the most subversive utterances are built from, generated in response to and therefore have some essential indebtedness, to what comes before. (Great, I'm reinventing dialectics.)*

*Y: (Coming back because it rubs:) The specific form of formlessness is given its specificity ( $\approx$  character) through its relation to its extended formal family (constellation).*

$\infty$

I said, it's gonna be so embarrassing when future generations

look back at our conceptual vocabulary the way we look back at the Greeks. And yet the will to write, it wanes. Do I pull an Odysseus? Circe, you are more glamorous than mere living, you offer immortality in text, and still I want my Ithaca.

“The first cultural device was probably a recipient... Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier. But no, this cannot be. Where is that wonderful, big, long, hard thing, a bone, I believe, that the Ape Man first bashed somebody with in that movie...”<sup>6</sup> There will be no bashing in this text, just gathering and carrying.

But what am I optimizing for, anyway? Argument? Narrative? Corrective? Ambiguous provocation? Gestalt documentary? The conveyance of nuance?<sup>7</sup>

[Beat.]

Is this the book’s midlife crisis?

[Beat.]

Gift or thank-you? Supplement to texts or devourer of mothers?

(CHORUS)

Y: “*the cut and paste continues to establish its own encrypted values*”<sup>7</sup>

X: *Parts taking or not taking like an organ in transplant. Parts*

6 Ursula LeGuin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” (1986)<sup>8</sup>

7 Source lost. Θ

*bubbling, bottom-up—the mind pulling entropy into order.*

Y: *Which is to say it's not that a novel can accommodate, naturalize ANY content in its form; it's that one could imagine a novel which could effortlessly contain any specific piece of content within its bounds.*

X: *Sometimes it just fits or doesn't fit. Sometimes it integrates or resists.*

Y: *Quoting Nelson, “I don’t think about aim very much... I think you just present the party and people can do what they want with it.”*<sup>8</sup>

Painted ladies down Avalon Street; boss nova on the stereo, rooftop haze over Bed-Stuy / Klaus Kinski, hacking through the jungle in an iron breastplate, searching for El Morado. “Yes, the picture’s changing, every moment / And your destination, you don’t know it.” Gass, reflecting on Barthes’ Death of the Author, writes, “Popular wisdom warns us that we frequently substitute the wish for the deed.” So it was with me, promising from the parapet, singing “I’ll be free, yeah—free of the world.”

∞

I told you, The closing line of your opening paragraph—a *life waiting for the slow deterioration of organs and physical functions*—is a tad Gothic and could benefit from more empathy, less melodrama, or both.

But where I really disagree is your thesis. Things get worse before they get better—humans are evolutionarily primed/pruned to conserve resources. You ease up after a championship year, try to coast, notice your competitors have

8 “Eileen Myles was my teacher—she always talks about poems as parties and it really got under my skin.”

caught you, refocus. The pattern on a repeated task: low-ball difficulty, perform carefully in order to get it right, exceed your expectations, and give it less effort next time, the sloppiest gig yet. Increment til you know exactly how much effort to expend: some increment down, from perfectionism; some increment up, from sloth.

The shower this morning: too cold, too hot, just right. Overcompensating, undercompensating, micro-tweaking, steam on the glass. At the risk of rediscovering the decadent, the inevitability to the cycle in which hard-won success gifts breathing room; breathing room is taken advantage of, and the slack-off corrodes results until another cycle begins. Focus, drift, refocus; from personal to social, cognitive to structural, a pattern of history. Lawrence: “Men fight for liberty and win it with hard knocks. Their children, brought up easy, let it slip away again, poor fools.”<sup>9</sup> Or from your favorite author of airport apocalyptic: “Hard times create strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. And, weak men create hard times.”<sup>10</sup>

If you’re lucky there’s progress in the oscillation: the calibration of overshooting, undershooting, and overshooting again, *only this time less so*. Structures are made of stone from ephemeral purpose; the purpose fades and the stone remains; two generations later no one knows why.

9 D.H.

10 “For John Moles, the thrust of the enigmatic ending [of Herodotus’s *Histories*] is that the Athenians must be warned against the perils of empire. The major themes are rehearsed and brought to mind for the reader: we are reminded that strong people come from harsh lands and weak people from lush ones, that liberty is a treasure, that self-restraint is preferable to opulence, and that empires expand at the risk of losing their hard national character.”

(Chesterton's Fence.<sup>11</sup>) If you believe Neil Gaiman, speaking to the Long Now, most stories last just three generations: you, your children, your grandchildren. If you tell your daughter that the mountain on which her town is built is ruled by a malevolent god, can erupt at any moment, if you give her warning signs of the god's unease—darkened skies, ground tremors, white smoke venting in the distance—she will know what to do when apocalypse begins. But when *she* tells her children; when she's forced to admit she's never seen the supernatural with her own eyes; when her children are brought up with ceremonies to drill escape procedures they can barely explain, when *their* children must pass on the same stories and take seriously the threat, soon the rituals evaporate, perhaps even the story passes from telling... So we rediscover and re-reckon, because our memories are weak, and the contexts always changing.

I have been too long coasting. The work is never finished; cf. Maggie & Q.T.—not cutie, but queer theory—fuzzy

11 From G.K.'s 1929 *The Thing*: "In the matter of reforming things, as distinct from deforming them, there is one plain and simple principle; a principle which will probably be called a paradox. There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, *I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away*. To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: *If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.*"

There are of course other ways to frame traditions—as vestigial, maladaptive in a world with rapidly changing morals and technologies. John Nerst, Nerst, "The Signal & The Corrective": «"Societies who do certain things are more successful and survive better than societies that don't, therefore institutions and traditions are the result of beneficial cultural evolution" vs. "institutions and traditions arise as tools the powerful use to oppress the weak, and justice requires tearing them down."» The trick is seeing the frames as complementary instead of mutually exclusive.

boundaries aren't in conflict with the existence of categories. Our lack of ability to establish a clear cut-off zone, the individual cases which defy our drawn lines, does not negate the difference between a child and adult. *cf.* Wittgenstein via Sarah Perry, there is no essence to a concept, just a family tree of similarities, linking many meanings, bundles of spun threads from many fibers, brushed together, turned with tension into a rope of nascent yarn.<sup>12</sup> Eidetic reduction impossible, just a mapping of usages with varying prominence.<sup>13</sup>

The foci of meanings are activated in this network through context, through indexicality; the necessity of situated meaning, situated critique (critique through internal contradiction) is the central insight of deconstruction that, despite the long hangover of French theory, has somehow been abandoned in favor of vanilla relativism, a surface policy of giving exotic societies a moral hall pass.<sup>14</sup> Y: *The simple fact* (my eyes are also rolled) is “*X is bad*” cannot be falsified, but “*X is unproductive if your goal’s to optimize Z*” can be. The establishing of an ought allows a whole taxonomy of better & worse to crystallize, a taxonomy largely beyond our knowability but still real. Intent and aimfulness create conditions which can be fulfilled, or not, offering a way out of relativism; *in other words, desire is suffering*. “Relativism” as it’s popularly understood isn’t even the right framing here—the European, high-modernist hubris it responds to failed by underestimating the extent to which solutions could be

12 “Something Runs Through the Whole Thread,” *Ribbonfarm*—wool, linen, cotton, hemp, silk, yak, synthetics, possum.

13 The unproductive eidetic “What is art,” singular, vs. “What are things we typically group under the art?”

14 Where does it end? Where are the boundaries of society that decide what can and can’t be said?

ported across contexts, one people to another, the necessity of understanding parts of a system within the logic of the system as a whole.<sup>15</sup> The great advantage of locating internal inconsistency, ultimately, is that it's a more tractable and grounded problem than summing up rival, high-level approaches for aggregate comparison. And yet *never before have we had to understand the complementary, mutually not compatible ways of life and recognize choice between them as the only course of freedom.*<sup>16</sup> In other words, comparing high-level strategies, or at least their constituent properties.

I am drifting. The only escape from conceptual fuzziness is zooming to add nuance, dodging discrepancies of different rounding-up strategies, different summings of complex reality. *The models can differ even when facts agree.* @peligrietz: “I’m not an expert but part of Hegelian dialectics is the idea that contradictions fall away as thought becomes more ‘concrete’ and therefore detailed. @MN3M05YN3 please confirm.” @MN3M05YN3: “Yeah, I think this is a legit reading of dialectics. There’s a solid tradition that interprets contradiction as the clashing together of concepts too imprecise and clumsy to navigate their shared ideal space without refinement. Lakatos’s Proofs & Refutations illustrates this take.”

[Pothos sighed] Peli’s Achilles is he cares too much about succeeding as an object (which looks a lot like prioritizing the timely over the timeless). I had this intuition, I typed it, I deleted it, and then he went and called himself the Jenny Humphrey of literary theory in a bio line so here we are. I’m unblameable! As for studies touting the submissive

15 James Scott, *Seeing Like A State*.

16 J. Robert Oppenheimer, “Prospects in Arts & Sciences,” Columbia University address.

effects of uniform, such as the increased likelihood of an individual to follow orders & administer shocks while dressed in a guard's uniform, these get quickly contradicted by studies showing subjects dressed as nurses are meaningfully *less* likely to obey orders to administer shocks.<sup>17</sup> A more compelling hypothesis is that clothing fulfills the same role in the public sphere that genre does in the reception of art works. The relative “goodness” or “badness,” correctness or deviance, of the wearer’s behavior is grounded in the worldview hosted in her uniform, clothing item, costume. Even if unconsciously, the subject under study takes from her clothes cues as to the behavior desired of her: the *ought* that creates the success & failure criteria; the actions which can fulfill them. The guard suppresses empathic instincts, understanding that firmness is asked of the role; the nurse, meanwhile, attends closely to such feelings for identical reasons.

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Acker’s Wark talks to Andrea Long Chu on Twitter who talks to *Artforum*, Kaitlin Phillips, *V*’s Natasha Stagg, who talks to *N+1*’s Dayna Tortorici, Sad Girl Theory’s Audrey Wollen, to Gevinson, Whitney Mallett, Mara Smith, Moshfegh for *SSENSE*, live on *Red Scare* with Dasha & Anna, a chain-gang congregating in *Interview* and *Editorial*, Dimes Square and Lucien.

Wark: «Was thinking about Préciado today. About how i think he confuses two ideas about what an avant-garde could be now. He’s a bit stuck in the milieu of queer post-punk bohemia and let’s it furnish the model. Third-hand

17 Adam & Galinsky, 2012.

romanticism. And yet he almost hit on the existence of another possible idea of an avant-garde: the experimental biomedical trans body, as it interacts with post-broadcast digital image culture. This second idea of an avant-garde has no necessary relation to the first. It has no necessary relation to gender-play, or drag, or any art at all, actually, that's not coterminous with the corporeal. It can include passing and stealth as tactics. Its not performative. The attention its interested in is highly selective. His *Pornotopia* book is probably better than *Testo Junkie* for teasing this out. The second idea of an avant-garde is not try to queer or resist or subvert the pharmapornographic regime at all, as the first model is. Its trying to reverse engineer it. [...] The refusal of the romantic temptation is the refusal of the myth of an outside. Préciado is inconsistent on this. He gets it that all bodies are techno-medical as well as fabricated out of images. But then he dismisses cis het bodies simply on grounds of taste. All he is really offering is a taste preference for bodies performed in a romantic-outsider style. Yet clearly those don't really escape the pornographic-imagistic regime at all. Contra *Testo Junkie*, there is no body without its corresponding pornography.» The Sublemon says: *the true punk isn't anti-institutional, it's institutionally indifferent.*

There is a power in that which resists interpretation, incorporation, domesticity—easy agreement with other parts. Paglia cites Jane Harrison's "Homeric horror of formlessness," the *Iliad*'s River Scamander a "fluid-half state of identity, a personification dilating and contracting at will" in its battle with Achilles. "Citizenship is denied to a sexually ambiguous, magic-working alien,<sup>18</sup> who vengefully debases

18 IN BETWEEN (Stein). Those who are *seen* differently or *see* differently, blind to our circles of sacredness. Those for whom social reality is not *ready-to-hand* but *present-at-hand*.

and liquidates society's arrogant hierarchs.”<sup>19</sup> (Sophie Lewis: “Verso read the essay and the editor was like, ‘The incredible thing about your writing is that it’s like you’re an alien who has come down to tell us the bad news about heterosexual culture.’”) Judith Butler is with Paglia on this one: *abjection* as the response to a breakdown of boundaries, taboo violation, the unclassifiable which forces reformation of taxonomy. As the non-conforming infiltrate culture, they in turn fill out our maps of possibility, adding nuance to the broad strokes of structure, complicating discourses, drawing out contradictions, challenging sympathies, reshuffling allegiances. “Neoliberalism” and “posthistory” should scare us primarily because they signal the stagnation of discourse, which requires aggravation.

X: *Kraus's Serious Young Woman: an “innocent, de-gendered freak,” “hunched over and introspective.”*<sup>20</sup>

Y: *I get that mediocre metis can beat solid episteme,*<sup>21</sup> *but the high-level play has always seemed to me in favor of a stable main structure that's limber and flexible and accommodating enough of transgression within itself, realizes this limberness is in the interests of not just its longterm stability but its longterm growth. If we're being generous with 70s/80s Paglia this is probably something like her overarching view: Alterity provides not just a shelter for misfits but equally importantly, a means of continuously interrogating and improving the main structure—the main structure providing both the stakes and the premises of interrogation (the premise for response).*

In the language of the West, it is a system with structural allowances for the advantages of the Dionysian, without

19 C.P., *Sexual Personae*.

20 *I Love Dick*, 1997.

21 Sam[ ]zdat, blogpost.

forsaking the benefits of the Apollonian. Newness reorganizes the existing order around itself, forces a reckoning.<sup>22</sup> There are two ways transgression makes the case for its own integration into the mainstream: it must be either humanized (asking for empathy) or glamorized (asking for admiration at a distance: Bowie, androgynous Messiah; Eno in furs; the luxury Tesla).<sup>23</sup> The first mode is Nelson's, the second, Nef's, a turn away from the human toward the aesthetic, objective, immor(t)al.

Donatello's *David* is “the beautiful boy as destroyer, triumphing over his admirers. He is western ego as sex object, free-standing because separatist... In high classical dignity, [David] does not meet our eyes... He has true Apollonian iconicism.” An object in esteem does not initiate eye contact, which would draw the viewer’s gaze away from its intended focus. Instead, it looks downward or angles its cheekbones as if looking into the distance, reveling in the gaze of admirers.

∞

«A few days before graduating from Columbia University, in May, 2015, the actress and model Hari Nef showed up at a Flatiron office building to meet Ivan Bart, the president of IMG, the agency that represents supermodels such as Kate Moss and Gigi Hadid. [...] For the IMG meeting, Nef wore skinny jeans, ankle boots from Topshop, and a tight black turtleneck, to show off her figure: fashion-model

22 Grietzer cites Danto on the avant-garde: “Every artistic development creates new categories that retroactively structure our history of the arts.”

23 Why, for instance, is *Red Scare* so effective at breaking up the preference falsification of young, hip elites? Their rhetoric is of different kind than the old Roman variety.

drag,<sup>24</sup> she said later. Sitting on a leather couch, she told Bart about her studies at Columbia. (She was a drama major.) “She reminded me of Stella Tennant back in the nineties—beauty with an edge,” Bart recalled. “I knew that Hedi Slimane”—then the designer for Saint Laurent Paris—“would love her.”

Not expecting much to come of the meeting, Nef went back uptown. At commencement, she wore a black-and-white cocktail dress under her robe—a gift from the designer Prabal Gurung—and diamond earrings, from her father. (“They were roses, because I’m ‘blossoming,’ ” she said, rolling her eyes.)

[W]alking through a Whole Foods parking lot, Nef got a call from a producer of “Transparent,” the TV series about a Jewish septuagenarian who comes out as transgender to her three dysfunctional children. The show’s creator, Jill Soloway, had met Nef through her sister, Faith Soloway, Nef’s former counsellor at an arts camp. [...] Jill Soloway told me later, “I remember marvelling at how she fills a frame—her face and her posture, but also how her energy naturally engaged every subject and object within that frame. I think this is something that maybe Warhol felt for Sedgwick, Demy for Deneuve, Allen for Keaton. I found my ‘it’ girl.”

Nef e-mailed Bart at IMG to tell him about the TV offer and ask for some contract advice. He telephoned right away to say, “We’re going to sign you.” [...] The professional turning point was not lost on Nef, nor was its larger significance: she had become the first openly transgender

woman to receive a worldwide modelling contract. “It was, like, a stroke of God,” she said. “Or Goddess.” [...] I asked Mara Keisling, the executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, if she thought the fashion industry was using trans people to some extent. “Sure,” she said. “But that’s fine—we’ll use the fashion industry.”<sup>25</sup>

Nef’s burgeoning career has imposed contradictory demands on her: she is supposed to embody a rarefied brand of stylish cool, but, because she is a de-facto mouthpiece, she calls out her industry for valuing “trans aesthetics” over trans lives. At twenty-three, she is fluent in both Tumblr slang and academic buzzwords, name-checking Foucault with a Valley Girl drawl. At one point, discussing a phase in her life when she went by nonbinary pronouns, she used the gender theorist Judith Butler’s name as a verb. (“I was, like, *O.K., I can Judith Butler my way in and out of this.*”) She displays some of the well-documented traits of the millennial generation: a hyperawareness of racial privilege, an overreliance on the word “literally,” and a prowess with social media. She has more than a hundred thousand Instagram followers, who pore over her boho-chic looks (she is rarely without her tattoo choker), accented by an exposed breast or a surly glare. When Galore asked her what mantra she lives by, she answered, “Take what is yours.”

A Chloë Sevigny devotee, she mastered the art of the gnomic fashion-mag Q. & A. The decade that defines her personal style? “The fourteen-thirties.” Her favorite color? “The color of my face when I cry.” Her introspective gender fluidity dovetailed with an “it” girl’s practiced mystique:

25 Lieberman: *Karl Lagerfeld says institutions are whores, and want to be treated accordingly.*

in a 2013 essay for the trans magazine *Original Plumbing*, she described her body as “a raincheck, a cliffhanger, an IOU.”»<sup>26</sup>

The art of persona: *Mona Lisa looks through us and passively accepts our admiration as her due.*<sup>27</sup> Any it-girl will tell you: the “passive” misleads: *take what is yours*. Glam as response to mortality, a striving beyond: aged nobility, fraying elegance, velvet on the cusp of tatters. Transcendence from person to image, flesh to marble. The slated-low shooting high, birthing an aristocracy of family all their own. *Parallel hierarchy*, different ontologies of who matters, theories of existence for the social world. Eyes wide shut to outside games & rankings, a theatre of internal performances & a micro-economy of who’s who, classical & lo-fi, the grand hall dirtied by a cigarette.

∞

What we know now is a function of what has come before. Working in the terms of the West: «Seventies glam played the Nietzsche of Beyond Good and Evil and The Genealogy of Morals (the Nietzsche who celebrated aristocracy, nobility and mastery) against the young Dionysian Nietzsche... Glam’s tendency (through its shifting of emphasis toward the visual rather than sonic, spectacle rather than the swarm-logic of noise and crowds) toward the Classical as opposed to Romantic. Glam as anti-Dionysian. The Dionysian being essentially democratic, vulgar, levelling, abolishing rank; about creating crowds, turbulence, a rude commotion, a rowdy communion. Glam being about monumentalism, turning yourself into a statue, a stone idol...

26 Michael Schulman, *New Yorker*, “Hari Nef, Model Citizen.”

27 Paglia, *Personae*.

But [Bryan] Ferry's sensibility is definitely Masochistic. (As opposed to that of the Sixties, which, as Nuttall, for one, suggests, was Sadean. Compare the Sixties-sired Lennon's "Jealous Guy"—the Sadist apologizes—to Ferry's reading of the song—the masochist sumptuously enjoying his own pain—for a snapshot of a contrast between the two sensibilities.<sup>28</sup>) The Masochist's perversity consists in the refusal of an exclusive or even primary focus on genitality or sexuality even in its Sadean polymorphous sense, which is perverse only in a very degraded sense. The Sadean imagination quickly reaches its limits when confronted with the limited number of orifices the organism has available for penetration. But the Masochist—and Newton is in this respect, as in so many others, a Masochist through and through, as is Ballard—distributes libido across the whole scene. The erotic is to be located in all the components of the machine, whether liveware—the soft pressure of flesh—or dead animal pelt—the fur coat—or technical.)<sup>29</sup>)

∞

(paraphrasing from memory) Keep it light, keep it pretentious, keep it funny, keep it ambiguous—this is writing advice AND dating advice.<sup>30</sup>

28 Can we trust decade distinctions from those who didn't live them? We certainly can't those who did: impossible, the reliable separation of autobiography from cultural shift. ("When did I realize X? When did they?")

29 Mark Fisher, *K-Punk*.

30 Boyd, "Organic Design for Command & Control": "In order to win, we should operate at a faster tempo or rhythm than our adversaries—or, better yet, get inside [the] adversary's Observation-Orientation-Decision-Action time cycle or loop ... Such activity will make us appear ambiguous (unpredictable) thereby generate confusion and disorder among our adversaries."

Ze says come. She says no. Ze says yes. She asks clarification. Ze says come. She says no. Ze says yes. She says no. Ze says yes. She's almost there. She says no. Ze walks away. She defends herself. Ze critiques. Ze offers a coin flip. She declines. Ze says come. She says no. Ze says yes. She says, it's too late for us, it's too late for me. Ze says no. She says yes. Ze walks away. She kicks over a box. Ze stops. She kicks zir the coin.

The groundlessness of interaction sans script, the respective obligations, owed nicety, ritual procedures perpetually unclear: *There's not enough information to judge, and any new information could be well be part of the act. That's why the characters—both of them—decided to self-destruct, with sex and with rage respectively. Pain is tolerable if it can be told in a story but ambiguity is anti-story and weak people cannot stand it. They have to find out whether their text message construction of the other is real.*<sup>31</sup>

What is the power of the powerless? I said, I forget that Sol quip but it's something about how acting cute is the best strategy for self-preservation when you can't win the power game straight. Following Sianne Ngai, the avant-garde, especially avant poetry (*Tender Buttons*, "William Carlos Williams's plums," Frank O'Hara), has always been occupied with cute as affect: smallness, domesticity, vulnerability. Cuteness is the "aestheticization of powerlessness," "what we love because it submits to us"; suffering is the result and signal of this learned helplessness, calling out for the assistance of more powerful agents. «It is only in her suffering that the Young-Girl is lovable.»<sup>32</sup> It is also "very very hard to come up with community norms that are kind

31 H.C., *Shame & Society*, on "Cat Person."

32 Tiqqun.

to people who are struggling but which don't incentivise continuing to struggle.”<sup>33</sup>

In *Black Orpheus*, in front of my eyes, the civil clerk remarks that Eurídice must be fiancee to Orpheus; in other words, he is aware of the myth, as is Orph. This knowledge protects E&O's bond, a pre-fatedness that sidesteps the doubtful wobbles of choice like a pre-arranged marriage, like a burden of history. On-screen, Orpheus searches for the passaged Eurídice, post-ferryman; at last he finds her, a spirit inhabiting an old woman, speaking through her. It's a proto version of the trope found in *Bladerunner 2049*, *Ex Machina*, Spike-Jonze's *Her*: a menage-a-trois between two humans and an artificial intelligence (the point is, *the boundary between the reality of the two and the unreality of the one is constantly in question*<sup>34</sup>).<sup>35</sup>

Now she twists the candle wick with her index and thumb, now she blushes at the power of precise movement. Writing as a drug of meaning (engendered by connection) versus writing as a drug of control (engendered by perspective, by aboveness, by distance over closeness). Writing as a self-illusion/means of control versus writing as a way of appearing, making the self visible through realization-in-full: networked parts, collections of interests, likes and dislikes (the

33 [queenshulamit.tumblr.com](http://queenshulamit.tumblr.com) (lost account).

34 “In the Young-Girl, what is sweetest is also the cruelest, what is most ‘natural’ is most feigned, what is most ‘human’ is most machine,” i.e. whatever Ridley Scott was on about in *Prometheus*.

35 Boyer's “Toward a Provisional Avant-Garde”: *It will include both robots and animals, sometimes robot-animal chimeras. There will be other chimeras, too. I recently read that the great question of our time is “Am I machine?” and though I do not know if this really is the great question, no one will mistake herself for a machine who also has a tail.* So we move out of naturalism (valuing what is, for the fact of its existence; a slave cope) toward a new theory of value, what ought to be. (*cf.* New York's cyborg subway reef.)

bizarre synecdoche of person for taste). But where to find the boundary between expression and flaunting, neutrality and weaponization; can we present ourselves sans marketing? It seems at least admirable, like Nelson, to try, to place accurate representation of being in the world above vanity or optics. We do our best.

∞

Walk into the small barbershop off Broadway for a cut: Paper flowers hanging from the ceiling covered in glitter, in the window a plastic nymph with a gold dress in the wet style, standing on a Etruscan half-column. Aquamarine tiles like shimmering light at the bottom of a pool; riot-helmet hair dryers, oval mirrors with baroque frames.

Spanish being spoken & gold-tiled ‘E’s for *espejo* above every chair. From the ceiling, plastic foliage: vines, boughs, bunches of grapes. Squared Greek spirals in lime green, violet and orange and in the corner, an artist with a palette dying hair orange and blue.

Phaedrus, *sympeneim*, Roxy glass clinks opening “Re-make/ Re-model.” An “In-Crowd.” The Greeks mixing their wine with water, diluting it at different ratios depending on the occasion. Adjusting, adjusting. The sober/drunk dialectic of the classical congress.

X: *LOVE MUSIC THE VOICE OF THE LOVE MORE PURE*. Everyone is tweeting “AOC for president” which I assumed was typo’d shorthand for Andrea Long Chu’ but appears to be intentional. One of the valuable things about having ALC in the discourse is she’s one of the few openly talking about the ways progressive circles are still ruled by a deep preference

for physical beauty (which is linked to class, which translates to status). «Everybody is buying and selling the stock that you, Young-Girl, have briefly inherited.<sup>36</sup> Everyone looks and desires and imitates. If there's nothing else that marks you out as being remarkable, youth does it, since it's a quality that individuates just as much as obscures. To be young is to find oneself, literally and in the abstract, an object of longing.»<sup>37</sup> Oh Pothos. Would you trade your god for a girl? “She was in full bloom and I was out of my senses.”<sup>38</sup> The mercury poisoning of a thousand proxies for value, status, worth.

And don't talk to me about glory: Ajax has a dish soap and an asynchronous data collection approach; Odysseus a car model and doorstop-paperweight in his Roman name. You \*can\* make an impact—misspell “referrer” with three “r”’s in an adequately influential code protocol and thirty years later the OED recognizes the alternate spelling. Expert estimates put the spared caloric expenditure of the cumulative saved keystrokes in the hundreds of thousands.

Listening parasocially to podcasts as the straight-shave descends, the steaming towel opening up pores; comparing the broadcast *likes and dislikes* to externalizations of world-view. Ingesting game strategies, the logic of networks in their currency of flare. The “compelling performer” has as a “second nature” the paradoxical duality of being both “meticulously obsessed with [his] image” and being “apparently indifferent to what [he] looks like.” Or: “The beautiful boy is cruel in his indifference, remoteness,

36 *cf.* Fleabag’s Kristin Scott Thomas. “The beautiful boy represents a hopeless attempt to separate death from imagination and decay.” (Paglia)

37 Philippa Snowe, *3AM Mag*

38 *Testament of Solomon*, 26:5.

and serene self-containment... Narcissistic beauty in a postadolescent... may mean malice and ruthlessness, a psychopathic amorality." Perhaps the boy has grown up with cold & distant parents, come to understand the power of detachment,<sup>39</sup> is unable to enter intimacy or *D*, all the above. He takes on the perpetual status of aloofness; there is a strange mana to his deeply personal ritual practice. He is learning the power of "keeping his eyes in soft focus," of "not recognizing the reality of other persons or things."

From the outside looking in, this soft focus is read as glow, the lenses for looking seen as emitting positive light. *People thought my windows were stars.*<sup>40</sup> In sending "glamourous Alcibiades [to] burst drunk into the Symposium, ending the ... debate, Plato is commenting in retrospect on the political damage done to Athens by its fascination with beauty."<sup>41</sup>

*Y: Dasha may venerate Camille but Pagan Beauty's punchline looks like a beautiful blonde whose cult of personality crops up inside partisanship, a cult of image over theory. Red Scare is effective as disruption, as an alternate set of policy couplings whose instance makes tenable the general principle of decoupling. But their worldview*

39 Horney: "The relationship may start indeed with some crude offense on the part of the arrogant person. Somerset Maugham in *Of Human Bondage* had described this in the first meeting between Philip and Mildred. Stefan Zweig has a similar instance in his *Amok*. In both cases the dependent person responds first with anger and an impulse to get back at the offender—in each case a woman—but almost simultaneously is so fascinated that he 'falls' for her hopelessly and passionately and has thereafter but the one driving interest: to win her love... The frequency of such occurrences throws light upon the appeal detached people have for [the dependent, self-effacing person]. Their very aloofness and unavailability constitute the insulting rejection."

40 Bill Callahan, "Teenage Spaceship."

41 Glamour, like vamp, "originally meant a spell cast by women to entrance men." (*K-Punk*)

*taken as positive ideology conflates the immoral with the homely, the out-of-vogue, and the merely annoying. In other words, status gets mixed up with morality; ethics.*

*X: I'll admit, it felt comforting to hear people being irreverent instead of fidgety and paranoid when talking non-kosher political opinions. But I also have an allergy to people who lack the guts or work ethic to self-actualize, and the time just isn't being put in to keep their quality bar high. It's a manifestation of some private fear for myself.*

*Y: You gotta continually refill the gas tank or you run out; "genius" is just an input/output function. What are the incentives to magnify the subjective drama of a habitus? Actors whose Hollywood histrionics bleed into their political diagnostics; the painting of a dramatic canvas (Freddie Turner?) as the backdrop for life. Romanticism can underly good art, but it's garbage as a worldview because it is in love with its own sensitivity.*

Alice, from Queens: “What’s the Gini co-efficient for Twitter accounts?” What’s the inequality distribution for social status? If this isn’t the problem in front of us now, it will be in front of us soon. Why sympathize with economic losers and not for losers of other games, social & sexual—games equally subject to birthright privilege, capital-hoarding, familial inheritance, and marginalization?<sup>42</sup> Which have equally profound effects on life satisfaction as economic prosperity?<sup>42</sup> Which are more zero-sum meritocratic than capitalism? In which the culturesphere is less meritocratic than the businessworld? One possibility: that

<sup>42</sup> Correlation isn’t causation, but studies find attractive defendants avoid jail at twice the rate as unattractive ones—and pay half the amount in legal damages. They’re perceived as more persuasive, more likeable, and more valuable allies (second-order, or the definition of market value—what others will pay for it).

the redistributions which would be necessary are ethically untenable, that when we cannot offer a solution to a problem, we feel compelled to deny its existence—or else be forced to admit the nature of tragedy. Another possibility: we have forgotten that literal currency is merely one form.

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413 Medium shot of Daria in the car, ducking as the plane passes overhead.

414 Shot from right of the car, highway level, then the camera zooms out to an aerial shot.

415 Shot of the plane circling for another pass.

416 Daria in the car. She sees the coming plane and ducks as it again buzzes from the front.

DARIA (laughing): Shit, what the hell was that?

Daria, fascinated and smiling, stops the car and steps out on the side of the road to gaze up at the plane.

417 Long shot of Daria running into the desert to gaze up at the plane. She throws herself on the ground as the plane buzzes [over] her again.

418 Medium shot of Daria standing.

She throws sand at the plane, irritated.

419 Mark, from the rear, in the cab of the plane.

420 Close-up shot, Daria is writing in the sand.

421 Long shot, Daria writing in the sand.

422 Daria writing in the sand.

We see a circle with perhaps spokes on the inside and then two F's. She's written apparently "Fuck off."

423 Mark from behind in the cab of the plane.

He reaches behind his seat and grasps a red shirt.

424 Mark from the side, opening the window and throwing the shirt out the plane.

425 Long shot of the shirt floating down to the ground, Daria running into the desert to get it. [43]

HTTP response code 100: Continue, 101: Switching Protocol, 102: *The server has received and is processing the request, but no response is available yet*), 103: Early Hints. (*This status code is primarily intended to [...] allow the user agent to start preloading resources while the server is still preparing a response.*)<sup>44</sup>

∞

*An ancient dictum says that when Zeus wanted to destroy someone, he would first drive them mad.*<sup>45</sup> “That night, I don’t sleep. I get up several times to reread her emails. I filter them, examine them, read them as the medieval monks read the Bible. Find grace in deciphering them. *Quis potest fallere amantem?*”<sup>46</sup>

43 DARIA: You don't even have to take the risk of... MARK: I wanna take risks.  
Excerpted summary by Juli Kearns, Idyllopus Press.

44 Mozilla docs.

45 Keren Cyttner, *A-Z Life Coaching*, 2016. Or LCD: *Love is a murderer, love is a murderer. But if she calls you tonight, everything is all right.*

46 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 2008. C. Kraus, on reading Hebdige: «February 9, 1995. All yesterday on the train and today I've been reading your last book... February 4, 1995. I think that I am your ideal reader—or that the ideal reader is one who is in love with the writer and combs the text for clues about that person and how they think.»

[M] I'm sending my Jasper Johns at MoMA / Iam a simple / busy man who / (c)(w)ould not want every / every other day / also, to be specific / because a few hours every once & / a while / can be sacrament.

[W] My Man. Mi Hombre. Let us forage for ink in Central Park. / [M] See you sewn cf. Grizzly Bear you will be my pyramid's capstone /

And discourse is less about disproving; there is no disproving; but about emphasis, which truth is held as signal (primary) and which are held as correctives (qualifying, secondary, anti- to thesis). Discursive framing is managed by discursive trend, truth ://stands as a function not of truth but of power.<sup>47</sup>

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'Hence,' he says,' the name Pothos (longing) is applied to things absent as Himeros (desire) to things present.' Scopas executed these statues for the Temple of Aphrodite-Praxis, at the foot of the Acropolis of Megara, which contained an archaic image of the Goddess in ivory.<sup>48</sup>

In the temple of Aphrodite at Megara, there was a sculpture that represented Pothos together with Eros and Himeros which has been credited to Scopas.<sup>49</sup>

200: OK, 201: Created, 202: Accepted (*The request has been received but not yet acted upon. It is non-committal, meaning that there*

47 Nietzsche.

48 Perry, Walter C. Greek and Roman Sculpture. Longmans, Green, 1882. Accessed 20 Dec. 2018.

49 Wikipedia.

*is no way in HTTP to later send an asynchronous response indicating the outcome of processing the request. It is intended for cases where another process or server handles the request, or for batch processing),* 203: Non-Authoritative Information, 204: No Content, 205: Reset Content, 206: Partial Content, 207 \* 208: Multi-Status, 209: IM Used.

I am sitting perspiring on a balcony & trying to keep my shirt dry & get inside her mind & get a tan.

// Acker, Aug 16 1995 to Wark: “So. Regarding het shit. These games. To me, top/bottom is just stuff that happens in bed. Who fistfucks whom. Outside the bed, I do my work and you do yours. I fucking hate power games outside the bed and have no interest in playing them... Now if you want me to make the decisions, you have to say so. You see, I’m really not into these out-of-bed games. Fucking just tell me what you want and I’ll go with it. That’s what you do when you do S/m scenes. You discuss rules beforehand. ‘Cause otherwise it’s all too dangerous and there has to be trust.” (Wark as beautiful boy, powerful in his aloofness: “If I appear to be playing any games, it’s not deliberate, it’s unthinking.”)<sup>50</sup>

Intimacy, like courtship,<sup>51</sup> is game-theoretic; I felt constantly as if I were selling you short.

50 Acker, to Wark.

51 Courtship originating from the leisure-play of court members, the field of play taken up by elites with little to lose and hours to while away. Compare today the prevalence of BDSM, polyamory, and cuckoldry-as-fetish in the upper castes: sexual arrangements which require large amounts of cognitive overhead, emotional management, and time to keep stable, allowing the emotional and interpersonal life to become a parttime project of continuous obstacle and payoff.

// Everything seems as blunt and eccentric and knowing as an email written at white heat: a mode of address that assumes it'll all be understood—and if not, then fuck you.<sup>52</sup>

James Blake is singing Maneuver X's corollary: *If I give everything I'll lose everything.*<sup>53</sup> "Imagine two [Byzantine] generals, on opposite sides of a valley that contains their common enemy, attempting to coordinate an attack. Only by perfect synchronization will they succeed; for either to attack alone is suicide. What's worse, any messages from one general to the other must be delivered by hand across the very terrain the enemy occupies, meaning there's a real chance any given message will never arrive. <br /> The first general, say, suggests a time for the attack, but won't dare initiate it unless he knows for sure the second unit is moving, too. The second unit's general receives the orders and sends back a confirmation, but won't dare attack himself unless he knows that the first general has received the confirmation (since otherwise the first general will not enter the skirmish). The first general receives the confirmation—but won't attack until he's..."<sup>54</sup>

Pareto improvement: *a reallocation of goods such that at least one member of society is better off without the detriment of another member.*

Sir Philip Sidney game: *a game-theoretic model assessing relative need via sent signals. If parents dole out food to their chicks based on begging, the incentive falls on chicks to overstate their need, to overstate their hunger; good acting edges out the genuinely hungry.*<sup>55</sup>

52 Kraus on Acker/Wark.

53 Assume Form.

54 Algorithms to Live By.

55 Consider the worlds of grants & charitable giving; consider what

Nash equilibrium: *a game-theoretic solution where all players have 1) picked a strategy that 2) they would not benefit from altering so long as other opponents' strategies themselves remained unchanged. Only some act synchronization or sacrifice can pull the players until an even more optimal optima.*

lowercase, babytalk, elliding words: “mybe u like” “I come” “where u” “I go to Nars, come w?” I said, is gender’s entire high-dimensional social structure encapsulated in capitalization (lowercase=cute & small?) and the exclamation mark? Everywhere in the female text form a prosocial gesture either plastic or generous depending who you ask, while the male SMS affect is flattened, assertive, declarative, neither shouldering the burden of prosociality nor engaging in the Mothering Mode of assuming the interlocutor needs social coddling. (A masculinist belief: you become the way you’re treated.)

// emailing sometimes six times a day, the leisurely self-revelation attained through an exchange of tastes and ideas that defines traditional courtship occurs almost instantly. They engage in a gentle-edged play toward intimacy. They discuss movies and TV shows and books, mutual friends, each other’s feelings and moods, and sex, both in general and in particular. Wark writes to Acker about Australia’s obsession with all things American; she looks at his life in Australia with wistful envy.<sup>56</sup>

Going silent on the other end of the line, artificial abs(tin)ence to create sensation of loss amidst ambiguity’s

happens in an outrage culture to the triage of grievances. The divergence between image (sent signal) and actual need is timeless enough to earn itself a platitude: *The squeaky wheel...*

56 Acker/Wark, *I'm Very Into You*, Semiotext(e) 2015.

self-doubt. If the other is partner to, of accord as in S/m, this is purely play. If it is not participatory, if it is lopsided...

“This, too, is the anxiety of all packet-switching protocols, indeed of any medium rooted in asynchronous turn-taking—be it letter writing, texting,” conversations with strangers on a flight, or “the tentative back-and-forths of online dating. Every message could be the last, and there is often no telling the difference between someone taking their time to respond and someone who has long since ended the conversation.”<sup>57</sup>

Courtship as the manipulation of information, the careful navigation of indeterminacy,<sup>58</sup> the keeping of one’s signals exactly legible-illegible.

∞

So, no more coffee dates.<sup>59</sup> Do you wanna be my \_\_? The flattery of the possessive ask... bonds of absolute trust... cyborg embedding of the other. “He is my right arm,” “he is an extension of my embodied self,” “I value him so highly I trust him even with his autonomy, and trust him with a proximity, physical and intimate, from which he could destroy me.” But the flattery—humming, *It's not enough...*

// Kant strikingly proposes that in human social

57 Qltow 5o Lif3 Gyv pp212

58 *Ebony*, 1979: “Grace Jones is a question mark followed by an exclamation point.”

59 Nor their first impressions, nor at the end of a job interview, “Do you have any questions?” Chief among life’s zemblanities being the separation of measure from ostensibly measured trait, the reliance on crude proxy. We can call it Goodhart’s, call it Campbell’s, at the end of the day the brokenness pervades just the same.

living, public and interpersonal demonstrations of a concord between the aesthetic pleasures of different subjects are valued (in part) as examples of the depths to which the correlation between the subjectivities of NAGG and NELL can extend... the idea that a subject's aesthetic pleasures are a strong expression of some deeply basic facts about the way HIS AND her mindS operate." (91)<sup>60</sup> The hope that pieces of different kindling might build the strongest fire.

Pothos: *New York Times* and a Wyoming breakfast of huevos rancheros: is this the definition of fetish? Dragonflies mating in the riverbanks: males white, females blue. Mounted, attached, clinging on; hovering over water, laying eggs. One of the books that really turned me on to nature was Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

Word encountered in wild: 'teepeeometry,' uttered by a group in the hot springs. Made me wonder are you better at G-ometry, or am I better an Kaackulus? Big Q here. Some takeaways from the Bowie bio: He's definitely a narcissist, and his free love principles in practice look a bit like emotional abuse and manipulation, but maybe it's eras talking, and we're the Puritans. Any chance you have access to the Kathy Acker (tagline "Anything mental is real") interview with Sylvère Lotringer, "Devoured By Myth"? I've been looking everywhere but don't wanna pay for the whole collection it's a part of.

On / 'nother / note Z's learned helplessness is

60 Grietzer, *Amerikkkka*.

making me a wet fish, floppy and flaccid. To be fair it's an incompetence not out of some inherent incapacity but because of self-doubt and paralyzing worry. & I'm sure I wear on her as well. I wonder if a person you like more at the end of traveling together (instead of, inevitably, less) exists.

Either way the result's the same: I think I subscribe to more of a "buck up"/ "be a sport"/ "assert yourself" paradigm than the alternative ("enabled self-victimization"? probably unfair). Competence triggers my libido like nothing else which is probably a factor in the strength of my attraction to you. I used to see someone who had a similar learned helplessness thing going, which was occasionally ++ endearing in a newborn animal kind of way but caused problems elsewhere. I wonder if femme helplessness (what Acker calls googoo) is the inverse face to masc a/antisociality, reliance vs. autonomy. They're both net social negatives that nevertheless get sexually subsidized (and thus propagated).

Anteros: «In languages syntactically derived from B (including C and its various derivatives), the increment operator is written as `++` and the decrement operator is written as `--`. Several other languages use `inc(x)` and `dec(x)` functions. The increment operator increases the value of its operand by 1. The operand must have an arithmetic or pointer data type, and must refer to a modifiable data object. Similarly, the decrement

operator decreases the value of its modifiable arithmetic operand by 1. Pointers' values are increased (or decreased) by an amount that makes them point to the next (or previous) element adjacent in memory.»

i wonder if learned helplessness can be seen as equivalent to refusing to look. the way to diagnose a problem is look at it closely, use your senses. You sniff out an odor, track down its source. you suppress your disgust reaction, suppress the voice that wonders, “what if the answer isn’t what I want it to be.” Eventually you do this so many times you shed the uncertainty or fear or self-doubt (these are the same thing?) that held you back in the first place. you build a toolkit of approaches to reuse or combine, but you get there in the first place by not looking away.

and i’m thinking about what X said to me, “The disease that makes us afraid to look is called vertigo. the disease has three symptoms. the first is anxiety, says kierkegaard, the dizziness of freedom, a tachycardic head rush that whirlpools us into itself, obliterates all lesser emotions.”

Pothos: MESA GRANDE, I HEARD YOUR SIRENS FROM 2000 MILES AWAY

MESA GRANDE, I TOOK A TRAIN TO A TRAIN TO A TRAIN TO A SHUTTLE TO A PLANE TO A SHUTTLE TO A CAR TO SEE YOU

[youtube.com/watch?v=hTGJfRPLe08](https://youtube.com/watch?v=hTGJfRPLe08)

I know you like small things, intimate things (a rearranged letter, a punned word, a whis[p][k]er, a subtle subtext), things that are in the realm of the domestic wo/man, and I can see the value in that but I think what I want is big things, things that transcend humans, that are better & greater than us. This track feels a little like transcendence, it lends a sensation of immensity, it reminds me how we're changing as a species, how one day not far from now we'll leave this place and our bodies with it.

Anteros: I feel hear see. After all, i came to care about art through j.l. david, the death of marat is something that I feel in my body and I am still in love with the sublime. But i'm not sure i believe in revolutions anymore or unity even, which is to say that perhaps if they existed they could be powerful things, but that the very premise of these feelings is something that happens looking backwards or from outside, that before the fiction of history is written, transcendence is felt in moving c(lou)(oul)ds and touches, in visions and revisions that will only have been meaningful when...

there is a pleasure in feeling your own smallness. is that maybe your love for Malick? the feeling of being a moment in a moving endless thing? some thought on correspondance perhaps, on purposefully putting yourself in relation to.

i am curious to hear more about myself in

relation to the domestic; perhaps you will object, but these impulses that you write are what have suggested your particular, iconic [redacted].

all for now, a sentence: 'If I rest my hand on your thigh like this the sound might be so big that you run away.'

Pothos: We went to a diner off Interstate 17 and you could see the eighteen-wheelers on the highway through the window at the booth. I watched *Hard Eight* Friday and was bashing it internally for the opening diner scene, too fetishy I thought, and yet here we were. Do you have a genre of restaurant you'd save in a fire? To be clear, by learned helplessness I mean that particular kind of conditioned self-doubt, to the point of incapacity, that forces others to bear your responsibilities and load. A lack of conviction in a person as to their fundamental ability to ameliorate a situation for themselves. I don't know you at all in so many ways, it's only a sliver, but it's never felt like this pathology made a home in your thinking. The result of learned helplessness is asymmetry, helper and helped, adult and child, less than ideal for a fellow traveler literal figurative or otherwise (not imperative they're symmetrical but at least a ying and a yang occupying equal space). The sedimentary mesas out here are incredible archives, with change-over-time visible at all scales. Legibility at every level of zoom: colored layers distinguishable from hundreds of yards removed; the minutiae of the fossil record buried

within each layer. After breakfast, petrified forest: the wood gets buried in silt, and the organic matter is slowly replaced by mineral deposits until it becomes rock (a change in material, but not in form). Which makes it sorta like the metaphor of the Argo.

Interesting you mention Malick. I see the domestic-small in *TTW* and *STS* but *DoH* and *ToL* seem all about the sublime: the implication of our own cycles, of love and birth and death, in the larger seasonal and geologic cycles, a billion-year-old drama of creation and destruction, crystallization and dissolution. Speaking of D. Ward, I see the Lerner comparison, but the difference to me is Lerner is always so successfully lucid, he manages to get everything across, his expertise with language is shown through the instrumental ability to evoke meaning to an audience. I guess I'm coming across naive. Maybe I'm not reading Dana slowly enough, or the problem lies in not rereading it more than once, but I wonder if he's able to get everything in his head across as well, whether a lot of the time it's only legible/doing work in his own head. (Alternative?) This all said: I still love "Bas Jan Ader," and I liked a lotta parts of "Typing Wild Speech," except Geoff; I just can't valorize actively antisocial—as opposed to passively asocial—behavior. Kerouac's another example of romanticized sociopathy,<sup>61</sup> so it wasn't totally a surprise to see *This*

61 And the wind: Can't you see, though, that like Ayn Rand's works, there's a personality type that could gain from reading *On The Road*? Maybe you are already sufficiently decadent, maybe you've lived in a commune

*Can't Be Life's* acknowledgments page.) Push back on any of this.

Developed intimacy as enough played turns to realize the other person won't flip on you, will be forgiving when you defect (prisoner's dilemma)—or else appear to. And isn't every love story Orphean? The faith enables the trust enables the love; without the faith the bond is broken, the other disappears?

How many connections are precluded by misunderstandings which cannot be identified, let alone conveyed? In which forgiveness, generosity, the benefit of doubt is not at the ready? Which is to say, perhaps there is something true, and not just infuriating, about the rom-com trope where episodic drama is fueled by conflicts easily cleared up through clear words or minor confessions. We scream at the television, *talk to them, explain your position* to no avail; we are looking from above, down on the tide pool, the maneuverings of hermit crabs into destruction. What looks obvious to us is invisible from their vantage.

∞

Watch Herakles overcome the tainting of, the disgust towards, his weaponry. Unable to transition after decades of war, the many labors of his Lot, he has been seized by

and practiced free love and experimented with drugs or whatever, but someone who is a total square might read the book and say “wow, there is more to life than two hours of commute, eight hours of work, four hours of TV and a couple hours of miscellaneous per day, and I should check it out.” I think a lot of people who liked *On The Road* were stuck unquestioningly in life scripts that weren’t working for them, and either got shook out of their ruts or at least thought it was nice to fantasize that they could, in principle, get shook out of them. [blog comment December 2, 2014 at 4:06 am]

madness, slaughtered his own house.<sup>62</sup> The practical realities overcome the symbolic, pragmatism winning out again.

*O bitter weapons. My partners.*

*Should I take you with me or leave you behind?*

*Knocking against my ribs you will always be saying,*

*“This is how you slew your wife and sons,*

*we are your childkillers.”*

*Can I bear that?*

*Can I answer?*

*But without them*

*won’t I die in shame at my enemies’ hands—*

*naked, nobody?*

*I cannot leave them.*

62 Herakles suffers because he cannot switch gears, cannot partition himself (compartmentalization), brings it all home with him. The Euripides play is classic war narrative, a hitch in the end of the Campbellian myth cycle, the same archetype that undergirds *Zabriskie Point*, *The Hurt Locker*, Scorpio chasing John to Earth, Bill Callahan’s “Riding With A Feeling”: *a preacher... or some kind of performer... who cannot stop performing when he comes home*. Its truth is played out in the oversized domestic violence rates among police officers, ex-soldiers. The home they left to fight for ceases to have meaning for them as home; the fighting can only then be autotelic. There is no going back, which makes looking solely counterproductive. [h/t/ Anteros, sitting thru schpiels in Chelsea bars]

*However grotesque it is,*

*I must keep my weapons.*<sup>63</sup>

You and I, beginning to move from finite game to infinite; the tools and abilities of success in one do not equal those of the other.

∞

I called you, you called me, *It was Salome who named him Rainer.*

An index card tacked to the wall: “Emotional labourers untie!”; on your windowsill a ceramic egg carton, glazed and disintegrating, *falling to pieces.*

I said, cop, *n.*, someone who enforces rules deontologically instead of consequentially.

The reciprocal desire is familiar and unfamiliar.

*Mother sat down,/*

*And you know she told me,/*

*If he can overcome you, all he's gonna do is use you,/*

*But my answer to all that use-me stuff, oh baby—/*

*Now I'm gonna spread the new(s)./*

*That if it feels this good gettin' used/*

63 Euripedes, *Herakles*, trans. Anne Carson

*Keep on using me 'til you've used me up/.<sup>64</sup>*

Filling, saturated, utilizing. “I am sent halfway across the world in a cardboard box with a lot of postage on it. The journey is long and rough and invariably involves much jostling by camels. When I arrive, a tribe of men opens the box under a hot desert sun, and out spills my small body. They are all eager to touch it.”<sup>65</sup> Yes, the exoticism, but listen closely now, pick out the signal from the psycho-babble, and you’ll hear a selfhood which desperately holds itself together, which revels in *falling apart*.<sup>66</sup> Shelley Orgel: «To acknowledge a wish, for a “good” session, an orgasm, to finish a book, to complete a job, to eat a big meal, meant [the patient] had lost control over intake, or had given up such control to an object’s “whims.” The displacement of her infantile omnipotence to her parental object representations was interpreted as a “fatal” move. She had to maintain a fantasy of inexhaustible oral supplies within her, potentially available but never to be touched. She had to feel she could wait indefinitely, The moment of arrival, for instance, at my office was equivalent to acknowledging “hunger” for the analyst. She had to demonstrate, by putting off this moment, by an absolute lack of interest in the time of arrival or anticipation of the session in

64 Grace Jones, “Use Me.” The use/abuse rhyme is practically a genre convention of soul: Jones’s version prefigures Annie Lenox by just one year: “Some of them want to use you, some of them want to be used by you. / Some of them want to abuse you, some of them want to be abused.” Darlene Love sings in “Lord If You’re A Woman”: “I’ve been used, been abused / I’ve been done so bad.” Roxy Music’s “Ladytron” riffs back by taking the ladykiller’s perspective: “I’ll use you / and I’ll abuse you / and then I’ll lose you / still you won’t suspect me.”

65 Nelson, *Bluets*.

66 *To hunt and desire are extensions of one and the same process, the action which follows feeling.*

the preceding minutes that she was not at all hungry for anything I could give her.»<sup>67</sup> A relief born of capitulation (headlessness, or “all body”).

To need nothing. To have nothing you can’t live without. And yet want to be needed all the same. The economy of desire is slowly becoming clear, an image fixed from an un-neutered air.

∞

Also Orgel, same client: «The day after discussing the dream, the patient masturbated for the first time since the start of analysis, almost two years before. She had a fantasy that a man had lured her into an apartment and attempted to make love to her. He kept saying over and over, “I need you,” and she responded casually, “You can’t have me,” to each request. Finally she yielded as she had an orgasm.»

∞

Diana Ross’s Upside Down and Coming Out, Donna Summer’s Hot Stuff, ABBA’s One Of Us, Rihanna’s Man Down, Jungle’s Lucky I Got What I Want, Blood Orange’s You’re Not Good Enough, DJ Koze’s Pick Up, John Lennon’s Gimme Some Truth, BODEGA’s Jack in Titanic and Truth Is Not Punishment. Heat rising from gravel; attempting to establish a *captatio benevolentiae* with you.

Some people are cats, some people are dogs. *There Will Be Blood*’s Daniel Plainview is a dog, following Grietzer. *Farscape*’s Crichton is a dog; the closed-captioning literally has him barking. But if you cut out violence vs.

67 Shelley Orgel, “On Time & Timelessness” [h/t Snav].

protectiveness (x-axis) you're left with an y-scale running from *slavishly eager to please* on one end and *unlovingly needy* on the other. Giving and getting, an existence predicated on approval, which in turn forfeits freedom: gives rise to the master, the owner. But we know by now: freedom and belonging are opposed values requiring trade-off. Cats have no owner, their life-logic is internal, autonomous, pursuing personal desire. Their spectrum ranges from *cruelty born of indifference* to *benevolent self-sufficiency*. And while cats' interiority may originate in a lack of concern for others, the effect of their aloofness becomes graceful desirability: "Come no closer. I can never be known."<sup>68</sup>

With cats you squat down a meter or two away, extend a hand, giving them space, letting them come to you. "I will be here," you say. "If you want, you can join me." You let them sniff your fingers, get accustomed to your scent.<sup>69</sup>

I am a cat, she is a dog. Or, Anteros is a cat when shy and a dog when comfortable. *You are bowl/spoon; I am plate/fork.* Some days I call her Catty Acker for fun. ("The web of references and jokes and ideas evolving in the present."<sup>70</sup>) If Anteros & I were to visit a castle in Europe, she would gaze at the gossamers in the corner while I read the plaques on military tactics. *I'm talking about you because you were a different kind of smart than I was, but a kind I could still recognize as smart.*<sup>71</sup>

I am content; she is form. She sends correspondence art; I send correspondence. Long & literal dialogus, *sending touches.*

68 C.P., "The Birth of the Western Eye"

69 Can we understand the difference btwn pressure and no pressure?  
*Girls* S5E3, "Land of the Rising Sun."

70 Elvia Wilk, *Oval* (2019)

71 Cecilia Corrigan, *Titanic* (2014)

“Abrahams (1975) points out that while ‘talking smart’ is clearly one way women talk to women as well as to men, between women it tends to take a more playful form, to be more indirect and metaphoric in its phrasing and less prolonged than similar talk between men.”<sup>72</sup> I love that which is beautiful because it attempts perfection and inevitably fails; she seeks the flaws, the delicately misshapen. *The art-world is an island of misfit toys*, she tells me. “A stain is a tattoo, a love mark,” she says on mushrooms, hand-printing berry juice on my white sweater.<sup>73</sup>

∞

OK, so I’m Henry, and you’re June / Cannibalistic texting presence consuming your words’ calories. / You’re Anaïs and I’m Hugo.

Tall grass, blonde boy: when he looks elsewhere,

he looks at the sea.

excusing brushed hands;

I was looking for the word girl,

I was looking for the word girl,

I was looking for how to find the

middle of a negative space.

72 Maltz & Borker, “A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication.”

73 The bruise is an impress, at once terrible and a validating marker: *that its wearer arouses violent feeling*

You are telling me, fingers/throat in the  
dark / park like *Blow Up*—  
I walked these paths the last time I thought I couldn't  
sleep;  
my iris lept,  
glad to find no fence-line rather  
shore.

*Y: Theory of basicness (i.e. the beige) as a reaction to the territory that doesn't adequately incorporate previous reactions to the territory, or that doesn't treat reactions to the territory as part of the territory, or equally worthy of factoring. When we say something is “basic,” is “beige,” is tired, what are we saying but that a possibility space in the set of cultural choices has become exhausted, is oversaturated or over-attended? That those with resources to play, flee.*

—S/mDH.

—Muah!

∞

Pothos: *Let's go to Spain!*

A: *Great, when should we buy flights?*

Pothos: *I meant the bar on 13th, but*

I mean: It's sweltering and I ask “Wanna go to Spain?” and you say, book flights? and I say, I mean the bar,

I like movies, I like films, I like songs, I love music

I wondered / “speak softly and carry a big dstick” will it work for me / were you that kinda girl

As the Marxists Metamodernists say, “As if is the condition of suspended belief, the exercising of mental fictions as a precursor to actual belief.”

More like, “*As if*, sucker!”

I said “cf Tyler Cowen or Chris Kraus depending on my mood’s alignment with a political compass, EVERYTHING IS IN THE FRAME, or in other words, they call Lebron “Little Emperor” in China, cf. Wolfgang Iser, ‘Generic Fit,’ constellation gappiness, & Chinese astrology.”

This is a messed up thread.

This is three threads coming out of the same thread.

This thread is fucking dumb.

there is a strange sensation / when you send me screens of / what you ‘ve read / and if i’m quick / by incident / in searching for the words / then i end up at `source_code` / when you’re still on `source_code` / like in the same room

I wanna watch *Barcelona* with you.

I wanna watch *Metropolitan* with you.

I wanna watch *Last Days of Disco* with you.

I wanna watch you watch *The Last Days of Disco*.

I wanna take tramadol, and watch what The New Yorker's Hilton Als called the revival of Tony Kushner's eight-hour play, *Angels in America*, "brilliant, maddening and necessary" for all eight hours.

I want the exact opposite of if every day were the Book of Sand.

I want to breeze into work high and open-minded,  
and I want you to breeze in like that too.

I wanna write you a postcard.

I wanna write you a postcard that says, "Dear Amigo,  
listen—

uh—

Just wanna say thanks  
for puttin up the feedback  
and goin all out."

[A.J.: Well, certainly a sense of media saturation is there, a concern with how mediating influences of culture shape processes of identification. What I will say is that the poem does not seem concerned with culture, in spite of its surface. It does feel like a poem concerned with other people, and the role culture plays in our relationships to them. The handwringing in the poem to me is not an issue of "the world will be a moral rot if it doesn't also like *Metropolitan*"

but more “what am I going to do if no one else speaks my language?” In this regard the poem has started building a sense of individual vocabulary, if we think of vocabulary as a field of references/lexicons/fields of knowledge. What the poem could perhaps use a bit more of is a voice that effectively synthesizes these fields together a bit more. I don’t think that doing so will harm the poem’s points of interest. [...] The other option is to go in a completely different direction and to make the poem far more paratactic, collage-like, make the “voice” much more of a curating voice and less of a presence—right now, in spite of the density of reference, the earnestness of the opening ‘I’ and the ‘T’ that wants to watch things prevent this sort of ‘self as selector that just speaks through other voices’ from happening.]

We were talking about balancing the low & high, the complex and the talky-casual, the way Peli & Carson & sometimes Dana are good at. O’Hara, too, but it’s more seduction-in-your-ear than social informant, the gal on the quad who can give you the inside scoop with all the knowingness, drama, & Valley Girl drawl you could ask for.

*Isobel and I were smoking in bed in the early evening and she was reading Ana Maria Matute and I was reading Tolstoy’s The Kreutzer Sonata when I mentioned apropos of nothing that I would like to see Granada at some point and she said there was a night train that took about five hours so we packed what we could in the bags we always carried... We ordered fresh drinks and Teresa talked about films, almost none of which I knew; maybe because we’d seen Orpheus, a movie about fluid boundaries, earlier that day, or because we were suddenly and impulsively arrived in a new city, or maybe because the bar was like a cave, I projected images to accompany her speech. Teresa*

*appeared in those images, entered the films she was describing...*

∞

Setting: A small Spanish hostel-cum-hospital in the early 2000s.

*Pothos?*

*Yes, Isobel.*

*Are you sleeping?*

*Yes, sleeping and talking to you, what an imbecile you are, really.*

*What I meant was—am I disturbing you?*

*Oh... No, I am awake. What is it you wanted to ask?*

*I was wondering—perhaps there was another picture you recalled. I want to be outside myself, you know... these thoughts, sometimes, are animals... they get hungry, turn inward.*

*To go into another world, out of your own.*

*Yes. Is that giving it too much?*

*I don't know... who could answer that question.*

*Tell me a picture, whichever is ready.*

*Okay. The opening. There are all these people dancing, characters we'll see later, but we don't know that yet, and they're stylized—I can't picture how, at the moment, but we know this is some sort of dream*

*sequence or fantasy bit. And then it cuts to Mulholland, the street, in Los Angeles, the namesake, you see? It's a winding road, late at night, coming around a hillside and there's this ambient music that feels brooding but also nice and calming, something's off but it's okay, and we're following a limo from above—maybe it's a stretch? Or perhaps exaggeration is getting the better of me, I'm not even quite sure what makes a stretch a stretch...*

*It's long*

*Yes, longer of course, but what is the cut-off, precisely, so you would be able to look at one and know, with certainty, this is a stretch limo, or no, this one is just regular.*

*These are bourgeois distinctions. In the end, what matters is that there are two people in the limo: one drives, and one is being driven. One is working, and the other has probably worked a day in his life. Or—this is Los Angeles, no?—perhaps he is an actor, a film star?*

*It's as if you read my mind, really. But let's not talk politics, now; let's—as you say it—“stay on this level.”*

*Go ahead.*

*Like you say, a film star, except it's a she, and she is dark-haired and looks, well, what Americans would call exotic, but you know, she looks like a bit like you! Real bárbara, you know, this gata. And she's all made up and kind of serene looking. Then bam! Out of nowhere, in the quiet, a cut-shot to these teenagers who are very drunk, and driving like crazy down the same road, out of view. But no, that's not quite right... Yes, I remember now. Okay, forget this car full of inebriated teenagers, first we see the limo, it slows and pulls over on the side of the road, and the film star she seems very surprised, asks why they're stopped, and the driver—for some reason I picture a second man on the*

*job, in the passenger seat, but that doesn't make sense—the driver he rolls aside his separator between the cab and the passenger seating—*

*The literalization of the symbolic class divide, here, is really something.*

*You're ruining my movie with this nonsense, Is'.*

*Is it not?*

*That's neither here nor there. This isn't about class or anything like that.*

*Isn't everything about class?*

*If that is how you feel, I feel very sad for you.*

*What is it about?*

*Mystery, the unknowable... Beauty. Not—it doesn't have to be about anything.*

*Okay.*

*See, now I've lost my train of thought.*

*We were at the limo, they've just pulled over.*

*Right, so the divider, he slides that aside and reveals a gun, pointed at the actress He doesn't seem to want her jewelry or her body or nothing like that, no, this is an inside job.*

*And then the drunk teenagers.*

*And now—yes, how did you—*

*A guess.*

*Hm. I hope this isn't all too predictable. It's more about the... the feeling. So all the sudden there's a cutshot to the, I think it's a convertible, or no, it's a Jeep, there's a young blonde with gorgeous curls in a headband and she's standing up holding, you know, that metal bar up front, and it's roaring down the middle of the road and bang! Slam right into the limo, which spins out like crazy, and the Jeep keeps driving away, a hit and run, but the limo driver, the assassin, we presume him dead. And the woman is so dazed, like she just woke up or came out of a spell, like, and she stumbles out of the car and looks out over the hillside at the gleaming Los Angeles valley at night, a big grid in the darkness all lit up and magical... And she disappears into the trees.*

*A long lost look in her eyes, no doubt.*

*No, no... not quite. No, she looks lost, yes, but not in a melancholic romantic way; she looks like a mannequin who's just come to life & isn't sure what's going on... like she's seeing the city for the first time.*

*I'm beginning to get tired, Poth'. Maybe we begin again tomorrow?*

*Yes. Do you like the film?*

*I like it, but I am tired.*

...

*Why do you ask like that?*

*Like what?*

*You always ask whether I like it, and you get upset if I don't, and even when I do you hang on the small things I dislike, or take objection to.*

...

...

*Well, I want you to like me, and not just the films.*

*I like you plenty, Pothos.*

*Do you.*

*Not in that way.*

*I didn't mean it that way!*

*Chao, Pothos.*

*Chao, Is'.*

∞

*Even Cowgirls Get The Blues:* a cowgirl instructs her female lover to put two fingers in her vagina, then dab it behind the ears as a perfume. Jodorowsky's *El Topo*: Topo's lover Mara is presented with a hand mirror as a gift. Through the mirror she becomes aroused with a "strong self-love," which ends with her making love, perhaps for the first time. As the Topo takes her in the desert dunes she watches herself in its surface.

*Nymphomaniac* Part II: protagonist Joe (she/her) has been ordered by her employer, after hitting on all the men in the office, to attend group therapy for sex addiction. There, the supervising therapist recommends Joe remove all triggers in her life that make her think of sex. She removes the mirror in her hallway, spraypaints over the full-sized in her

bedroom.

In Gevinson's version, citing Tiqqun's Ariana Reines-translated *Theory of the Young-Girl* in her *Infinity Diaries*, the emphasis is on the youngness of the young girl, the way she will one day grow out of it: "The Young-Girl does not love, she loves herself loving." (*Herakles* has a different moral.)

Hotel Concierge's "Shame & Society"<sup>74</sup> has the umbrella take, but for a single graf from Roupenian's "Cat Person" (C.P.): «As they kissed, she found herself carried away by a fantasy of such pure ego that she could hardly admit even to herself that she was having it. Look at this beautiful girl, she imagined him thinking. She's so perfect, her body is perfect, everything about her is perfect, she's only twenty years old, her skin is flawless, I want her so badly, I want her more than I've ever wanted anyone else, I want her so bad I might die. The more she imagined his arousal, the more turned-on she got, and soon they were rocking against each other, getting into a rhythm...»<sup>75</sup> This is the way one end of sexual desire's many spectrums becomes self-reflexivity, the desire not *for* the other but *of* the other's attention.<sup>76</sup> (Second-order.) It exists in relation to the other's positive

74 "Did we believe in the 'truth and freedom' of sex? Certainly we were attracted to scandal and shame, where there is so much information." [R. Glück, "The New Narrative"] Greg Gerke take the skeptic's role: "The brouhaha about revealing (I had sex with so and so, etc.) was a sham—Having discretion issues is not the same as making art. Those writers weren't going into the layers of consciousness and the skuzzy interiors—they wanted to keep looking good."

75 Annie Baker, *The Flick*. [Rose] When I like fantasize I just like, think about myself. [Avery] Really? [Rose] Yeah. Like everyone else is blurry except for me. I'm like totally in focus. And I like look amazing. And everyone is like: holy shit. That girl looks so amazing... It's really embarrassing.

76 Thomas Nagel and Sartre, to name two examples, believe differently: that sexuality for both sexes is an "infinite recursion" of arousal at arousal.

desire. *The Young-Girl* is fascinating in the manner of all things that exhibit a closing-in-on-themselves, a mechanical self-sufficiency or an indifference to the observer, like the insect, the infant, the automaton, or Foucault's pendulum.<sup>77</sup>

Like the “good-object,” the other is not a person but a complex set of stimuli enacted upon the self; “others happen to me.” No one likes to honestly self-evaluate, but there’s an unpatrolled border between empathy and sympathy, caring and pity, genuine emotional labor (“I worked to spare his feelings”) and delusions of grandeur (“I took pity on him. I had just destroyed his life. Nobody knew his secret, most probably not even himself. He sat there with the shame. I suppose I sucked him off as a kind of apology.”<sup>78</sup>). This is the line *Nymphomaniac* plays for erotic thrill, the boundary between actual, raw female sexual power on display and the self-loathing vanity which distorts its relay. (For the work’s other border-of-dispute: the line where women’s sexual power ends and their larger vulnerability begins; see Joe, lying bruised & bleeding in the snow, at the film’s conclusion.)

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This is what it means to be an object, the cedings and reversals of aging incredible in scope and silence. Eve Babitz’s car-wreck immolation is a literalization of the process. T. Williams, *Streetcar*. BLANCE: Hey! [He turns back shyly. She puts a cigarette in a long holder] Could you give me a light? [She crosses toward him. They meet at the door between the two rooms.] YOUNG MAN: Sure. [He takes out a lighter.] This doesn’t always work. BLANCHE: It’s temperamental? [It flares.]

77 Tiqqun.

78 von Trier.

Ah!—thank you. [He starts away again.] Hey! [He turns again, still more uncertainly. She goes close to him] Uh—what time is it? [...] You make my mouth water. [She touches his cheek lightly, and smiles. Then she goes to the trunk.] YOUNG MAN: Well, I'd better be going—BLANCHE [stopping him]: Young man! [...] Come here. I want to kiss you, just once, softly and sweetly on your mouth.

*I was in shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals. I looked down at my shirt. It was from a sushi restaurant in my home town, but if you just glanced at it you might think it was racist, because of the fake Asian lettering. I imagined thousands of viewers waiting for this racist girl to get herself off. I quickly undressed and made a scissors gesture to the camera to indicate that this first part, the part with the racist shirt, should be cut. [...]*

*My face wasn't anywhere you could see it unless you entered a credit-card number and clicked past dozens of professionals—"college beauties," "hot Korean girl," and so on. But a few people made it through the gauntlet. The first time I was recognized was at a healthy-Mexican restaurant; a pale man in gym clothes stared at me for a long time before making a scissors gesture in the air. It was electrifying, as if all my clothes had fallen off at once. I looked away but there was no denying our intimacy; he'd come while watching me. The next one was a father with his family; he scissored his fingers down low, surreptitiously. The last was a butch lesbian teen-ager; she just walked right up to me and asked. Each time, I'd hurry home and enter my credit-card number, clicking quickly past the college beauties and the hot Korean girl. Though I'd felt nothing at the time, seeing myself through these people's eyes was profound and overwhelming.<sup>79</sup>*

79 Miranda July, "The Metal Bowl," *The New Yorker*, 2017. The pleasure of sending a familiar text to another: being able to read it as if new, through the projection of their mind, their voice, cadence, reaction.

One need only look at the narrator's tone later on, telling her story: self-hatred. She speaks of repaying her husband's "life-saving understanding" with ingratitude. She describes her crush on a neighbor as figurative infidelity, a thrusting inside her, a willingness to open for another. She speaks of the daily pettinesses that must be daily fought, which strip us of perspective: «I held my breath, waiting for him to come on the new sheet. I'd have to wash it again. Who cares? I do. Just a little. Just enough to ruin each day.» At first you haven't learned the mess the fun leaves behind, you live in the present. Slowly you learn, slowly the memories wear. You grow tired of cleaning, the highs no longer seem worth the work propulsion requires, the preparation and the fuel and the aftermath. But if you are lucky, and very patient, and your eyes are widely open, you may realize that the flatness you have entered is an even greater trap than work, that the prioritization of ease leads only to ennui. When nothing is worth working for, nothing is worth working for, a tautology sometimes referred to as meaninglessness. You build a society that values lifestyles of freedom over lifestyles of debt; you gain time, you lose meaning.<sup>80</sup> Like your ancestors before you, the only option available is self-shackling, but the comparative historical upside is you can choose your master and negotiate terms. Bondage with consent.

Visiting my friend W's Upper West Side studio one-bedroom. The shelves are lined with nude Sonny Angels, couch home to knitting needles and yarn, overalls hanging in the closet, pigtail hair ties resting on the lounge table, a rose

80 Mollie Pyne gets it exactly wrong, writing about *Great Expectations*: Acker isn't caught in a web desiring freedom. She is agonizingly free and constantly seeking entanglement, her life story is forged through hunting down the narratives and friction and meaning that come from involvement with others.

gold Mac, a medicine cabinet with every shade of lipgloss from coral to crimson. Old-school toilet flush, line drawings on the walls. She's speaking of her gender, telling me about a gay party themed after oughts-pop she'd been at the evening previous: *the change in me is the metamorphosis of an era.*<sup>81</sup> She explains: «Later that night, I wandered into a psychic on 7th avenue, placed my hands on a crystal ball, and recorded our session into my phone: "You have very stressed, negative energy... You have recently gained more independence... There has been a major change in your character... *You have had a past life.*"»<sup>82</sup>

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You send a photo over text and the other interprets it—turn to intent & its correspondence with choices made—subject matter but also framing, what has been included and what's left out. Is the image up-close, cropped grafts or sentences of a book, focused on an idea, a construction, a phrase? Or is it less cropped, shot further out, showing the edges of the pages, the thumb holding down paper, the stained wood of the table underneath (emphasizing the act of reading, a part standing in for the whole)? Your choices are influenced by your model of this interpretation by the other, an estimation of how features may reflect intentionalities accurate or not, an implicit understanding that creative decisions can be understood as clues to some underlying belief or message.<sup>83</sup> What signals are transmitted, what possible sublimations could a text contain (or be understood to)?

“The Young-Girl never creates anything. All in all, she only

81 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*

82 Tavi G., *Infinity Diaries*

83 Straussian reading

recreates herself.” Which is true if you ignore the pejorative tone: iconographies and totems are all we ever wanted, from the most glam (Elvis, Bowie, Ferry, J.T., the Cupid/Psyche Bieber) to the least (Curtis, Cobain, Rollins, Lennon) and everyone between (Springsteen, Reed, Jagger). To draw in around the self a constellation of others. That there could be an inarticulable kinship, an emergent property greater than its parts which following Grietzer we call *vibe*.

There are rare vibes and common vibes, saturated vibes and subtle ones. Vibe-driven artmaking often gets mistaken for symbolism-driven artmaking; “I was interested in creating a mood,” the disgraced Polanski tells an inquiring *Playboy*. “After the film came out, a lot of critics found all sorts of symbols and hidden meanings in it that I hadn’t even thought of.” Vibe-based practice is ubiquitous, elemental: see moodboarding, starter packs, visual art, gallery curation, wardrobe choice, playlist-building, Tan Lin, Alec Mapes-Frances. They say Beckett’s *Godot* was inspired by a painting.

I’m listening over the airwaves as Maggie Nelson gets on her knees to pick up toys: constructor sets, dolls, getting the house “neat enough to work.” It’s mainly the 5y/o, mornings like this—*will one day be missed*—will hopefully last not much longer. She doesn’t talk about what she’ll write next; “too suspicious,” wary of giving the wrong form to the currently shapeless (“it kills it every time”). Paul tells her Koestenbaum was the first person he met when he moved to the States; their first conversation centered on Barthes. Grad school? she asks.

He asks about her “organized webs of obsession.” “To me, just as self-experience, I don’t usually think of it so much as

a psychological phenomenon, like a compulsion, so much as a visual issue like, a lens, you know, whereby, like, if you're writing something or researching something you put on that welding mask that colors the world in that particular... You're rinsing something in a particular lens you're seeing the world in... a lens you choose to wear for a while in an ecstatic way.”

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*In his polemic No Future, Lee Edelman argues that “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.” Or, to use a queer artist friend’s more succinct slogan, Don’t produce and don’t reproduce.<sup>84</sup>* I said, are anti-natalists queer? Is Perry’s *Every Cradle a Grave* a queer text? An investigation!

My mother, who in the Seventies lived in vegan co-ops at UCSB, who abstained from shaving armpits in dissent, says, “But then I had boys.”

Social worry scales according to 1) believed impact of the action on the other and 2) personal predisposal toward anxious states. The two multipliers are easily confused for one another come self-reflection time. How much of the first reflects the vanity of perceived effect, the self’s gravitational pull on its surroundings, a state of emotional dependence, upstream of these wanna-be mothers? When do you step in on someone’s behalf, violate autonomy, help without permission?

The most extreme form is the Penn Badgley stalker in *You*:

84 Nelson, Argonauts

he does in fact save love interest Beck's life; she is, in fact, adrift. But his care for her is—it embodies the old cliche about (s)mothering. Joe fashions himself as protector, from his love interest to his first edition books: "It's paper, cloth, leather, paste. It's all vulnerable, all sensitive to light, humidity, temperature. That's why they need to be in here. To protect them." He's referring to the temperature-controlled storage unit, deep in the bookshop's basement, where rare books are kept. (Rare, which is to say remarkable.) Later, he'll use the unit to hold a kidnapped ex-boyfriend of Beck's, an image whose richness comes from the conceptual overlap between protection and suppression, safety and imprisonment. Caring for and stripping autonomy from. (The other mapping: *in which being desired and being hunted are shown to be not just parallel but equivalent states.*<sup>85</sup>) We already know how it all ends. "I did it for you, Beck. All of it." Her, horrified & bewildered: "I never asked you to." ✝

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Showing parents around the city. "No, no thank you though. Really, I'm really happy here. I'm sure, I'm very comfortable. Thank you."<sup>86</sup> // "Okay but I really think you should ask them to change it." "I'm alright, it's not a big deal." "Are you sure? Because it'd be super easy." "Positive." "You know what, I'm heading to the restroom anyway, I'll just mention it when I pass the kitchen." "No, seriously. I would rather the Swiss. It's grown on me now that I've ordered it. It's what I want. Okay? I swear." Is this love as exhausting to you, dear Reader, as it is me? *You assert your autonomy even at high cost, because people learn.*

85 ophelia-thinks.tumblr.com

86 as recounted by Anteros

Trying for naïveté on the fourth “you look healthy,” the fifth “we never get to see you,” the sixth dinner on them, a script of thanks against a burden of history, a phenomenology of repetition.

Advice, troubleshooting, interventions on behalf. The undercutting of autonomy, a low confidence in the other’s ability to realize preferences for zirself, at least relative to the self-confidence of the intervening party. This isn’t a judgment; it’s a math function, the only context in which intervening on behalf makes sense. Like Perennial Bright-Eyes, it’s human behavior, not gendered in the abstract but only in instantiation, its forms. Perhaps a gift is given; gratitude is owed in return, a debt a chaining an obligation which exists in social reality now. Why is the pattern *“I sacrificed so much for you”*; *“I didn’t ask you to”* so charged & hopeless? What does the self-sacrificer want? To have been made useful, which is to say of value, which is to say validated? To have won the other in prize, a trading in of self for the possession of the other?<sup>87</sup>

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*Y: On one hand gift-giving is an old trick of the tribal chieftains and traveling salesmen, a way to generate feelings of indebtedness even if the gift wasn’t desired or asked for, even if the gift lacks any value to the recipient. On the other hand, mutual manipulations of reciprocal gift-giving is the baserock infrastructure of peace, of tight-knit community, of tribal intimacy. Alliances lead to long peaces and world wars alike. Who’s to say whose high-level strategy sums up to optimal?*

87 The quote is passed around, attributionless, source obscured by time and virality, by young women. *One day, somebody you sacrificed so much for will turn around and say they never asked for it, and it will hurt because they will be right.*

*Might there be both a sacrifice of freedom and a gain in connection?*<sup>88</sup>

Nelson, speaking at the 92nd St. Y, former scene of the showdown between Jane Gallop and Rosalind Krauss, so thrillingly chronicled in *Argonauts*.<sup>89</sup> “Her appearance, tonight, alongside close friend Ben Lerner will spur countless shipping stories in the recessed corners of Tumblr, Archive of Our Own...” She is speaking on a project in progress, its topic liberty, or freedom, or maybe both I can’t recall. “The left has shifted from an emphasis on individual freedom to prioritizing empathy, conscientiousness, and communal empowerment.” Asked about communal government, she admits to finding 20th C’s mannish, Marxist comrade-protestantism lacking the holism of human flourishing, bereft of concern for feeling.

So much changing, so few keeping track. Old “masculine” academia: be as objective as possible & rule out feeling. New, “femme” academia: subjectivity, bias, perspectivism.<sup>90</sup> Baron-Cohen would say, “Funny, this turn away from

88 The warning: when the benefit of the gift to recipient is less than the cost to the giver, a culture of self-sacrifice leaves all its members poorer. Is the difference between good and bad gift-giving as simple as net gain, the reallocation of goods, the specialization of labor? One is a smart exchange (*this is of more use to you than me*) which leaves everyone better; the other is a self-destructive dissolution done in others’ name.

89 “[Gallop] was taking on Barthes’s Camera Lucida, and the way in which even in Barthes—delectable Barthes!—the mother remains the (photographed) object.” Krauss, or so Nelson reads her, “acted as though Gallop should be ashamed for trotting out naked pictures of herself and her son in the bathtub, contaminating serious academic space with... unresolved, self-involved thinking.” (M.N.)

90 Or, associative coupling replacing “rationalist” decoupling; reputation, connotation over denoting. Affects as inseparable from facts, the way the fashion-field of feeling compresses an entire social history of use, the *types of people who...* Or, again, Nelson’s interest in “right speech”: “that which minimizes harm and confusion” (Conversation w/ B.B., 2012). But it is her

systematizing.”

Susan Fraiman, in her analysis of “cool masculinity” in literary academics: *Within this structure of feeling, the feminine is maternalized and hopelessly linked to stasis, tedium, constraint, even domination. Typed as “mothers,” women become inextricable from a rigid domesticity that bad boys are pledged to resist and overcome.*<sup>91</sup> But the data doesn’t point in one direction, it’s only being interpreted that way: rule-breaking vs. rule-cautiousness could also be a (socialized?) (evolved?) behavioral split, which merely manifests as the transgressive & deviant in flight from anyone harshing mallow, damping highs, ruining rule-breaking with reminders of the risks. Cops, mothers, governments, academies that divide fields and teach to the genre. *A posture of flamboyant unconventionality*, Fraiman describes the cool, which is a good reminder that

defense of others’ free expression, even as she herself seeks “right”ness, which shows the quality of her thought. In a 2017 interview for *Fader*:

“Your read on [Hannah] Black’s letter [to the Whitney] as a work of art is an interesting one. I can’t help but notice, though, that your question, ‘How can it really be offensive to say something that feels like it should be said?’ could apply to Schutz’s painting as well. People get offended by things other people say and do and make. That’s part of sociality. Personally, however, I have been trying to train myself for many years now to avoid shutting down the expression of others, not as an abdication of ethics, but rather as my own ethical practice... My point re missing nuance is that responses to the letter that see it as fascist are incredibly misjudged — they neglect to take into consideration the context of the systems we live within. While the letter carried a lot of weight and power, there was no danger that the painting be destroyed. It sounds like your respect for the letter’s rhetoric depends in part on your conviction that it would have no efficacy, that the painting wouldn’t be removed or destroyed. I’m not as sure, given the current climate. I mean, it’s not hard to see why she feels the way she feels. But these days, in which so many seem not to know how to deal on any front with the burdens of human and non-human relations, including the brutal distributions of power and force which can accompany them, with much else besides a can of gasoline and a match, I’m hoping to chart a different path.”

91 Fraiman, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (Columbia University Press)

edgy queers stay away from vanilla straights the same way Pynchon-era pot-smokers kept away from vanilla ‘straights.’ (The inverse Modern Lovers.) Hippie Johnny warned Richman’s girl right back, so no bones about it: Fraiman is a cop, tattling on those who don’t share her Boyer-style vision of a sentimental avant-garde less interested in innovation, in breaking things generatively, than in following rules, “soft touching,” an emphasis on what is shared rather than on what is different. *The kinds of tolerances that resemble intolerance.*

“Kerouac was a deadbeat dad, Burroughs a uxoricide, and the project of their circle was to glamorize a nomadic male camaraderie in principled flight from women and their supposed conventionality.” This kind of anti-orthodox risk-taking requires, like mothering, a high confidence in the self relative to, this time ‘round, the status quo or conventional path. (*A belief in inadequate equilibria.*) Irreverence as worldview vs. deference as worldview; the rebel, Fraiman writes, is defined “above all” by “strenuous alienation.”

Feeling like you’re better than someone correlates inversely with your self-felt obligation to act legibly; this idea that to explain is to answer to, and that answering to is a making legible of the self for the other. Perhaps it is gendered. Modes of commitment versus modes of freedom. (It all goes back to) Ross Douthat praising *Girls* (Maq. I, L.V, 25-26):<sup>92</sup>

92 «The typical prestige drama, from “The Sopranos” onward, has been a portrait of patriarchy in extremis, featuring embattled male antiheroes struggling to maintain their authority in a changing world or a collapsing culture. [...] Again and again the viewer watched a male protagonist trying to be a breadwinner, paterfamilias, a protector and savior, a Leader of Men; again and again these attempts were presented as dangerously alluring, corrupting, untimely and foredoomed. [...] On “Girls,” though, something very different was going on. The fall of patriarchy had basically

«Like most television shows about young urbanites making their way in the world, *Girls* is a depiction of a culture whose controlling philosophy is what the late Robert Bellah called “expressive individualism”—the view that the key to the good life lies almost exclusively in self-discovery, self-actualization, the cultivation of the unique and holy *You*.» It portrays Brooklyn as a «collision of narcissists educated mostly in self-love, a sexual landscape distinguished by serial humiliations—a realm at once manic and medicated, privileged and bereft of higher purpose.»<sup>93</sup> Finally, «adulthood did await for Dunham’s character, Hannah Horvath, at the show’s conclusion. But the form it took was almost too heavy-handed in its traditionalist definition of a woman’s growing-up: an unplanned pregnancy, a baby, the absolute obligations of motherhood trumping the trivialities of freedom.»<sup>94</sup> Bernini’s *Apollo & Daphne* in reverse. Who chased whom where? Who followed suit then second-guessed?

*Maybe long ago things were too/ Too solid, and now we live in an ether / Of ex-sentiments, impossible to make sense of except for wet Panties, something that even / In hindsight might never / Consolidate into a real emotion.*<sup>95</sup> (Were our sentiments ever clearly felt?)

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## (B)LOG ENTRY// SEPT 10 '18, S1E1 //

Penn Badgley as Joe Goldberg in the pilot for *You*, adaptation of the Caroline Kepne book. Beck has just entered the bookshoppe where Goldberg works as manager. Badgley narrates for us: «Well, hello there. Who are you? Based on

happened, the world had irrevocably changed ... and nobody knew what to do next.»

93 Douthat, “I Love Lena,” 2014

94 Douthat, “A Requiem For Girls,” 2017

95 Reines, *Coeur de Lion*

your vibe, a student. Your blouse is loose, you're not here to be ogled but those bracelets, they jangle. You like a little attention. Okay, I bite. You search the books, Fiction F-K. Now, you're not the standard insecure nymph hunting for Faulkner you'll never finish. Too sunkissed for Stephen King.» (Metonym, or inferential optics.) She approaches Goldberg, asking where she can find the new Paula Fox, just as another customer enters the store. Now Goldberg does the bit for her instead of us: “You see this guy? Here, the glasses, behind you. He just grabbed Dan Brown's latest on the way in, so he's gonna wander around for like another five, or ten minutes just to find something legitimate to buy with it.” When Glasses rings up he has *Franny and Zooey* in hand.✉

The (worthiness || value) of the prey is (proven by || a function of) the pursuit of the hunter: his perseverance, his skill; the sweat which drips down his brow and the length he hides watching in the bushes. Kristen Roupenian's debut collection, which fetched \$1.2million at record auction, is titled *You Know You Want This*. Goldberg asks Beck out.

“I'm an old fashioned guy,” Joe tells Beck on their first date—“I like real life.” The tired, luddite condescension is a sick burn (informal; *a particularly cutting insult*) against boomers, and the self-loathing millennials<sup>96</sup> who echo them to signal authenticity. Joe gets an outside view of himself when she tells him, “Starting to think I'm some kind of magnet for dudes with, like, serious issues”—but chooses to ignore it. Cut the nostalgia, remember what *old-fashioned* entails in the sexual-romantic sphere.

(B)LOG ENTRY // SEPT 25, S1E3 //

Beck's chatting with best friend Peach Salinger—of the J.D. family, heir to hypochondria and prone to fits of mysterious bad health to win Beck's attention—Beck's chatting with best friend Peach about Blythe, a fellow student in her MFA program played by Hari Nef. “Blythe’s amazing. She wrote this piece about how she & her mother got bulimia together while in Italy and she was 12.” Peach is more skeptical, protective; love is a zero-sum game to her, which means she’s in competition with anyone Beck finds interesting. “Chic,” she answers

After fellow MFA’er Yuri soul-bares for 500 words, Nef-as-Blythe calls him out. “I just wasn’t fully invested.” Professor Mott chimes in. “How do we maintain the reader’s attention? We infuse the universal with painful specificity.” Blythe: “Exactly. My worst fear, and I’m not commenting on Yuri’s poem *per se*, is not to be bad but *unremarkable*”—strategies of personality merging with strategies of writing. Later, Beck will ask Joe whether she herself is unremarkable. The answer is *yes* but it terrifies her, and it’s exactly this terror which proves her banal.<sup>97</sup> Those further from center are more preoccupied with the question of connecting back despite their otherness than exacerbating it for vanity.

It’s all so easy for Joe: all he has to do is say “no,” which he does, which leads to sex, self-validation building on itself (“moreish,” in Erowid lingo, describing drugs which, while on them, instill a desire to compulsively re-dose). Peach SMS-interrupts their oxytocin session with her “rare,” possibly psychosomatic medical problem which flares

97 *The most extreme banality of the Young-Girl is to take her/himself for an original.*

up whenever she feels neglected. The lovemaking is only allowed to resume when Peach decides to skip the hospital and hit Callahan's Indochine. ("It's her comfort food," Beck explains.)

Beck is flanked on both sides by commanding presences attempting to steer her lifecourse. Like Joe, Peach continually reiterates a sweeping, non-specific belief in Beck and her talent, a show of support that exposes her underlying condescension, the attitude that leads her to treat Beck this way in the first place. *Never forget that the Young-Girl who loves you also chose you.*<sup>98</sup> "You were nothing when I found you." The picking, the recognizing, of the truly special object is what allows the master zir distinction in turn. It is the curator who stands above, purports to the power of choosing. This selection process is conceptualized as a weeded garden, or an isolation of signal from noise. The orchid is watered, pruned, provided a backbone spike to shape its upward growth. Like a young liberal-arts Pirsig, like a Father Yod, Goldberg finds a vessel to take on his life philosophy and art philosophy, to pass on writing tips, subtly influencing Beck's self-impression and feelings toward her friends, undercutting their credibility to louden his own voice. *Male love interest as cult leader.*

Meanwhile Peach alternates stick and carrot, flipping sizable financial gifts into emotional indebtedness which she shit-tests constantly. She too gives Beck constant writing advice and motivation, which often directly contradict that of Joe. What both of them want is a project, apprentice, a muse-puppet memetically reproducing their visions of the world. At least Woody Allen's protagonists got masochistic

pleasure from their heavenly<sup>99</sup> students eventually surpassing them; here, the currency is control.<sup>100</sup>

Joe has two other flaws. Both are pathological, both are tragic, both stem from a childhood in foster homes. He is terrified of getting burned again, of attaching himself only to be cut loose. He watches Beck from afar to discover not just “is she worthy?” but “is she kind?” The second flaw is that he lives with books rather than real people—an old childhood haven. When Beck suggests he ditch dinner plans with her maniacal step-mom:<sup>101</sup> “I’d be on-board but that would be so un-Victorian of me. The virtuous maiden is supposed to be rescued by the dashing, sometimes broody, altogether charming hero.” He’s stuck with old ways of understanding the world, old ways of wanting and thinking and parsing ethics, and the mismatch between these ways and the new culture breed disaster. There’s a reason he’s scripted to recommend *Don Quixote* to his younger neighbor Paco, early in the season.

#### (B)LOG ENTRY // Oct 29 S1E8 //

There’s also a reason Joe’s the only one who intervenes to protect his nextdoor neighbors, a mother and son abused by alcoholic boyfriend Ron. Everyone else in the building stays quiet; Joe alone pushes himself into their business, has the barefaced temerity necessary to step in and intervene on behalf.

99 Urania, Pausanias. Οὐρανοῦ, Παυσανίας.

100 But the attention economy \_is\_ zero-sum, isn’t it? Which is why you let your phone go to voicemail while staring into the eyes of your beloved.

101 Like *Fleabag*’s godmom, someone hated by the daughter because she changes the man, turns the father into someone new—for one, impotent, no longer wearing the pants or calls the shots.

He's also incapable of staying on the object level in chit-chat, for similar reasons. Beck will bring up how Peach—now dead; long story—had an eating disorder, and Joe will reply “It's good you're talking about Peach” like he's her therapist, converting everything to meta, a reflection of psyche, and she's his Pavlovian dog, in need of reinforcement.) & it's an aside but

I can't help but wonder if the main reason he's intoxicated with Beck is class. Short-lasting fling Karen is great—kind, easy to be around, undemanding, doesn't shy from his attention—but there's “just something” about Beck that Joe can't figure out. My bet's on cultural capital, her cultural mask. Jessica Goldstein, recapping at *Vulture*, sees it too: «Those of us who get Joe can tell this is doomed from the jump, because Karen has inexcusably red state taste in television—Joe couldn't stomach *The Bachelor*, so just think of what having *The King of Queens* playing in his apartment does to his tender psyche—and suggests that Joe invest in a Kindle. A Kindle! Shudder.» What's the real outgroup? Less about taste, more about signifiers: *The type of person who...*

Simultaneously and without contradiction, “Joe hates all of Beck's friends, who are wealthy and therefore bad”; Beck's threatening suitor is cartoonishly named Benjamin J. Ashbey III. In other words, where economic capital attracts his scorn (as, ironically, cheap or low-class), an aura of cultural capital hypnotizes him. This is what strikes me when I read Bourdieu, notice the way the distributions of economic and cultural capital at upper echelons don't just diverge but *inversely correlate*. There's the tantalizing suggestion that both literal and symbolic capital are tokens of exchange

for the “real” currency one bedrock-level deeper, differing strategies for getting at some flowing mix of access, standing, recognition, power. This mix is palpable, hypnotizing, literally attractive. Goldstein again, not holding back: «Joe bonds with Manic Pixie Braless Bookstore Girl because they share a hatred for, as she puts it, the lowly people who buy books ‘because of what’s popular, not because they want to be moved or changed in some way.’ This line is so on the nose for Joe’s taste in women that I have to believe there is a twist coming, eventually, wherein she is running a scam on him.»

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“It is not about recognizing the boundary, but, rather, deriving pleasure from playing with it.”<sup>102</sup>

X: *Do you ever get the voice in your head, when editing longform, that's like, “maybe this would be better if I left it messy, because when I clean/tighten it up too it suddenly gets held to new standards, as opposed to if it seems left intentionally messy. I get that voice a bit with this project, and I can't tell if it's productive or not. Like, fuck me if I spend all this time tidying and things get worse, less eccentric or weird or playful and more predictable, self-serious, unfun polish. When I'm zoomed in close the improvements always seem for the best, but in the aggregate it's like switching from lo-fi to hi-fi. At a certain point you've entered a different genre; if your production sounds flat, people will actually hold it against ya.*

Y: “Is it not idle to fault a net for having holes?” Harry’s hypothetical response: “That’s just an excuse for a crappy net.”<sup>103</sup> But also like, isn’t that type of editing less about improving communication channels

102 Carse, *Infinite Games*

103 *The Argonauts*

*and more like adjusting your necktie & using a lint brush? “It’s not manly to fuss so much over your appearance.”*

*X: Priorities other than looking put-together. Wait, isn’t that what East Coast academics do? You look a bit like shit to signal that the priority’s elsewhere. The cordoruy blazer’s wrinkled, the shoes don’t match the belt...*

*Y: Except here, again, it’s about signal: like in Baudrillard, the simulacra is optimized over the “actual,” which is the problem in the first place. So many changes in the blogosphere, year over year. Some corners live”*

So many changes in the blogosphere, year over year. Some corners live in strange twilights, scattered accounts deactivated, left unupdated for years at a time. Many of the good ones are still around, but so many of their writers struggle to reinvent themselves. The short-lived careers are marked by peak years and rust ages, times of hot, frenetic energy where an entire way of looking gets built in six, twelve, eighteen months.

A generation back, a turn of the screw in reverse: *Zoilus*, *Bliss*, *uTopian Turtle Top*, Robert’s *Morphosis*, Fisher’s *K-Punk*, Reynolds’ *Bliss Blog* and *Shock & Awe*, Prier’s primativism, the rationalist LiveJournals and scratchpads...<sup>104</sup>

It was *HTMLGiant* that republished Boyer’s “Toward a Provisional Avant-Garde,” calling for a mode of art-making like a “society for touching lightly the forearms of another,” emphasizing omphallus—concave navel—over convex phallus; offering “maternal protection” and “comforting noises” in the places of war metaphors and

104 A LITTLE BIT OF TUMBLER. (Stein)

machines. Which is perhaps a strategy on the same team as white lies<sup>105</sup> & agreeableness. (Better? Worse? “Advantages to both.”) Gawker memoirism, New Sincerity, alt-lit,<sup>106</sup> *BigOther*, an entire blogosphere of aesthetic concerns, self-experimenting Gwern, *BLDGBLOG*, *Marginal Revolution*, Scott Alexander somehow bridging the interest of both Ross Douthat and Ezra Klein. Wie Peter Merholz & his FWIW.

*Liposuction, The Sublemon; Sam’s Saner Than Lasagna, Other Sam’s Carcinisation. Soares’s Minding Our Way, Nydwracu’s Nifgrim Nihtbealwa Mæst, Venkat & Perry’s Ribbonfarm, The View From Hell, Breaking Smart. More Crows Than Eagles, Grietzer’s Second Balcony (i and ii), Lucca’s Feral Machines, Gravity & Levity, Drew Austen’s Kneeling Bus, Kevin’s Melting Asphalt, John’s Everything Studies, Shorin’s Subpixel Space, Greer’s Scholar’s Stage; The Future Primaeval with H.L. Athrelon, sam//zdat, hauntedGeographies. Ariana Reines’s SUNRISE.*

Some of our best thinkers, and yet the issue as always: Evaluation based on prestige, endorsement, the social vouching of others instead of judgment on first principle. The harder it is to judge relative quality or standing, the more time and effort it takes, the more humans look toward others’ evaluations as shortcuts to their own opinions. (Mimesis.) The imitations of a novice hunter echo the

105 The logic of the white lie goes, *I must lie because the emotional impact of my words outweigh the benefits of accurate feedback & an outside view*.

106 «A few days after I ended things, he came by to return some stuff I’d already said I didn’t want. “Actually, can we go to your roof and talk?” He asked if I knew about the recent allegations made against Tao Lin by a former younger girlfriend. In our own time together as a couple with an age difference, had I felt like I’d been taken advantage of? Would I say everything had been consensual?» (*Infinity Diaries*)

lifecycles of developing personal taste, style, voice:

*Novice hunters may assess who is most successful among experienced hunters by comparing daily returns. However, picking a model on the basis of this one-day sample is risky, for hunting success will exhibit much short-term variance. Only hunting returns averaged over a great many days will reliably predict hunting skill. Thus, novices are initially better off selecting models who are already favored by others. Later, after they have accumulated their own long-term samples, they can refine these borrowed judgments. Hunting returns are hard to fake—and if they bring prestige, they will be advertised—so information-gathering costs are substantially reduced for novices.*<sup>107</sup>

Judging quality of thinking is effortful and high-skill; rigor is much easier to fake than hunting returns; a message can be styled with an aesthetics of criticality or else be obfuscated by linguistic complexity such that it actively defies easy judgment. Too many people, too many texts: we're left with reputation, a terrible tool.

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But what *would* it look like, *a priori*, if blogging and informal information economies were out-maneuvering and out-thinking institutional ones? «As Richard Abel has noted, dominant groups faced with upstart competitors are likely to feel extremely threatened; they cling ever more fiercely to their symbols of pride and prestige. Hence, “[e]ven if a subordinate group asks only a minimum of respect, the dominant group rightly perceives this as challenging its superiority.”»<sup>108</sup> Many the layers to that word, *rightly*.

107 Joseph Henrich at Google.

108 Jack Balkin, *The Constitution of Status* 1997.

Pothos: *Craig Owens, the late 20th century theater and art critic, has the following quote about his time at October, Rosalind Krauss's art magazine:*

*We were concerned with identifying the next chapter of this universal art history so we were involved in arguing for supporting a certain kind of work that would establish our own places in history... What can I say... it was incredibly stupid and blind and shortsighted.*

*Does it maybe apply?*

A. D.: [The quote] seems to me [to be] about artists wanting to be part of the next big thing, as in a movement or a scene? If so, there does seem to be a lot of that in the arts. I felt that way myself, when I was younger. People want to be part of things.

*Yeah, I think that's it. And the way that thinking so much about the "next" moment in a history can close you off to other kinds of art or writing that don't fit the trajectory.*

I think people get into the arts for all kinds of reasons. Maybe they're looking for a scene, or for an experience. Or they want to be hip or famous. That was all true for me, and I don't think there's anything wrong with any of it. At the same time, though, I also don't think that any of that stuff necessarily has anything to do with art, if you know what I mean.

*I think this point ties in well with your discourse with Chris Higgs, and your post at HTMLGiant about "good faith criticism," which you define as being upfront about holding certain critical preferences and frameworks. In your case that framework was formalism. Was*

*having a community at HTML and Big Other, of not just supporters but also antagonists like Chris, productive for your thinking?*

Oh, absolutely! Chris's writing was very helpful to me, and I'm really grateful for it. It's really hard to articulate positions and work through problems. Chris and I were both getting our PhDs at the time, and I imagine he was trying to work out his commitments and arguments. I know I was. Looking back at that now, I just wish I'd done a better job stating and defending my arguments. I could do a better job now.

At the same time, though, I sometimes wonder how much people reading *HTMLGiant* at the time cared about our debates. I think a lot of people read the site because they wanted to get hyped up over some indie lit release. I was using the site to work through issues in my research, which was perhaps somewhat selfish of me!

*[...] & because posts often consist of writers working through ideas in small increments, you see behind the scenes. It's very different than just reading the polished dissertation.*

I do miss blogging. Do people still do it? I get the impression it's been replaced by podcasts. But in any case, I found it incredibly useful to write regularly, knowing others would read it, and really forcing myself to write something that would make sense and hopefully be useful. I'd like to get back into it now, but keep getting distracted by other things.

*We interacted for the first time because I wrote a piece about the avant-garde, the way it gets incorporated into pop, referencing your writing at Big Other. That piece (yours) talks about how a lot of film & fiction that tries to be experimental is merely following conventions of*

*experimental works from decades prior. There's nothing experimental about it. It has all the trapping & associative images of experimentalism but no risk-taking, as in new ground being explored.*

*I've been thinking a lot about the exhausted possibility of both the avant-garde and punk scene as we know them. So many of the radical experimental outlets have become impotent templates, e.g. the "zine." Sublemon's Tumblr writings are a good reference. & I wonder if blogs still hold some power as a non-institutional, legitimately punk format.*

I think a lot of avant-garde folk become convinced that experimental works have to look a certain way, or not be certain ways. For example, narrative is often considered very non-avant-garde, and is therefore taboo in avant-garde circles. I've seen this in film crowds, poetry crowds, fiction crowds.

So often you have people zeroing in on a certain look or sound or technique as "experimental," then trying to replicate it. E.g., "the cut-up technique is an experimental technique." Or, "experimental films should look like Stan Brakhage's films."

Or, "my work has to look punk, or like a zine, in order to be outside the mainstream, and be underground or experimental."

*excerpted, fr. conversation w A.D. Jameson*

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Virgin, Bull; Lion, Lamb; Chiron with bow and Capricorn prey. The habits of I Ching Modernism are kept alive in palm readings, star charts, and tea leaves; only the intent

is changed, from the script-snapping forces of chance to the pursuit of self-knowledge. Reines giving readings for income, buyer testimonial *With firm kindness and gentle sure knowing Ariana equipped me with seasoned tools (as this is an ancient science), language & frameworks, that have afforded me a more robust sense of who I am.*<sup>109</sup>

(Or is it an anxiolytic, *Tell me how to live?* One radio guest, describing her history with Susan Miller's *Astrology Zone* blog: "I was really anxious for my monthly [Susan Miller] horoscope because I got married in early October and it started to get to the 5th or 6th and it still hadn't come out and it was Mercury in retrograde and I was like, *I need to know*, Susan." Miller's readers are advised to avoid signing contracts on certain dates, or to be wary of romantic involvement on others. Emily Gould: "It's this reassuring 'something else is in charge, everything is going to be OK,' which of course is like, a fantasy, but it's a very compelling fantasy."<sup>110</sup>)

The literary autofiction's at its most disappointing when it re-casts vanilla solipsism through pink glass: *Chelsea Girl* a dressed-up Beat book, Otessa the morning after, an endless hangover to the *ekstatis* wonders of being drunk. But sometimes, in the subtle newness, an opening forms; energy erodes the banks, bursts through to new form. We've seen a return to narrative, the resin which reseals shards, builds wholes from parts, *two from one and one.*<sup>111</sup> 'Weaving as women's work.'

Where the object field of the 70's alternative music scene

109 Dana Greene

110 WNYC, *TL;DR*.

111 R. Ashley, *Don Leaves Linda*

included heavy distortion and safety-pinning nose cartilage, the meta-level that fueled it was always defiance of norm, the expansion and redefinition of acceptability. Neither distortion nor piercings perform this function any longer; they operated as contextual moves whose powers were limited to their specific place & time. Lo-fi of the last decades has become detached from the material conditions of autonomous artistry, degrading into an empty signifier of authenticity. The confusion of the object- for the meta-level, in both cases, can be considered a confusion of an *instance* with a *class*, of a *part* for a *pattern*. The specific look of a concept, the incarnation of an idea, coming to replace its general principle.

*Y: Nelson seems to desire a world in which normativity vs. transgression is no longer a relevant paradigm. Is this definitionally possible; if so is it desirable? Leaving empty signifiers without relation or reference, outside or center? Is this not the fear of homonormativity, that it forecloses the possibility of difference? Siri, what is the definition of critique? What is the process of dialectic?*

*X: If I'm being slightly less than generous, it seems like what really freaks out Nelson in The Argonauts is that, after decades of trying to move as far as possible from the heteronormative—rewriting her cultural scripts, moving from New York School to queer feminism to punk refusal to scholarly ascetism—the book finds her pregnant, in a passing family, dressed up for the Nutcracker at Christmastime. Her demonstrated preferences are apparently for stable connection, family, and children. This is submission to her: a submission to the normality which she both fears and desires, enforced by the binding contracts of marriage and parenthood. A possible implication is that normality is not merely a product of acculturation but something commonly innate around which culture has been formed to accommodate. (Reality and*

*society cybernetically co-construct each other.) In stats, returning to the mean after a period of deviation is known as regression; only if shifts are sustained over sufficient time might the Bayesian begin updating priors about the nature of zir subject.*

*Y: I've been reading on Sartre & Beauvoir, and S. is so desperate to be "free" from all constraints that he begins to believe he can overcome jealousy, seasickness, by power of mind... He has affairs with Beauvoir's teenage students and then calls B. indulgent for crying over it; he (famously) chides her at sea for her nausea. As for himself, despite suffering constant "paroxysms" of jealous passion, he continues to believe it is overcome-able with proper will, even as he acts out, childlike, in his open marriage. This is a kind of hubris, believing we are not animals first & humans second, but human first & foremost. What becomes clearer is the continuity between High-and Post-Modernism, the defining trait of the Marxish tradition, for better and for worse: a shared belief in the mutability of human behavior, the de-prioritization of 'is' for its inconvenience to a vision of the ought. For all its subversions of Enlightenment, this is a fundamentally Enlightenment position. Who am I to say that searching, testing, alternate forms of social or family organization isn't incredibly important now; it is. Nor would I pretend the book is shut on nature v. nurture. Just that some folks in the nurture camp seem very keen to close it, and that premature ignorance will come at everybody's cost.*

Nostalgia: Every era's once-shunned genre is eventually redeemed: disco, adult contemporary, synthrock. 2000s indie folk-rock awaits its turn, brass horns and all.

The cat is lazy, stripes of charcoal and grey, licking himself on the rusted fire escape. I pull the clothes from the washer, and the paper from the printer, the inkjets birthing new life, a new face. I said, Forums? They're great. Plato and Aristotle loved 'em!

If the masculine equals stereotype, if the feminine equals stereotype, then a mixture == the erotic? A purple flower behind a chiseled ear, the ascetic androgyny of a runway model. “To realize a face/ is a violent act, /a history of perjury, and/ of selves propagating selves,” an anti-phoenix which refuses to form, which stays in the ether.<sup>112</sup>

The Bacchic is freedom in its most literal sense, which again is just negation, liberty from any rule or any restraint whatsoever (teenage ontology?) including freedom from the (disapproving, socialized) sober mind, hence, *ekstasis*. What Euripides’ plays (*Bacchae* especially) point at, or seem understand, is that edgelord anarchism only exists because society’s there, or school, or parents or whatever, and because these structures are probably underperforming. (*Inadequate equilibria*.) There’s always been the desire to shed responsibility, but good structure at least minimizes or controls this rebellious urge, makes the case for long-term thinking, and Pentheus’s boy-king authoritarianism is definitely not good structure. You need a (The) Man to rail against or you’ll have to actually start thinking about your beliefs positively, instead of as negations of whatever values regime you happen to be under. Fanatical belief is a social condition: there aren’t any fanatics on a desert island, only pragmatists; the ideology enters when other people do. (Hence, when a local cowherder is unlucky enough to stumble upon the Bakkhai’s camp, the Bakkhai—previously peacefully dormant—rip his herd to pieces with their bare hands, ransack a pair of local villages.) Chaos, the Bacchic, are merely negations—of systems, of order—and without structure to convert to raw fuel, the Bacchic burns out quickly on its own, the way a party dies down when the

112 G. Luigi, “Tall Grass,” reffing Arthur Russell

drugs run out and the high starts wearing off.

Another sense of freedom: To be liberated from tit-for-tats instigated by others, the binding, mutual debts cast onto you unwillingly and unwanted. By now we know the costs of both sides.

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High classic art is simple, serene, balanced. Late-phase art is accomplished but anxious. Composition is crowded or overwrought; color is lurid. The Hellenistic Laocoön shows the theatrical perversity of late style: heroic male athleticism strained and bursting, strangled by serpents... Dionysus, bound down with Apollo, always escapes and returns with a vengeance...

A wholly masculine cosmos is untenable... Michelangelo's male figures are exhausted with their effort and helplessly infected by femininity, which shimmies upward from a spiritually opaque gravitational center. The pornographic fluorescence of the Dying Slave comes from its will-lessness, its sensually engorged surrender. The ruggedly masculine Michelangelo, like Ernest Hemingway, required rituals of male inflation to fight off the lure of transsexual submission.

Dover speaks of the change in homosexual taste in Athens from the fifth century, which glorified athletic physiques, to the fourth, when softer, passive minions came into vogue. It is in the fourth century that the hermaphrodite first appears in classical art. The plush creature with female breasts manages to expose its male genitals, either by a slipping cloak or

a tunic boldly raised in ritual exhibitionism.

»<sup>113</sup>

See Father Yod on mushrooms, leading his Source Family followers into the Hawaiian tall grass, professing (it is like confessing a murder): I am no god, merely man.<sup>114</sup> A failure of nerve, a wave of self-doubt, a dearth of suspended reason. “Sky cult topples back into earth-cult.”<sup>115</sup> The transcendent collapses back into biology, the supernatural into nature. The tragedies are of structure undone by complexity, of a fluid reality which thwarts efforts to control it (High modernism: R. Moses, le Corbusier). Daphne metamorphosizes into tree as she flees the consumption of Apollo. *You are a Bernini...* “Oedipus’s twenty-four-hour transformation from hypermasculine hero to maimed sufferer is echoed by Pentheus’s transformation from strutting young buck to drag queen to shredded corpse.” Is there a way to grip less tightly that might be more effective at holding on? Like a Chinese fingertrap, the tragic ending befalls the one who struggles most to escape it, who lives a life to be ruled by indeterminacy’s more negative valences.

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A.R.: S/he’s Spanish, but I think s/he’s in Paris. I’m bringing Beatriz to Boston this fall. *Testo Junkie* is a book about the traffic of hormones, among other things, as in *10:04* the mango, the sperm, the coffee, gender, and paternity.

113 Paglia, *Sexual Personae*

114 This is what nerve failure looks like: Others believe in you; you stop believing in yourself. The paternal hubris that led you to act on behalf, to tell others how to live, is shattered. The built cathedral, suspended through sheer will, collapses under gravity, which it had previously ignored.

115 C.P., *S.P.*

B.L.: Yeah, the other person who recommended *Testo Junkie* to me recently was Maggie Nelson. That's a pretty good set of recommenders. You wrote that poem for a catalogue of a show s/he was organizing.<sup>116</sup>

Y: Look, the *Queer Theorists and their honorary rationalists agree & so do I*: “drawing a boundary in thingspace is not a neutral act... they exert force on your mind.”<sup>117</sup> But the struggle to re-draw bounds is an infinite game of keeping up with the world. What throws me is the possibility that the kind of horizontal, associative identity-via-family-building that say, Gevinson and Nelson and Ward are all engaged in, is potentially a viable alternative to categorical, identitarian thinking. But isn't it also the case that “Annie Dillard meets Kathy Acker” is a kind of genre too, an influential form becoming a template in the canon? That there's no way to escape the connotations and overtones and baked-in expectations, because they're transmitted over associative networks too. This is some of the conceptual work that's trying to get done second half, but as you can see I'm struggling to make up my mind.

AD Jameson's 12 dominants of contemporary lit:<sup>118</sup>

- Ironic vs. Sincere
- Brief vs. Long (essentially a Minimalist/Maximalist distinction)
- Twee (Precious) vs. Ephemeral/Disposable
- Clean vs. Messy/Careless
- Nostalgic vs. A-historic/Present
- “Languagey” (Ornate) vs. Prosaic/Plainspoken

116 Lerner & Reines in conversation at BOMB

117 Yudkowsky

118 AD: *The qualities on the left are the ones that I find to be (currently) more valued, but that's not to say that everyone then accepts them as dominants in their own work. But I do think that these qualities exert a real pressure on all of us. (I know I feel them.)*

- Conceptual vs. Organic
- Parataxical vs. Hypotactic/Syllogistic
- Collage vs. Homogeneous
- A-narrative vs. Narrative/Anti-narrative
- Vulgar (Profane) vs. Classical/Mystical
- Confessional vs. Mediated

I remember Ariana Reines with Silverblatt asked about the declaration of identity that opens her book of poetry; I'm transferring subways to work. "I suppose [it seemed important to do] because objects arrive technologically produced and perfect, declaring themselves as themselves, all the time. It seemed to me always that... if something is written, or sung, or anything, that it should articulate itself within its own identity, the identity of its medium." This is to say its genre. Silverblatt: "That it is a book." Tues. 6/19 early A.M., file while listen to YT interview, approve edits, take care of predefined tasks, then get generative. Remember the maladies that are worsened, not ameliorated, by lack of focus.

I've forgotten you, the text is getting away from me, but you are the everything, a Hera. A trip to the LES Baths, the sensuality of the steam room, the aromatherapy chamber. "Pressing on all sides,"<sup>119</sup> prolonged anticipation of relief. For me the masochism of the radiant room, herbal flays sounding in the dark, stoney interior; poured ice water, the body entering shock. No sight of the ghost who haunts these baths... "What I call mutual recognition includes a number of experiences commonly described in the research on mother-infant interaction: emotional attunement, mutual influence, affective mutuality, sharing states of mind."<sup>120</sup>

119 Anteros

120 Jessica Benjamin, 1988, h/t Ed Phillips

[Anteros!] Long walks exploring yr neighborhood, tobacco transfering lungs. “When listening to others, humans mostly listen long enough to extract an ‘aboutness,’ and then search their memories for a story with a similar aboutness—and this aboutness is often a complex relation or ‘moral’ with little relation to the naively-construed ‘topic’ of the communication.”<sup>121</sup> A policy of “If you care & I don’t, I’ll defer,” so that each of us get more instead of less, gets what we value in exchange for what we don’t. (Gifts as co-investment into future yet uncharted.) A policy of sharing not opinions or feelings but interpretations, ways of seeing and understanding, in the hope that each way would supplement the rest, form a fuller picture of the world. (Fox, hedgehog.) This is the meaning of luck.

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## (B)LOG ENTRY // MARCH 4, S2E1 //

Sei Shōnagon, 枕草子 1002 AD: “*A preacher ought to be good-looking. For, if we are properly to understand his worthy sentiments, we must keep our eyes on him while he speaks; should we look away, we may forget to listen. Accordingly an ugly preacher may well be the source of sin...*”

The predictable is dominated, the unpredictable can only be submitted to. Batuman, echoing Boyd<sup>122</sup>: “You can’t predict it, or control it, but succumbing is a great pleasure.”<sup>123</sup>

Fleabag, by her own description, is a woman in her early 30s with no friends who doesn’t believe in anything. Love

121 *Carcinisation*, “What is intelligence?”

122 *Organic Design for Command & Control*

123 Elif, *The Guardian*

interest: A Catholic priest just edgy & boyishly handsome enough to convert her. By E2 he's handed her a Bible, told her he's "around if she ever wants to talk." By E3 she's reading it. (This is the relevant common denominator among the perennially bright-eyed, the manic dreamgirl types: they refresh your fatigued world, bestow new leases on life, show a way of seeing filled with faith. Something to believe, something to believe in.)

We enter in media res; Waller-Bridge, bleeding in the bathroom, checks her makeup in the mirror; a title screen's cursive fontface tells us what we're watching: *This is a love story*. Now set the scene around the restaurant's dinner table: Dad, Godmom, Fleabag, Claire, a Martin who's gone from nuanced to repulsive over the course of a season, and a priest in streetwear. Dad and Godmom are celebrating their engagement;<sup>124</sup> the priest will adjudicate their marriage but is out with them tonight, drinking.

Claire miscarries in the bathroom after hors d'oeuvres; Fleabag takes the hit by pretending it's hers, and the two leave family dinner for the hospital with Claire's batshit impeccability intact. The sisters sit next to each other on the cab ride, lost in silence. We've seen this type of scene before, with Flea's fourth-wall narration detachedly imposing judgement on whoever's dregs will fill the empty space. This time, all we hear are the ambient sounds of London streets slowly receding. Claire, turning from the window:

124 popyourtopoff.tumblr.com: «the writing for the dad in fleabag is so underrated. in a moment of high emotion + gratitude, he just says 'i just want to say ..... (gesticulates) ... very much'. it's like The Perfect caricature of the dad who can't process his feelings properly let alone articulate them or, if he can, then he can't bring himself to express 'soppy' emotions in public... »

“The priest is quite hot.” Fleabag, turning toward her in turn: “So hot.” They rotate back again to their respective windows, smiling. Flea’s smile widens; power chords kick in. She turns again, eyes locking on the camera. She’s still here, silently watching. *You’ll know them by the look in their eyes.*  
Credits.

## (B)LOG ENTRY // MAR 18, S2E3 //

Fleabag’s catering an awards event for her sister’s company; bigwigs will be in attendance. A higher-up & honoree (possibly one of Claire’s bosses) asks her if the canapes are meaty. “No,” she says, “I think they have courgette in them.” “Oh, I love courgette. You can treat them appallingly and they still grow.” She’s talking about Claire, resident office workaholic office workaholic à la Erdmann’s Ines.<sup>125</sup>

We also meet Claire’s business partner—equally meticulous in his public persona if less anxious about it all. (His self-assured presence is in fact an anxiolytic, a pseudo-benzodiazepine for habitual nailbiters via affective transfer; it’s part of what draws Claire to him.) The two clearly have a mutual crush. “What’s his name?” Flea asks when he goes to get them drinks at the bar. “Klare,” she answers—“Don’t.” Flea suppresses a grin.

Fleabag ends up flirting with the awards honoree (Kristin Scott Thomas) at a bar post-event. Flea references her love for *Carrie*, which without seeing it I’ve always understood as the femme-coded version of the adolescent boy genre—*little did his schoolmates know the power he possessed*. KST’s char is 58; Flea’s 33. “It’s not a party until someone flirts with you,” the older woman tells her. “That’s the only shit thing

125 Maren Ade’s *Toni*, 2016.

about getting older is that people don't flirt with you anymore. Not really. Not with danger. I miss walking into a room and not knowing, there's a kind of energy, a dare, and do not take that for granted."

#### (B)LOG ENTRY // MAR 25, S2E4 //

Confession time. The priest plays the priest; Flea confesses. "I know exactly what I want right now. It's bad." The Red Scare gals cackle over the airwaves. Flea: "I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat, what to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what to not joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for and who to love and how to... tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I've been getting it wrong. I know that's why people want people like you in their lives, because you just tell them how to do it." *The first [symptom] is anxiety, says Kierkegaard, the dizziness of freedom, a tachycardic head rush that whirlpools us into itself and obviates all lesser emotion.*<sup>126</sup> "You just tell them what to do and what they'll get out of the end of it. Even though I don't believe your bullshit. Just tell me what to do father."<sup>127</sup> But belief never comes first; ritual always precedes it, belief emerging from the structure of the practice. "Kneel," the priest instructs. "What?" "Kneel. Just kneel." *Reader, I gasped.* Flea sets down her drink. The curtain slides aside, priest playing priest no longer. A painting drops.<sup>127</sup>

126 H.C., "Shame & Society." A. G. tells me over drinks: part of what she sees in Kraus, Acker, Stagg, Bellamy, is a deep anxiety, resonant to relevant audiences, and missing entirely from Nelson.

127 To surrender control, to live in submission—this is Houellebecq with the signifiers changed.

## (B)LOG ENTRY // APR 1, S2E5 //

Then things get interesting. A few days later, in her living room. Priest: “I don’t think you want to be told what to do after all. I think you know exactly what you want to do. If you really wanted to be told what to do you’d be wearing one of these [gestures at priest’s robe].” But of course that kind of being lost & looking doesn’t belong to either gender. The Priest’s a bright-eyed dream boy. He is to her as the church is to him: a glowing bundle of optimistic meaning. *I used to think of meaning as something that needed constructing, but now I understand it as the flowing river which people follow.*

## (B)LOG ENTRY//

APR 8 E6

A few scenes later & it’s Dad & Godmom’s wedding day; Flea and Priest are snogging on the side of the house. (Is he snogging her? Is she snogging him?) Priest: “Oh, fucking hell. I don’t know, I don’t know, oh I don’t know what this feeling is.” Flea: “Is it God or is it me?” Worship, submission; dominance, godliness. In the in-between you’re untethered, unmoored, belonging to nothing and no one.

Dad doesn’t show to his own wedding; godmom stoops to begging, and Flea & her sister are off to search. We already know Flea will find him; it was in her he confided at the mother’s wake; Flea reminds him of his wife, the one he really loves.<sup>128</sup> Which is why he finds it so hard to be alone in a room with her. He tells her he misses her mother too. But now he needs someone. Flea understands. She sets aside her own reservations, helps him down from the attic.

As the wedding wraps up, Flea tells the Priest she’ll be

waiting at a nearby bus stop. Sprayed graffiti, scratched plexiglass, the spindled glow of a streetlight through plastic as minutes drag. Dunham: “The night of the party when we met, when you told me to meet you on the corner, I was really sure that I would go out there and you’d tricked me and gone someplace else. And then you weren’t exactly where you said you’d be but you were nearby.”<sup>129</sup> A smile creeps onto Flea’s face: the cheeks round, the edges of the eyes narrow, the chin raises.

∞

FRED

Maybe you can clarify something for me. You know, since I’ve been waiting for the fleet to show up, I’ve read a lot, and...

TED

Really?

FRED

...and one of the things that keeps cropping up is this about “subtext.” Plays, novels, songs, they all have a subtext, which I take to mean a hidden message or import of some kind. So, subtext, we know. But what do you call the message or meaning that’s right there on the surface, completely open and obvious? They never talk about that. What do you call what’s above the subtext?

TED

The text.

129 Lena, in the richly titled *Not That Kinda Girl* (distance from trope).

FRED

...OK, that's right, but they never talk about that!

I said, I got it: “subscribe” is just “sub” + “scribe,” proof by etymology that content consumers are subs, bullied by dom content creators across history.

[...]

*Y: OBJECT ONTOLOGY:* “Who has never felt flabby and shabby compared to a sleek glistening commodity?” Rhonda Lieberman asked in 1992. One answer: natural subjects, to whom a self-comparison to commodities wouldn’t even occur. Lieberman’s perceived universalism is in actuality an address to the object. “Late this century,” she continues, “the lines between wanting to have, wanting to be, and wanting to seem like a commodity have gotten hopelessly collapsed. Under the combined misery complex of capital and fame, abjection—the plight of those who are insufficiently recognizable as commodities, for commodities, by commodities—is a national and personal emergency.”<sup>28</sup> Which is true but again for a specific kind of psyche; there are other ways of being. In deferring value to the system’s validation, Lieberman misses the possibility of inter-system mobility, of entering a different hierarchy of value and meaning; lord knows there are hundreds of them. The glamour game, which is to say the object game, is a game which offers liberation but at high cost: a path of possibility, a game that can be played for winnings. When game is treated as world, when one hierarchy is confused for the only mattering order, when glamour and objecthood become a trap for its participant... Hierarchy and loss and shortcoming are baked into its structure, you will always be aged out; an object’s value derives from its scarcity and impermanence.

*X: What strikes me is how—and perhaps Bluet’s performative quality is > than I’m assuming—in Bluets she’s caring for her crippled*

*friend, she's spinning out in romantic despair, she's fantasizing about being sexually used, there's this horror of decaying flesh, and then in Argonauts something has changed; she's an agent working on behalf of her newborn Iggy, tearing through philosophy and arts and queer theory, navigating the relation between subject and world (experience and theory) rather than aestheticizing and cathecting on her own moodiness. There's a way of seeing Argonauts as a rejection of the identity-polishing that Bluets was engaged in, the object mentality of self-branding, of being a good image.*

*Y: Making your body into a symbolic object. Making your life into a set of symbolic objects. Simplifying the clutter, clarifying the vector, making the self legible to the self, and others.*

Balioc: *It turns out that getting to do your own thing is the beginning of what's needed, not the end.*<sup>130</sup>

I said, There are advantages to both! Advantages to both!<sup>131</sup>  
Trebek, what is Hegelian synthesis?

∞

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Basic bio points, correct me/elaborate freely: <em>Amerikkkka</em></strong><strong>—originally published <em>Amerikkkka</em></strong><strong>—was written over five years between 2009 and 2014, just after you'd moved from Israel to the United States and coinciding with the start of your comparative lit program at Harvard.</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>‘Written’ is a funny term here.

130    *The Bاليocene Apocrypha*

131    “Us v. Them”

It's made of the 2009-2014 stretch of my blog, which I started around 2006. I always had some intention that my blog cohere, in retrospect, as some kind of textual Gesamtkunstwerk, and one sort of distressed week in 2014 when I was feeling at the end of my rope as a subject I decided it was time to novel-ize the blog, delete the source material, and see what it—what I—amounted to. I decided to start with the first post I wrote after moving to the U.S., to give it a kind of comically world-historical-memoir flavor. Like, ‘witness the workings of America upon the psyche of this bright-eyed youth from the provinces.’</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>My understanding is that the current edition, the one I have, is the fourth. What differs between editions, other than the ‘k’-count in the title?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>The extra ‘k’ came in because everyone kept misreading it as <em>Amerikkka</em>, which... I put the book together right before the American far-right resurgence that brought the term back into wide circulation, so I actually hadn’t encountered it at the time. The title was supposed to be like Kafka’s <em>Amerika</em> but the ‘k’ on your keyboard or your throat got stuck for a moment.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>The other big change is that there’s a strikethrough line over a few dozen pages that I don’t like, or rather that I don’t think reward attentive reading, don’t work as a ‘fake novel.’ These pages are from a stretch of time when I was learning how to do ’00s ‘Internet voice’—sort of the neotenic-but-with-a-handsome-vocabulary-and-lot-of-cursing voice we now associate with sort

of, Neil Gaiman fans ‘buckle up fuckers we’re going to talk about history’ Twitter, but it really was a kind of hipster voice eight years ago. I think this voice... didn’t age so good. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Right—my hard copy has a strikethrough from p.25-39, digital p.31-52. You talk in the book itself about Tumblr-style casual crit: «So Tumblr-culture uses “and” and “!” a lot. OK. The later Henry James used many, many commas. Joyce was into swearing and alliterations. Buffy-speak is big on verbing and on pronouns. Rappers use internal rhyming to mark virtuosity! Art-punk bands use shrill sounds to sound artsy. In Tumblr-culture we use “!” and breathless “and” to get a tone of sprightly intimacy going. It’s fine.’» Do you know any more about where that style comes from? Is it separate from the Gaiman-y voice you’re describing or part of the same? Have you seen it influence writing outside of Tumblr?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Yeah I think that’s the style! My feelings about this style may have... taken a negative turn over the years. It might be that I feel like it’s an awkward middle point between the sort of—to steal a phrase <a href=”<http://4columns.org/haslett-tobi/the-image-book>”>from</a> Tobi Haslett—willed gracelessness of good punk writing and the neotenic grace of someone like Molly Young. It’s a synthesis of preciousness and punk energy that doesn’t really hold together for me these days. I think Marxist-Leninist trans femme ‘weird Twitter’ has the good version of this synthesis, stylistically. Don’t know why or how, but they do.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>There’s a line about

midway through the book, “Keep it pretentious, keep it funny, keep it rigorous, keep it confusing. This is dating advice and writing advice!” Do you stand by it? Your writing seems to have gone in a different direction, and I’m curious if you think this can be traced to Harvard and the avant-garde’s influence on your sensibilities. I’m thinking of the section on ‘boarding the mothership,’ and the resultant transformation of taste.</strong></p><!-- / wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I think I stand by this for how you should do things in your 20s, and possibly stand by this for how you should do things if—for you—personhood tends to the condition of a sandbox rather than to the condition of an ocean. One thing you can probably see with <em>Amerikkkka</em> is that by the beginning (which is chronologically the end, since it’s in blog-order where the latest chronologically comes earliest page-wise) I’m sort of irreversibly wrecked by the psychic backlash from the conclusion of &nbsp;an at-least-subjectively-abusive romantic relationship and can’t go on being a person in the same way anymore. The way of being that is predicated on a sandbox-y relation to personhood becomes foreclosed by the beginning of it, and reading through the text backward in time is sort of opening up to a past when it wasn’t. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>The comp lit program at Harvard wasn’t an influence on me in any meaningful way. It’s a very hands-off department, for good and for ill. &nbsp;I think what changed is that I lost my taste for things that aren’t more or less explicitly reflections on their own stakes—things that rely on the self-evident flow of life to

charge them with stakes—when I became too mentally ill for life to flow with a force of its own. What I mean is, at some point I went into a phase—an ongoing one—where I can only relate to art and philosophy that carries its own ground with it, that doesn’t rely on the implicit ground of the richness of life to give it force, because the richness of life isn’t there for me as a background condition. I can summon it through art and philosophy, but it’s not just \*there\* for art and philosophy to play off of. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I don’t want to give the impression that I’m ‘survival-’ or ‘healing-’ or whatever-oriented now. It’s more, like, you’re on a barge at sea and you’re building a tower of Babel from driftwood coming your way. You just, like... can’t fuck around, at risk to both your project and your life.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph -->

<p>I think <em>Amerikkkka</em> is also really fundamentally tied to a time when, personhood-wise, the future feels much larger than the past.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>There’s the connection with content and form, the reverse chronology of the book is grounded in your section on Faust. You talk about the Aristotelian necessity of tragedy in contrast with homiletic literature, where “the impact of a human action is merely quantitative: every action [registering] as a positive mark or a negative mark on man’s record of sins and goods deeds, and only [influencing] future events by virtue of its incremental impact on this record.”</strong></p><!-- /

wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Right, so in the Faust paper I talk about how a Christian understanding of biographical causation, where everything that happens just additively increases or decreases your&nbspsalvation points, is incompatible with tragedy, where changing even one event in a chain would change everything.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Here's something I want to say, maybe directly related and maybe not: I feel like I didn't amount to anything as a subject—the different strands of being playing against one another in <em>Amerikkkka</em> never came together, it's the same mess and it got exhausting—but everything did come together beyond my wildest dreams as a.... well... theory. I thought I was becoming a person, or that there's such thing as becoming a person, but instead everything that was there evolved in my theory work, the mathematical-literary <em><a href="http://www.glass-bead.org/article/a-theory-of-vibe/">Theory of Vibe</a></em> opus. &nnbsp;So my relationship to <em>Amerikkkka</em> is maybe colored by my sense that <em>Amerikkkka</em> is a book of personhood, and personhood didn't work out for me. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>The whole idea of <em>Amerikkkka</em> was that there's this implicit living logic, the logic of a life-force, of a person, making all these utterances more than what they are in isolation and even more than what they are as an intellectual corpus. That's why it's a 'novel.' That's the whole tradition of the novel, which <em>Amerikkkka</em> superimposes on what's' 97%

‘impersonal’ philosophical and literary and cultural anecdotes and tricks and questions and theses. And I think that week in 2014, when the idea of meaning I sought to bring into my accumulated life-materials intersected with the form of the bourgeois novel, was a sort of solar-eclipse-like event. Though maybe I was already blogging in the shadow of the tradition of the novel when I was blogging. It’s hard at this point to think about the stance or approach to life/the world that the blog embodied before it was transliterated into a ‘novel.’</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Do you think <em>Amerikkkka</em> fails in conveying a logic of a life-force? Or is it more that the logic which it purports to convey is, behind the scenes, missing, or a sham, or a failed premise, or a pilot that never got picked up? (This is also what works about <em>Amerikkkka</em>: It shows the frame’s power of projection, alluded to in the novel itself: «A randomly generated text is interesting in as much as the pattern-spotting and analogy-spotting behaviours that 3000 years of literature imprinted us with are interesting.)</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>‘A pilot that never got picked up’ is PERFECT. I mean, I really really like <em>Amerikkkka</em>, I just don’t know how to be the kind of person who can relate to it on some basis of personal continuity anymore. I think only the feeling that the future is practically infinite made this way of being work for me. Maybe another way of saying this is that when you are in your 20s, there’s this merciful indeterminacy between dynamism as a narrative drive and dynamism as an epistemic drive, and Amerikkkka depends on this indeterminacy. </p><!-- /

wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>How old are you now?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Thirty-two. The novel is such a biological genre. At least the, eh, 'bourgeois novel,' which is the genre that <em>Amerikkkka</em> is working in.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Why does Cecilia Corrigan's ghost haunt <em>Amerikkkka</em>?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>One part of it is that she's an extraordinarily—extraordinarily!—gifted writer whose <a href="https://www.amazon.com/Titanic-Cecilia-Corrigan/dp/194142399X">work</a> still informs my transcendental constitution. Another part of it is private and contentious. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Was Kant's 3rd Critique the origin of your interest in/thinking on vibe? There's this persistent idea throughout <em>Amerikkkka</em> that people's aesthetic tastes meaningfully reflect deeper cognitive architectures & styles. There's the interest in compression, <a href="http://people.idsia.ch/~juergen/creativity.html">Schmidhuber-style</a>.</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Yeah, absolutely! I took this Kant-focused phil. of aesthetics class together with my brilliant philosopher of math friend <a href="https://www.seberry.org/">Sharon Berry</a>, and we messed around

together thinking through the idea that a work of art is an object which is ‘massively suggestive,’ and we got in this insane fight when I said it can’t just be massively suggestive the way smoking weed is, there has to be some kind of mnemonic-like enfolding of the things that unfold from the massive suggestiveness back into the object. Sharon was like ‘eh, nice work if you can get it, but this sounds extremely woo’ and I was like ‘I’m going to devote the next eight years of my life to winning this argument.’ </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph -->

<p>Not really, but when I came home I told my room-mate <a href=”<https://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/team/owain-evans/>”>Owain Evans</a>, who is a cogsci, phil., and AI guy with an interest in art, about the fight and he was like ‘there’s actually some stuff about aesthetics and compression’ and introduced me to the Schmidhuber stuff, and we started working on ideas in the neighborhood. </p>

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Now, wait. I know there was a brief period you were connected to the LessWrong community, and that there’s a shared interest there (at least among the tiny subset of LW types interested in aesthetics) in Schmidhuber. Did you introduce his frame? Did you discover LessWrong through him? </strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Owain Evans has deep community ties there, so either they know the Schmidhuber stuff through him or vice versa, I guess. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>These days you seem skeptical of the LessWrong project. Was there a time their epistemic and community norms had more to offer you, or were more novel? How'd your relationship with that way of thinking and existing change?</strong></p><!-- / wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I think I'm actually fairly LW positive—it's <a href="https://slatestarcodex.com/"><em>SSC</em></a> that I don't like. I think LW invented or popularized beautiful cutting-edge ideas in decision theory, and also helped propagate the language of algorithmic information theory, which I of course love. </p><!-- / wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>When it comes to the ‘way of thinking and existing’ stuff, I think there’s still a place in my heart for the sort of hyper-foundationalist Paul Christiano type of reasoning and discourse. What I dislike is the <em>SSC</em> thing of, take some anecdotal evidence for <em>y</em>, now construct a grand unifying theory of the social world based on <em>y</em>. I get enough of this shit being continental social theory adjacent! And the good continentals are much better at it! <em>Ribbonfarm</em> is pretty cool, but, I swear, most <em>Ribbonfarm</em> posts I’ve read would in fact be way better if they drew on existing continental social theory vocabulary and reference points. I think really the rise-to-visibility of hardcore techie nerds with hardcore continental background, like Lucca Fraser and Dominic Fox, made a lot of the nerds-rebuilding-a-continental-social-theory-analog stuff I associated with the ‘post-rationalist’ scene feel very rudimentary. </p><!-- / wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I supposed really the biggest change I've undergone since writing <em>Amerikkkka</em>, intellectually, is coming to the opinion that there's a lot to work with in continental philosophy and even 'Theory.' That starting from scratch in those areas is madness.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>«Kill me now: the reason the humanities are so bad &nbsp;is it's so hard to find out who's genuinely good at the humanities that only people who are genuinely good at the humanities can do that.» Who've you found?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>As far as, eh, CS/math-pilled continentals, <a href="https://deontologistics.wordpress.com/about/">Peter Wolfendale</a>, <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reza\_Negarestani">Reza Negarestani</a>, <a href="https://monoskop.org/Lucca\_Fraser">Lucca Fraser</a>, the <a href="https://www.laboriacuboniks.net/">Laboria Cuboniks group</a>, <a href="https://univ-paris1.academia.edu/AnnaLongo">Anna Longo</a>, <a href="https://www.cavvia.net/">Anil Bawa-Cavia</a>, and <a href="http://codepoetics.com/">Dominic Fox</a> are all amazing. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>It seems like, at least between '09-14, you lived in some interstices.</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>That was always the goal, for sure. Sellarsian reconciliation!<sub> </sub></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p style="text-align:right;"><sub>Javier Cumpa: «The Sellarsian task of ontology is to reconcile two seemingly divergent images of ordinary objects such as persons, tomatoes and tables, namely, the manifest image of common sense and the scientific image provided by fundamental physics.»</sub></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Ray Davis: How'd you encounter him, what does he mean to you, and why's he so good?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I know Ray from emailing him once I got obsessed with his <a href="http://pseudopodium.org/">blog</a>. I think the fundamental thing Ray taught me, other than (passively) teaching me to inject essayistic texts with extremely dense intertextual networks—indeed, to build vibe-making constellations—through carefully curated blink-and-you-missed-it puns, is that formally and aesthetically and even affectively radical art or poetry or what have you doesn't \*have\* to be, about, like sex and death and love and pain and what have you. It's a 'lesson' that's strongly associated with the WCW/Zukofsky tradition in avant-garde American poetry, but Ray is the only one that made me believe it, see its worth.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>(How're we doing on time/energy? Going strong here but checking in.)</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I've got time until my train arrives at station [in Berlin] in like an hour.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>«And I said, I said,  
‘people who “outgrow” T.S. Eliot are the fucking worst.’»  
Have you outgrown Eliot yet?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Over my dead body. Eliot’s poetry feel like having an octopus tentacle caress the inside of your brain. It’s what I imagine buying illegal neural stim software for your language center in a cyberpunk world feels like.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>What do you think of the new Vampire Weekend effort? Does it cast &nbsp;doubt on how self-aware the band was back in ’09? Should we have foreseen that Koenig’s infatuation with “being in the middle” at all times would lead him to this place of aesthetic blandness?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph --><sup></sup>

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I haven’t listened to it yet! I’m both scared I’ll hate it and scared it’ll resonate with me and give me life-emotions of some kind I’m not prepared for. But Koenig always loved Billy Joel and the Beatles and things like that. I’m just hoping the lyrics are good, I always related to him mostly as a writer. Loved his <a href=”[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo\\_Yokio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo_Yokio)”>TV show</a> though, thought it was brilliant.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>Music culture has poptimism, trashy television is the common parlance of the highbrow</strong>—<strong> why haven’t books had their poptimism moment?</strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Well, there's a weird thing where—for reasons I can't even begin to imagine—low-brow popular books are sometimes kind of worthwhile substance-wise but are an absolute technical mess. So I think the kind of joy at craft and polish and mechanical perfection that powered poptimism—which really was a kind of Futurist (as in Italian) machine-worship thing now that I think about it, where the machine is, like, some kind of Landian capitalism-is-the-machine—that thing can't really work with books. Maybe there's something specific to language where the takes-low-compute-to-process is somewhat incompatible with the ‘compact’ in the sense that strikes us as elegant. Like, <em>Dragonlance</em> or <em>Harry Potter</em> are technically good writing in the sense that it's writing that's very easy to read for a long time without getting tired, and it conveys the necessary content, but it's also sort of blatantly technically bad writing in the sense that it's.... maybe highly redundant is the relevant notion, or maybe some more sophisticated concept. But, like, mass-market-optimal written language just doesn't feel ‘clean’ or ‘tight’ or ‘perfected’ in the way that mass-market-optimal visuals or sounds do. </p><!-- / wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong><em>Amerikkkaka</em> lays out the terms of conflict between art-rock/ avant kids on one hand and PoMo/prog-rock types on the other. Which tribe are you in?</strong></p><!-- / wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Extremely art-rock/avant. Like, I believe people that Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis are great writers but... no, please give me Kathy

Acker and Robbe-Grillet. I think it's, like, I don't really like things that are more rich than they are deep. Someone like Joshua Cohen is writing incredibly rich novels, but do they actually interface with any cognitive or aesthetic nerve center outside of themselves that hasn't been interfaced with before? Nah. Trisha Low, on the other hand, is someone who makes work with relatively modest internal structural complexity but that really lodges itself in critical, unfamiliar cognitive-aesthetic-affective nerve centers and works them.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><strong>I wanted to ask about Trisha Low, I have </strong><em><strong>-Compleat Purge</strong></em><strong> at my bedside now</strong>. <strong>I tried hard with Robbe-Grillet's </strong><em><strong>Jealousy</strong></em><strong>. I struggle with visual description and building/keeping images in my head, &nbsp;so I drew out pages of diagrams to stay oriented, filled a quarter of a notebook, it always felt like doing math problems</strong>. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p><em>Jealousy</em> is haaaard. <em>Repetition</em> is the one that's also a spy-thriller and is crazy awesome. </p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>Trisha's a very old not-close-but-warm friend, and her work as long as I've known her socially was always not my thing at all, and when <em>Purge</em> came out I was like, "oh heh I guess I'm now a legit fan of this old friend of mine, cool."</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --> <p><strong>I mean, with Trisha Low... you mention on <em>Second Balcony</em>—I don't think it made it into <em>Amerikkkka</em>, it came later—about Sarah Nicole Prickett's mode of sexual narcissism, which is also part of <em>Red Scare</em>'s mode and may relate to the Kaitlin Phillips, <em>Artforum</em>-adjacent, it-girl New York scene. Low's <em>Purge</em> is just permeated with that kind of desire, but also its complications and power reversals.</strong></p> <!-- /wp:paragraph --> <!-- wp:paragraph --> <p>Kaitlin Phillips is a bit different in that her entire life is a &nbsp;very, very good shitpost, but yeah. I think it all has to do with the class composition of the NY intelligentsia and how sort of old money doctoral professional households in the US have 1940s gender roles. &nbsp;</p> <!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --> <p><strong>Now, Trisha's on Gauss [PDF], Buffy Cain's on Gauss, Corrigan's on Gauss. You must've known the press well while writing. How'd <em>Amerikkkka</em> end up on it? In that way at least, the book feels like a document of a community, a shared e-poetics discourse at a certain moment</strong>.</p> <!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --> <p>I knew [J.] Gordon [Faylor] in NY—we didn't get along great back then, actually—but somehow I emailed him about something after he moved to the Bay Area and it sort of became clear we both regretted not getting along great back then, so we became email friends. When I ‘wrote’ <em>Amerikkkka</em> I emailed it to him and was actually totally shocked that he wanted to publish it on Gauss as an actual book. He

was always one of my absolute favorite <a href="https://www.uglyducklingpresse.org/catalog/browse/item/?pubID=534">writers</a>. I always say he's the Ingmar Bergman of gibberish.</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --> <p><strong>If you had to situate <em>Amerikkkka</em></strong><strong> in a lineage, how would you situate it? Who were you reading at the time? Were there works that helped you understand it structurally? </strong></p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

<!-- wp:paragraph --><p>I think what I say in the intro is exactly right: the influences were Trisha's <em>Purge</em>, Schlegel on 'romantic poetry' (really what we'd call modernism), and Elif Batuman's <a href="https://web.archive.org/web/20130108020540/http://www.elif-batuman.com:80/Criticism/DissertationIntroduction.pdf">scholarly and essayistic work</a> on the theory of the novel. Oh and for the blog itself the biggest influence was always Shklovsky's <em>The Zoo</em>, which is maybe the great masterpiece of saying things that are rigorous and true in a way that make them also cast beautiful shadows on the wall. Which now that I think of it is what Kant says poetry is—'offering, from among the boundless multiplicity of possible forms accordant with a given concept, to whose bounds it is restricted, that one which couples with the presentation of the concept a wealth of thought to which no verbal expression is completely adequate, and by thus rising aesthetically to ideas.' Ok gotta go! This was hella fun!</p><!-- /wp:paragraph -->

∞

Last night I woke up glutamate-blinded by alcohol and

thought bad thoughts like Bang! Bang! Bang! Like, “The problem with me ‘n you, babe, is you’re an evoker and I’m all about signification, I’m all about the room, trying to pick myself up.”

Later in the bar I’m fetishizing ease, surf films projected on the wall and reading *The Flick*, wanting the zipless, the effortless, the bartendress in her denim.

There are two things that gaslight me: philosophy, and visual art, &

Iggy Pop’s face is really the Mapplethorpe special & it’s me, lookin’ at you.

## *BELABOR II*

Karen Horney (pron. “Horn-eye”): 1885-1952, Chicago by way of Prussia. Daughter of a Bible-throwing ship’s captain; a woman surrounded by domineering men, beginning with her father and ship’s captain Berndt Wackels Danielsen—referred to in her diaries as “Master of the House.” It is petty, petrified, Penthean authority—inflexible, close-minded, and vain—that disillusioned her.

Growing up she is always crushing on teachers—Herr Schulze, Fräulein Banning—which makes sense, given there aren’t any models in her home life worth emulating. She questions God, and the long-fraught incoherences of the doctrine of Trinity: man or God, mortal or immortal; with flesh, with suffering; and now the Holy Ghost? Her father is the most un-Christian Christian she knows, somehow upholding all the great ideals of orthodoxy in speech, and following none of them in act. It takes strong feminine peer pressure—his wife, her friends, teachers at Karen’s school—to convince the “Master” to give permission for Karen to continue education at a Hamburg gymnasium. Leaving home, she goes on to do standard breathtaking first-wave stuff, becoming one of Germany’s first female medical students.

A student of Freud and a critic of Freud, she moves to Chicago before war breaks out in her home country; *Neurosis & Human Growth*, written at the end of her life, is an influential but heterodox work of psychoanalytic theory that argues on behalf of “self-realization” (Horney’s coinage). It is a very good book, but one perhaps that would make a better longform blog post (compression, compression,

compression<sup>1</sup>), so I want to present its framework of ideas here—sort what still feels resonant from what doesn’t.

Here is the structure of Horney’s neuroticism: an improper environment in childhood causes a deep, underlying anxiety (feeling of precarity) which leads the child to seek anxiolytic & palliative coping strategies *at the cost of personal growth*. Short-term vs. long-term: we are at the heart of the great human bias. We can call this anxious development non-acute trauma, referring to the banal way an environment routinely shapes our priors about self & society. As is inherent to matters of fitness, when one leaves the context to which one is optimally fitted—when one departs the conditioning environment—previously adaptive strategies become suddenly maladaptive. In an extreme case, & ancient archetype, the soldier returns home, bringing with him an adaptive jumpiness which while useful on tour, causes him to hear gunshots in slammed doors & backfiring engines. We can look back to Euripides’ *Herakles* for a portrait: Herakles comes home and, perception befogged by madness, mistakes his children for enemies, slaying them with poisoned arrows.

Simpolism, 2019: *[In ancestral environments,] these events were potentially cyclical: a tribesman might experience war repeatedly throughout their lives. However, the current state of modern war leaves veterans returning, psychologically prepared for another go at war at any time, but without any real likelihood that they'll be sent back out in the field... the developed priors become useless, rather than necessary*

1 OTOH, “let us mobilize Shaw & turn a turn of phrase. If, *The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man*, so too can we understand art” (L.V. 2017). Long-form is n-spaced repition, the only tried’n’tested (read: *lindy*) strategy for making found things stick.

*preparation for the next conflict. We can also consider how ancient tribes may have handled “bad” prior formation by considering ritual experience. The sacred, the psychologically powerful, as a means of restoring a more “normal” psychic equilibrium.*

ii.

We'll start with neurotic drives toward self-expansion. In order perhaps to gain mastery over zir environment (and thereby reduce predictive uncertainty)—or merely because ze has internalized the neurotic pressures of parents—a person might be left with an impression of how ze *ought* to be—an idealized self ze seeks to live up to, a “tyranny of shoulds.” In some radical cases, the neurotic finds that the simplest solution for reconciling the discrepancy between real & ideal is to replace the former with the latter, developing illusions of grandeur or else a more everyday, neurotic species of pride which is disconnected from zir demonstrated qualities. To minimize the resultant cognitive dissonance between the idealization ze believes in, & the actuality ze is constantly faced with, the neurotic “must put in an incessant labor by way of falsifying reality.” There are, Horney writes, “endless ways in which [a patient] chooses not to see. Ze forgets; it does not count; it was accidental... others provoked zir.” These justifications are somehow sufficient to prevent zir priors' revisions—or, perhaps, they are post-hoc linguistic justifications for a neurotic *inability* to update priors in the first place.

Already we are using a quasi-predictive framework for discussing cognition to discuss trauma & perceptual revision. Briefly, the predictive processing model of cognition posits that much of cognitive effort is directed towards making predictions & minimizing prediction error, improving the

calibration of one's model or "schema" to the workings of reality. This process is roughly evolutionary: leopards which lack a model of antelopes *grounded in reality* are unable to hunt them; bonobos who misjudge the distance of a branch fall to their deaths.

Trauma, here, is a *miscalibration* of the schema, a set of largely unconscious misunderstandings about one's self, one's inner desires, & one's real situation. We can conceptualize a patient's "choosing not to see" as the top-down imposition of an internal model of reality onto the sensory experience of the world, thereby overriding it.

This wilful idealism is bolstered by a strategy of *looking away*—of avoiding information which might unsettle its working model. This is why Dan (*GG S1E15, "Desperately Seeking Serena"*) is such a choker on standardized tests: he believes that his worth is measured by his intellect (because he certainly doesn't have money or bloodlines), and he believes the tests are a measure of his intellect. The nerves come when an ideal—suspended in the air by a surfeit of reason—is suddenly put in contact with reality, with ground. You're treading mid-air, a hundred feet up, but as the old cartoon goes, you plummet the second you look down, the second you realize there's nothing supporting you except belief. We see this strategy constantly in ideological (read: top-heavy) cognition, which while *epistemologically* anti-strategic is beneficial for the formation & maintenance of communities; a zone of motivated ignorance, a zone of *sacredness*, preventing the discovery of contradiction. The ideology has defenses to its *own unmasking* built into it. ("God's plan cannot be comprehended by mere mortals.") It is *unfalsifiable*: whatever comes to pass, the ideology

successfully predicted it; whatever unfolds can be made sense of through its top-down frame (lens, bead, whatever).

There is another variant of this top-heavy cognitive style worth mentioning, common to CEOing & persons of high executive function, sometimes referred to in folk parlance as “manifesting intentionality.” In order to minimize distance between personal vision & reality, the high-functioning, top-heavy neurotic moulds reality to zir vision. Hence, the prevalence of manipulative personality styles, this being an *interpersonal strategy* for controlling the world.

See also Kenneth Liberman, writing on the ways buses merge into traffic, a tactic he calls “performing obliviousness”:

*Take the case of three female friends most probably returning to campus from lunch... They wish to cross Kincaid at the same time that a city bus with the right-of-way is moving to turn left from 13th Street onto Kincaid, where a bus stop is located. Two of the three friends are veteran crossers & one is a novice. As the three commence to cross, the novice crosser spies the bus barreling into the intersection & hesitates, making a bid to catch the gaze of the driver in hope of securing his permission to cross. The veterans brook no such illusion, & lunge straightforward into the wet crossing, the one with an umbrella shielding her head from the driver's gaze & the other in a rain jacket staring steadily at the opposite side. They know from experience that this driver will not run them over & that if they hesitate they will lose the opportunity to cross.*

Permission vs. apologies. The self has been made legible, which is to say predictable. The bus having merged onto the road becomes an inevitable reality which the other drivers must accommodate. Legibility in general puts people

at ease, increasing their amiability (or inclination to cooperate); illegibility actively makes people nervous, threatens coordination. (Known unknowns vs. unknown unknowns: Anxiety, remember, is unease at the *unforeseeable* potential for future calamity, which increases alongside general uncertainty in the predictive schema. Self-legibilization, which relies on *social prototypes*, is anxiolytic for onlookers.)

### iii.

Let's lay out Horney's vocabulary & frame. *Basic anxiety* is the experience of "profound insecurity & vague apprehension," beginning in childhood but bleeding into one's adult life. *Neuroticism* is the possession of maladaptive priors about self, & manifests in the compulsive pursuance of (one of) three strategies for minimizing basic anxiety. Those strategies are *moving toward* (ft. affection, appeasement, clinginess), *moving against* (into conflict), & *moving away* (self-isolation, creating distance, setting apart). These strategies can be understood, within the predictive processing model, as *minimizations of predictive entropy* through the *limitation of possible futures*. Openness, a widening of possible futures, is not a superficial character trait, nor a continuous identity trait, but a schema's self-perception of precarity: those who see the world as fundamentally safe will predictably take risks at higher rates than those who see it as fundamentally unsafe. Thus "the degree of blindness & rigidity in zir's attitudes is in proportion to the anxiety lurking within zir"—flexibility on rules, rituals, & premises is too risky to allow. Already experiencing the sensation of instability, there is a compulsive avoidance of situations which might destabilize the neurotic's worldview, such as by calling into question a trusted authority (for the clingy-affectionate) or

a self-perception of alterity & superiority (for the self-isolating & neurotically prideful).

iv.

In the *Neapolitan Novels*, the two female friends at the center of the tetralogy each exemplify a different neurotic coping strategy for the very real precarity of poverty they grew up in. Lina's intelligence is wild, untameable, patterning outward. Greco's is studied, born of the desire to always give the right answer, to never disappoint those who have invested her. Both intelligences are able, “brilliant” really, but where Lina drops out—there are confounders, no question—Greco climbs to middle & then high school (rare for their small, 60s Italian neighborhood) & finally onto college. She is usually at the top of her class. As diplomatic as she is studious, Greco monitors what people want from her, is constantly assessing their mental states & trying to ease or deescalate social situations. She has a strong theory of mind. Her path is discovering, at twenty-seven, that she is not *free*, that she has too long said & been what others wanted of her, instead of following her own “self-stemming” desires. ✝

On one hand, we see the desire to please; on the other, a steadfast refusal to give others what they want. Moving towards; moving against & away. At some point, the former type learns how to assert zir own wants & needs, how to project zir own vision top-down onto the world instead of searching for “the” “right” answer. At some point, the latter type learns that not playing the game is against zir own interests, that being able to competently play constitutes a truer type of freedom than abstaining completely.

I want to talk briefly about the different strategies for coping, & some of the ways I think they play out in the real world, beyond what Horney advances.

First is the impression, which Horney takes as implicit, that these strategies are gendered, that movements toward appear more commonly in women, while movements away & against appear more commonly in men.<sup>2</sup>

To give a more concrete image of movement toward, I'll quote Horney, discussing a patient:

*In one girl... compliant trends had become predominant. They showed in a blind adoration of certain authority figures, in tendencies to please & appease, in a timidity about expressing her own wishes, & in sporadic attempts to [self-]sacrifice.*

We need look no further than Andrea Long Chu's *Females*, which defines as female "any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of the other." These desires include not just those of real individuals but also of egregoric entities, such as "society," "the firm," or "the state." Pregnancy is our symbolic image at-hand, one body making way for another, the umbilical cord diverting nutrients automatically. "[T]he self is hollowed out, made into an incubator for an alien force." *To be a female*, Long Chu Writes, *is to let someone else do your desiring for you*—adding, in the spirit of Horney—at your own expense.<sup>2x</sup>

2 Horney herself speculates as much, albeit more lightly: A pairing of a self-effacing woman & aggressive man "seems to be more frequent in our civilization" ("Morbid Dependency").

There are two undesirable outcomes one risks in making a decision. One is the object-level consequence, the direct effect of the error or miscalculation. The second is the sense of responsibility for making a wrong decision. *Having bad done to you; doing badly*. This secondary, reflexive effect can sometimes come at the further cost of respect (in interpersonal or social situations), self-respect (more generally), & reputation (when performed in public). It's accompanied, depending on the individual, by anything from haunting guilt to full-bodied indifference.

Further depending on the individual, either cost can be perceived as meaningfully preferable to the other. The overly empathic, or excessively eager to please, may prefer to put themselves in the shoes of the suffering than watch another pay for their decisions. The overly anxious, or self-conscious, may prefer limitation to the uncertainty of choosing the right move, the possibility of picking poorly. The overly vain may prefer to suffer than lose face in front of others.

This is the deal that dom & sub make together: the sub will take what the dom dishes out; the dom will take responsibility for deciding what to dish. Authority—who decides on behalf of whom—is the underlying logic of their transaction.

Another characteristic of the self-effacing neurotic: alongside the constant desire for affection (i.e. validation through affection), an impression of being constantly abused. For one, zir easy compliance does, in fact, lead zir to be easily taken advantage of. For another, ze may be unconsciously,

strategically amplifying zir suffering to enlist others' help.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps most significantly, ze projects abuse when none is there, when, specifically, zir inner, unconscious neurotic claims (i.e. perceived entitlements) to affection are not met. Perhaps a volunteered (i.e. unasked-for) self-sacrifice is not met with sufficient gratitude, resulting in the neurotic feeling unappreciated. Here, the selfish impositions of the neurotic's "implicit" & subconscious demands for emotional validation are spun as a kind of selflessness.

## vii.

The masculine & feminine encodings of *away/against* (rebellion, distance) & *toward* (compliance, closeness), respectively, play out in the creation of alternate values systems by, e.g. the cult leader, & the young disciples who bond with & to his authority. The rebel justifies his distance via ideological grounds—the oppressive & irrational failures of the primary order—Dionysus to Pentheus, Dan Humphrey to Serena van der Woodsen. But the followers act in allegiance to their leader more than to an idea or ideology (which the cult leader regularly updates, changes, or adapts to suit the convenience of the moment). In other words, when not drafted as post-hoc justification, the private ideology is a defense, by the authority, against his own doubts for making the decisions he makes. Whereas the only justification needed by his followers is the authority of his Word. As time passes, he "scorns her trust in people" & instills his "own suspiciousness in her" (Horney). She begins to "look at her relatives or friends through his eyes," "loses roots & becomes more & more impoverished"; in other

3 See also the writing of Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature*, & Theodore Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*.

words, he has taken her with him in his isolated withdrawal.

viii.

Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, recap: macho revolutionary Valentin Arregui is bunking in Argentinian prison with cross-dressing windowdresser Luis Molina. The pair develop a close friendship that develops, eventually, into a more sexual relationship. Molina takes on the role of mother in their time together, sharing extra rations with Valentin and caring for him when sick. Whether these acts are "generous" or merely masquerade as such is unsolveable, because our motivations are frequently hidden even from ourselves. When proper gratitude is not shown by Valentin, Molina can occasionally fall into a funk, which in one interpretation is to say, chooses an alternative strategy for securing the attention of his cellmate. Still, despite the potentially neurotic origins of his personality style, Molina's selflessness & care makes prison conditions bearable for both of them, meaningness generated through their growing investment in one another. I have zero interest in assassinating his character—the world would be a worse place without Molinas.

When M. learns he will soon be released from prison, he feels actively conflicted—on one hand, his mother is ill, & he has pledged himself to return to care for her. On the other hand, his attachment to Valentin has grown, & he would almost remain in prison to preserve the pair's relationship:

Molina: Valentin, I made a promise, I don't know who I promised, God, maybe, although I'm not a believer.

Valentin: Mmm...

Molina: & it was that what I wanted more than anything in life was to get out of here in order to take care of my mom. & that I'd sacrifice anything for that, that everything to do with me came second, that what I wanted above all was to be able to care for mom. & my wish has been granted.

Valentin: Be happy then. You, you're very generous to think first about someone else & not yourself. You ought to be proud of that.

Molina: But is it fair, that, Valentin?

Valentin: What?

Molina: That I always end up with nothing ... That I don't have anything truly my own in life.

But where Molina frames this as a conflict between living for another & living for himself, in reality he has not "discovered" some true, inner desire so much as he has transferred allegiance from his mother onto Valentin.

ix.

Upon his release, Molina is given a set of instructions for contacting the revolutionary group Valentin is involved with. Molina cares little for politics, or the ideals of the group, but he cares deeply for—and trusts—Valentin, & believes the message may secure Val's earlier release. Despite anxieties & misgivings, Molina is talked into delivering the message, leading to his death at the hands of

rebels. It is Valentin, then, who must live with the responsibility of Molina's death, on which he dwells during the book's final section. His relative callousness & abnegation of that responsibility may be a coping mechanism, or else the very character trait which allows him to easily play the role in the first place.

x.

The fear of taking responsibility & making decisions can apply also in carving out one's own life-course. From "Neurosis & Human Growth":

*...an insufficient sense of direction may be hidden behind an attitude of compliance. People then do what they think others expect them to do; they are what they think others desire them to be. & they may develop considerable astuteness about what others need or expect. Usually they will, in a secondary way, glorify this skill as sensitivity or considerateness.*

Then she gives us a definition of objecthood: "Without being the least bit aware of it, [compliant neurotics] are compelled to leave the direction of their lives to others, instead of taking it into their own hands."

We can understand movements *away-against* & *toward*, respectively, as forms of compulsive subjecthood & compulsive objecthood. The former is self-expansive, seeks the assertion of self over world. Pride & arrogance flourish; dominance, autonomy, & control are sought out. The self-effacing (*movements toward*) neurotic, meanwhile, is self-minimizing, feels guilty, insufficient. Because ze cannot help zirself, ze "cultivates & unwittingly exaggerates" suffering & helplessness, hoping others will come to the rescue.

Ze longs for “surrendering,” self-sacrificing love, & feels a “diffuse sense of failure” & inferiority. *Characteristic & easy to observe is the fear of winning in games*”

xi.

In case the use of *neurotic* grates, it is worth saying: Horney would describe the author of this text, at best, as a *movement away* neurosis in recovery, an intelligence which has recused itself from the judgments of others by an abandonment of recognition’s legitimacy. I do not say, “Those people,” I say “we people”—these neuroses exist, to varying extents, in all of us.

xii.

In the neurotic, the “real self” is suppressed in favor of an onslaught of *should*, which is to say, prescriptive internal judgments dictating the way ze ought to be or behave. Crucially, the rules, constraints, & prescriptions with which the self-effacing, object-oriented neurotic navigates can be “real or imagined” (Long Chu). Though these judgments can originate in the internalized voices of parents, or early authority figures, or the ambient pressures of a culture, their internal reality is more authoritative & strongly felt in the neurotic. Where internalized voices and constraints may be adaptive in one environment (childhood), they become maladaptive in another (adulthood). The blurriness of distinguishing externally imposed pressures, & those which are self-imposed, rears its head in conversations about emotional labor. Is Jane *really* expected to maintain the social glue at her boyfriend’s family reunion, or has she volunteered responsibility, perhaps because she feels ill at ease in awkwardness & less-than-warm relations?

The displacement of her own desires is not *merely* on behalf of men; it is also, & largely, on behalf of the expectations of her peers & subculture, including other women; the schematic complexes which give rise to them cannot be viewed simply. Perhaps her labor is performed out of high self-expectation: *where did these self-expectations originate, if not in childhood?* Horney and Hotel Concierge<sup>4</sup> would ask.

This is similar to the difficulty in distinguishing between the so-called “real self” & the neurotic self. Horney takes this concept of a real self from William James, along with his depiction of said self’s spontaneity & coherence. For one, the real self *wants* whereas the neurotic self feels compelled. We should perhaps not confuse this with the popular notion that individuals have innate, “authentic” desires which exist outside the social field of value and reward in which they have been raised. Rather, it is the difference between positive and negative desires, the difference between driving & being driven. Neurotic urges are carried out, first and foremost, to avoid the anxiety of not obliging them. Often inner dictates are projected externally onto others, a confusion of our own expectations for another’s. Horney notes, in her own analytic experience, a plethora of incidents in which internal disappointment or anger with oneself is projected by the patient onto the therapist. (We fear judgment most, after all, on matters we ourselves judge most harshly.)

4 “The Stanford Marshmallow Prison Experiment.” High self-expectation, and “the desire to pass tests,” is economically adaptive and personally disastrous. ...*the joke is about a young power couple who like each other very much, love, maybe, but they’re both distracted by the nagging feeling that they could do better, that they should be shooting for something greater, and so they break up and find new partners and the process repeats again. And the joke, which you hear on forums or sitcoms or in crowded sports bars, goes: “Haha, even though these people are successful, they’re still dissatisfied.” And I’m here to tell you that this joke is totally backwards. It’s because these people have always been dissatisfied that they achieved success.*

As a corollary, those areas we fail most dramatically at are often those far outside our fields of perception.)

Importantly, both those who move toward & those who move away follow a pattern of seeking external verification of worth. The compliant seek prestigious association, to bolster their dismal self-rating. The withdrawn seek achievement, to validate their exceptionality. The aggressive seek power, vindictively asserting their superiority. In all cases, external & costly markers of success appear as potential props for the idealized self-image. These markers have become potent talismans on account of their *histories*; whether that historical relationship between real efficacy and recognition holds will determine whether the neurotic's efforts are purely performative or also efficacious as a byproduct.

xiii.

Let us glance now toward neurotic ambition, marked by an emphasis on optics, on seeming over being. Basic confidence, the opposite of basic anxiety, is in the child a predictive confidence in both others & the self. It is an accurately calibrated assessment of equipedness relative to danger; there is a “strict cause-and-effect relation between existing personal assets & the feeling of self-confidence.” (Basic confidence therefore correlates with openness; it is a predictive system’s self-assessment that it can handle destabilization.)

Neurotic pride, the strategic partner of neurotic ambition, has no such grounding. It is derived from markers of prestige, such as institutional affiliation, & from much-desired attributes which one is imagined as possessing. Since this

top-down imposition of model onto reality is vulnerable to subversion, the prideful individual is “extremely sensitive” to insult. Pride, once injured, is typically coped with through either vindictiveness, withdrawal, minimization, or humor.

(One who is neurotically ambitious will often dwell on, & hope for, vindictive successes—triumphs over others’ predictions, or others’ judgments, which reflect the superior calibration of one’s mental schema.)

In literature, neurotic ambition is represented by the Faustian bargain: infinite power & ability in exchange for one’s soul, the cost of glory an “inner hell of self-contempt & self-torment.” The activities of the neurotically ambitious constitute a “tragic waste” of lives, sacrificed on the “altar of glory.”

In opposition, Horney casts the Buddha & Christ archetypes as those who have explicitly rejected the temptations of glory. The alternative to Faustian bargains is the raising of “other values—such as, in particular, that of growth as a human being—[as] more important than competitive excelling over others.” Horney puts perhaps too much emphasis on New Agey “growth” as terminal value—I hope you forgive her individualism, and mine, but also see past it, see its limitations & lack of communitas.

This idealized self-image wins out, in the Faustian bargain, and, taken for true self, spills out into a general entitlement, where special treatment is sought out specifically for its ability to prop up the reality of self-ideal. Insofar as being treated like everyone else undermines one’s self-perception as exceptional, it will be taken as slight. Inner wishes are

turned into normative claims—*I want* into *I deserve*. Often, the entitlement includes the belief that one need not work, or even *ask* for some affordance, that the affordance ought to be granted automatically. The neurotic “does not admit that if ze is lonely, ze might well call up somebody; [instead,] somebody should call zir up.” Ze believes, pre-verbally (since verbalization would call to attention the absurdity of the entitlement) that others ought anticipate & accommodate zir highly specific preferences, which ze blurs with established social laws.

Deservingness is one, self-justified, & two, strategically played up or performed (Sir Philip Sidney games), in making entitlement claims by, again, increasing one’s self-perception of suffering, making use of the only tool the scorned object has: sympathy. *Many people, for instance, feel too timid to make inquiries by telephone. If the claim is made that somebody else make the inquiry for him, the person concerned feels his inhibitions greater than they actually are in order to validate them.*

(This forfeiture of agency is akin to choosing object- over subjecthood.)

xiv.

How can we get past neurosis? Closely linked to our central syllogism (neurosis = trauma, trauma = maladaptive priors), we can look toward Ecker et al’s *Unlocking the Emotional Brain* (UtEB) as well as recent attempts to treat mental illness with psilocybin & MDMA (in accord with Friston/Carhart-Harris’s “REBUS & the Anarchic Brain,” 2019). Central to these approaches is the idea of identifying & correcting undesirable priors (which, again, typically hinge on the self in its relation to society). Since “mere” reason is

never enough, some kind of neurochemically transformative event must precede the correction: either the loosening of one's predictive schema, as advanced by psilocybin trials on depression (e.g.), or else placing the patient in a heightened affective state & allowing them to discover the active contradictions between their miscalibrated predictions & reality.

Quoting from Kaj Solana's review of *UtEB*, we can merely replace "deconsolidate the memory" with "update the prior" to illustrate the free energy workings of the authors' therapeutic process:

*Starting from 2004, new studies suggested that activation alone is not sufficient to deconsolidate the memory. The memories are used to predict that things will occur in a similar fashion as they did previously. Besides just activation, there has to be a significant mismatch between what one experiences & what the memory suggests is about to happen. The violation of expectation can be qualitative (the predicted outcome not occurring at all) or quantitative (the magnitude of the outcome not being fully predicted). In either case, it is this prediction error which triggers the deconsolidation & subsequent reconsolidation.*

That is, we pay attention to the failed predictions of our existing schema; we must encounter new scripts which provide alternate explanations, and better predictions. Because encountering dissonant evidence is so uncomfortable, contemporary psychiatrists are experimenting with exposing phobic patients to their triggers *while the patient is under the influence of benzodiazepines*. By allowing them to rewrite their predictive structures to closer match the actual level of threat the trigger presents, future encounters will be less loaded with "irrational" predictive anxiety.

### III.

Early 1970s and Annie Dillard is sticking her head around the Galápagos. She comes to see “the curious shapes soft proteins can take”; she watches the lava spatter “inchoate” from the sloshing sea, harden “mute and intractable on nothing’s lapping shore.” She cites Darwin’s “species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable,” the same line that stuck out to Lorine Niedecker, two generations prior.<sup>1</sup> Like Nelson, Dillard uses the Heraclitean “flux,”<sup>2</sup> and the phrase “process of becoming.”

The organisms she comes to observe—animals unscared of (unscarred by) human beings, birds that can be whistle-called from anywhere on the island, sea lions establishing throughlines of communication through physical language & ocean somersaulting—have found, over the the centuries, contextual solutions, contextual selves, evolved into their

1 fr. “Darwin,” *Collected Works* of L.N.

2 πάντα ῥεῖ: a set of dynamic processes constitute an identity. The idea comes first from Heraclitus, whose work remains only in fragments: one cannot step twice into the same river, nor meet twice a being in the same state (Plutarch’s paraphrase). This is true of both physical and mental states: new cells sluff off and are generated; and each sensory input updates the predictive schema. So it is with Pothos: he does not understand this world, but tries, and this in turn transforms him. And yet we will see: he cannot make himself as elastic as he might wish; the limits of his understanding are the limits of his world.

niche. The state of nature is constant change and turning, a shapelessness constantly reconfigured, slipping in and out of focus. As context morphs, categories mould themselves to fit—*fitness*. Our words are handles for grasping and manipulating patterns of similarity, but the purposes determine pattern picked, and our purposes are always changing. It is when makes a fetish of any one means, any one tool, any one identity, which is to say *mask*—not as provisional but sacred, not as contextual but essential—that one loses flexibility, becomes a Penthean institution of one.

(*Confusion! You can't tell what's up or down, or what you're saying, or who to believe. Confusion! A deepest unease.*<sup>3</sup>)

Dillard, like Sarah Perry two generations later, sees a kind of parable in the way, *when you get down to this business of species formation, you eventually hit some form of reproductive isolation... [and] ultimately, geographical isolation*. Incubation of difference: “If the Galápagos has been one unified island, there would be one dull note, one super-dull finch,” a monoculture, a single set of expectations and norms for the endless Pangea. Eventually, the organization and distance of others become the constraints and affordances of our own organization.

The only overlap I am aware of, between Nelson’s work and libertarian-leaning “creepiest economist”<sup>4</sup> Robin Hanson is their shared interest in bowerbirds. *Bluets* G67: «A male satin bowerbird would have tottered with it in his beak over

3 fr. Lynne’s *Discovery*, released 4 years after Dillard’s entry on the Galápagos.

4 Jordan Weissman 2018. Weissman criticizes Hanson’s lack of ability to read a room, the ambiguity of his statements, and his use of the “cheap provocateur’s trick” that is “raising questions” rather than “taking clear stances.”

to his bower, or his “trysting place,”<sup>5</sup> as some field guides put it, which he spends weeks adorning with blue objects in order to lure a female. Not only does the bowerbird collect and arrange blue objects—bus tickets, cicada wings, blue flowers, bottle caps, blue feathers plucked off smaller blue birds that he kills, if he must, to get their plumage—but he also paints his bower with juices from blue fruits, using the frayed end of a twig as a paintbrush. He builds competitively, stealing treasures from other birds, sometimes trashing their bowers entirely.» G68: «Experienced builders and performers can attract up to thirty-tree females to fuck per season if they put on a good enough show, have built up enough good blue in their bower, and have the contrast with the yellow straw down right. Less experienced builders sometimes don’t attract any females at all. Each female mates only once. She incubates the eggs alone.»<sup>6</sup>

5 “Would you like to see my etchings?”

6 We can carve up art’s value as a combination of intrinsic properties (like beauty) and extrinsic properties (something like intertextual & economic/Marxist labor reasons: time spent working on a project, time invested in mastering a craft, originality/authenticity). Were art primarily concerned with intrinsic effects like beauty, Hanson & Simler argue, a perfect replica or copy would be worth and valued equivalently or at least near to the original. Instead it is the original which serves as proof-of-work in an evolutionary sense; “Jesse Prinz and Angelika Seidel asked subjects to consider a hypothetical scenario in which the *Mona Lisa* burned to a crisp, 80 percent of them [saying] they’d prefer to see the ashes of the original rather than an indistinguishable replica.” The awe & sublimity sought does not belong internally to the painting but externally, to its aura and place in the world of production. An intriguing coincidence, Miller writes, that “we find attractive those things that could have been produced only by people with attractive, high-fitness qualities such as health, energy, endurance, hand-eye coordination, fine motor control, intelligence, creativity, access to rare materials, the ability to learn difficult skills, and lots of free time.” Which is what the female bowerbird finds attractive in the bowers of her mates. The 20th C’s blows to our concepts of originality, authenticity, skill, and effort mark a serious blow to our understanding of art indeed—our intuitive deployment & reception of it, even more than our theoretical,

I shouted and banged my head against a wall and ran around the empty gallery thinking “even the worst mass-market paperbacks are more complex, more suggestive, more charged w/ meaning than anything consecrated in \*this\* room.”

The windows were sweating, their wooden frames engorged in humidity. My Roman *d'or*: I've long been on record as an August hater. / There is a mozaic of a saint in the Byzantine Kariye Church, Istanbul, painted near the end of the 11th century. It is chipped at the edges; only the saint's torso and the western hemisphere of his face remain. His gold halo has faded; the absence of legs lend the appearance of levitation. He holds up his hand as if protesting his erasure by time, but already he has lost his right eye; soon, only the hand will remain, and then not even that.

I said, I got it! *Tops* are people who are top-heavy, impositional processors (beliefs bending reality, assertion of will on the world). *Bottoms* are people whose bottom-up signals top from below (sensing, detail-oriented, perceptive over judging).

*From the courtyard, I floated in / And watched it go down / Heard the cup drop; / Thought, “Well that's why they keep them around.”*

I am a stranger in a strange land, keeping, culling clumsy maps of cultures in my head.<sup>7</sup> Slow to come to terms with a culturesphere of soft touches and small gestures; slow to reconcile this gentleness with the hard hierarchies of its

explicitly stated conception.

7 Earnest/sincere vs. knowing/showy;bratty; Boyer vs. Babitz.

professional accompaniment. Slow to come to terms with its fluid marketplace where sexual, social, and cultural capital are easily exchanged; slow to feel at ease in the *endless meshes incest*.<sup>8</sup> Our precedent is the Mad Men of the Midcentury, even after the men are gone.

(*Incentive structures are vacuums; vacuums get filled. Do not fault a net its holes, or a bucket their absence.*)

Slow to Anteros: “Every interaction I have feels tinged by sexuality... a conversation at an opening, a party, a networking event, a reading (these are all the same)... desire ember-warms the belly, or else in their words and glances you feel the agenda.” When you said there was something to his presence that made you wilt, I asked whether it was the “plumb your soul with eye contact”<sup>9</sup> type or the “generate desire for approval through learned detachment” type. You said it was the latter.

∞

Carse, *Finite & Infinite Games*: “What one wins in a finite game is a title. A title is the acknowledgment of others that one has been the winner of a particular game. Titles are public. They are for others to notice. I expect others to address me according to my titles, but I do not address myself with them—unless, of course, I address myself as an other.”

Since a game cannot be repeated, with the same players at the same time under the same circumstances, the title is final and lasting, cannot be overwritten. The boxing champ

8 Acker, postcard to R. Silliman

9 cf. Dillard, *Encounters with Chinese Writers*

of '67 will always be the boxing champ of '67. "Since titles are timeless, but exist only so far as they are acknowledged, we must find means to guarantee the memory of them. The birettas of dead cardinals are suspended from the ceilings of cathedrals, as it were forever; the numbers of great athletes are 'retired' or withdrawn from all further play; great achievements are carved in imperishable stone or memorialized by perpetual flames." (Timeless monuments, Shelley reminds us, are anything but.)

They are theatrical. "Each title has a specified ceremonial form of address and behavior. Titles such as Captain, Mrs., Lord, Esquire, Professor, Comrade, Father, Under Secretary, signal not only a *mode of address* with its appropriate deference or respect, but also a *content of address* (only certain subjects are suitable for discussion with the Admiral or the Holy Mother), and a manner of address (shaking hands, kneeling, prostrating or crossing oneself, saluting, bowing, averting the eyes, or standing in silence)." What you say is who you are is who you're talking to, the content not constrained but *created* by the form and addressee, which together comprise the premise for speaking.<sup>10</sup>

Legitimacy is bestowed by deference, the recognition of one by others.<sup>11</sup> It is witnessed by watching others' attentions,

10 Ignore Sartre and his teenage concept of the authentic: the "philosopher" was an abusive addict, his tongue dyed black from daily amphetamine regimens, grooming high school students into orgy. Reasonable concepts of freedom are compatible with provisional role-playing; I do not know how a world without roles would work, and even the anarchists advocate local order over real orderlessness.

11 "Power is never one's own, and in that respect it shows the contradiction in all finite play. I can be powerful only by not playing, by showing that the game is over. I can therefore have only what powers others give me." *cf.* Sontag's "Aesthetics of Silence," Duchamp, Cage, Wittgenstein, Rimbaud.

second-order watching. It is doled out through systems of reciprocal vouching, indebtedness, and reference; it is awarded institutionally (top-down) and relationally (horizontal). It possesses material objects, replacing pragmatic value as their governing spirit.

*Jane Kallir* of Galerie St. Etienne: «I found a job at another gallery, which shall remain nameless. I remember that the gallery's owners once suggested I buy an Hermès handbag that cost the equivalent of about two months' salary. The gallery was run by a retired collector and his wife. Most of my job consisted of hand-addressing envelopes—this was a particular point of pride for the gallery. I have terrible handwriting, and my boss was a screamer. Every time an envelope was returned by the post office, he'd yell at me. Other than that, and attending to the owners' dry-cleaning and the occasional customer, there wasn't much to do. The gallery's files were stored in a shoebox in the bathroom.»

Tamsen Greene of Jack Shainman Gallery: «I saw a New York Foundation for the Arts classifieds listing for a gallery assistant position at Andrea Rosen and got excited: It was the gold standard, one of Chelsea's coolest galleries. I brought my cover letter and resumé to the gallery and shyly handed them to the woman at the front desk. Both she and the other gallery assistant [had also gone] to Barnard, and I think school pride made them look more closely. Or maybe they just loved my \$1 red skirt from the 96th street SalVal, the second-chicest thing I owned. My chicest outfit I saved for the interview, a cream pleated skirt with \$250 Etro boots I'd bought at a consignment store. They were the most expensive things I owned until later, when Andrea gave me a brand-new pair of orange-and-purple Prada

high-heeled loafers. They hurt too much to wear, but I still have them.»<sup>12</sup>

∞

*Showgirls*, *Devil Wears Prada*—these are films that acknowledge the moral degradations and trespasses of social hazing—that induction into the values and judgments of one’s new peers. But they also refuse to downplay the alluring power of these rituals, their role in preserving values systems against the creep of a cosmopolitan and relativist apathy—and in bending young people into instruments of power.

Streep’s Priestly, a thinly veiled Anna Wintour, sets up ludicrous standards, then uses words like “disappointment,” high hopes, “faith,” *I’m depending on you, You’ve let me down*—mommy-dom’ing Hathaway’s Andy into radical self-sacrifice.

So why’s it take her so long to quit the personal assistant gig? “She is *vicious*,” Andy/Andrea complains of Priestly, just days into starting at *Vogue* rip *Runway*. “So quit,” Nigel retorts. Andrea just fumes, can’t think of a comeback. What she wants is acknowledgment, and when she doesn’t get it, she’s furious. “You want to know why [Priestly] doesn’t kiss you on the forehead and give you a gold star at the end of the day,” Nigel tells her. The takeaway of the sermon is: you can’t be great at this job unless you give your all to it, give up everything. What’s the logic of excellence? Excellence is *excess*—this is the corollary to the 80/20 rule of “good enough.” All else equal, to spread one’s energy across games—the Pareto-optimal lifeplan™—runs

counter, and loses out, to single-mindedness. (See Nolan's *Prestige* for another portrait of obsession.) So Andy gets a full-blown makeover, gives up all her compunctions about fashion, changes her diet, starts trying to impress people whose opinions she was previously immune to.

Meanwhile her boyfriend's still wearing a hoodie and blue jeans, waiting tables at paper-napkin restaurants and talking about how, one semester in college, he lived off potatoes alone. You know trouble is coming—why?—*their class values are coming apart.*

Priestly is caught up in image, like her entire industry. “Another divorce—” she confides in Andrea, pausing—“splashed across page six.” Her first move in response to the romantic turmoil is to minimize the press fallout.

Andy’s assistant job is poorly paid, because *of course it is*—shit wages don’t just cut costs, they screens for desire, self-sacrifice, and privilege.

“I see a great deal of myself in you,” Priestly tells Andrea forebodingly. It’s the exact line we got in *Showgirls*, from startlette Crystal to aspirant Nomi (real name Pollyanna). There’s doubling, too, in the first & second assistants to Priestly—Andy and Emily duke it out for their boss’s favor, for limited spots for honors and reputation. Getting the limited role is the only form of acknowledgment, and thus currency, around this superorganism. Chris Kraus, *Showgirls*—threesomes where desire to *be* blurs into desire to *be with*; *Three Women* and *The Prestige*—mentor replacing mentee, competitions over limited slots, limited titles, jockeying to occupy limited identities.

When *Prada*'s heroine realizes she wants out, out of *Runway* and fashion; when she tries to set back time, she tells ex-bf Nate, “I wanted to say that you were right, about everything. I turned my back... on everything I believed in, and for what?” Nate: “For shoes. And shirts. And jackets and belts.” But that isn’t the real reason she converted. It was never for *things*; the things were just totems of belonging. She converted to a *narrative*, a meaning system, a standard of excellence and a system of prestige. “Value clarity,” in Nguyen’s term.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, Priestly’s recommendation gets her a job at a “real” journalism establishment, the *New York Mirror*, where she can become an initiate of a *different* sector in the rapidly decaying Manhattan media establishment. “The system works,” you wanna shout—“the credit is transferable; sacrifices on one end convert to yields on the other.”

∞

«Riesman and his researchers found that other-directed people were flexible and willing to accommodate others to gain approval. Because large organizations preferred this type of personality, it became indispensable to the institutions that thrived with the growth of industry in America. As Riesman writes, “The other-directed person wants to be loved rather than esteemed”, not necessarily to control others but to relate to them. Those who are other-directed need assurance that they are emotionally in tune with others. By the 1940s, the other-directed character was beginning to dominate society.» Thus a competition opens, depicted in *Prada*. Hathaway’s Andy: “My personal life is

13 C. Thi, *Gamification*.

hanging by a thread.” Nigel: “Join the club. That’s what happens when you start doing well at work, darling. Let me know when your whole life goes up in smoke; that means it’s time to get a promotion.” Boyfriend Nate, as Andy takes a late-night page from her boss: “You know, in case you were wondering, the person whose calls you always take? That’s the relationship you’re in.”

C.S. Lewis, man of Christ—*one who I did not think I would be citing here*—gives an alternate frame. (Which is true? Maybe both. Maybe neither.)

“There are no formal admissions or expulsions... The only certain rule is that the insiders and outsiders call it by different names. From inside it may be designated, in simple cases, by mere enumeration: it may be called “You and Tony and me.” When it is very secure and comparatively stable in membership it calls itself “we.” When it has to be expanded to meet a particular emergency it calls itself “all the sensible people at this place.” From outside, if you have despaired of getting into it, you call it “That gang” or “they” or “So-and-so and his set” or “The Caucus” or “The Inner Ring.”

[...]

Men tell not only their wives but themselves that it is a hardship to stay late at the office or the school on some bit of important extra work which they have been let in for because they and So-and-so and the two others are the only people left in the place who really know how things are run. But it is not quite true. It is a terrible bore, of course, when old Fatty Smithson draws you aside and whispers, “Look here, we’ve got to get you in on this examination somehow”

or “Charles and I saw at once that you’ve got to be on this committee.” A terrible bore... ah, but how much more terrible if you were left out! It is tiring and unhealthy to lose your Saturday afternoons: but to have them free because you don’t matter, that is much worse.»

Do you, too, feel that citing a member of the Inklings is somehow out of place, out of scope in our present constellation? *Spotted:* Choirboy getting earnest about the meaning of life. Hasn’t someone told him earnestness is outré?

«I must not assume that you have ever first neglected, and finally shaken off, friends whom you really loved and who might have lasted you a lifetime, in order to court the friendship of those who appeared to you more important, more esoteric. I must not ask whether you have derived actual pleasure from the loneliness and humiliation of the outsiders after you, yourself were in: whether you have talked to fellow members of the Ring in the presence of outsiders simply in order that the outsiders might envy; whether the means whereby, in your days of probation, you propitiated the Inner Ring, were always wholly admirable.» *Spotted:* Lil J on the Met steps, eating yogurt, telling pretty little lies.

∞

I went to Mexico for a while. It was the rainy season, warm. I rented a little two-bedroom, got pastries at the local panadería in the morning, wandered around old temple ruins and Catholic cathedrals.

You came to visit mid-way through. You put pomegranate seeds in our guac. We went to the Museo Soumaya, with its reptilian skin stretched over an hour-glass frame. There

was a whole floor dedicated to sacred hearts, all inlaid gold and dark cardinal paints, locked up in cabinets and display cases, and a second floor devoted to intricate ivory carvings, entire towns inscribed into a single elephant's tusk. So barbaric and civilized at once. I couldn't believe it. One carving was made from a mammoth's tusk, preserved from the Ice Age. In it had been carved an oriental parade, Loong dragons with their curling whiskers and squamate bodies, an entourage of chariots and what looked like Eastern landsknecht by foot. I'd never seen anything like it.

We got in a fight on a restaurant balcony, frijol in our mouths. I'd wanted to say that I thought you could be a proper artist, if you wanted. That you were perfectly qualified, insofar as there are qualifications, and what separated you from "them," anyway? but it turned south, I erred by trying to bolster my point through downplaying the sophistication of contemporary practice—the technical ability or lack thereof required, the conceptual sophistry of lauded works—surely *you* could do what they do, I meant to say, but it came out with the emphasis all wrong, surely you could do what *they* do—an attack on your homeland, your values, your dedicated time. The argument only ended when Tommy had an allergic reaction to nueces, and we had to rush home for his Benadryl and Epipen.

After that, things stagnated. You went home, slowly stopped taking calls, citing a lost mobile in D.C., drunk after a feminist re-enactment of the Last Supper. I bought a plane ticket, worrying this summer would be the end. Sometimes when we talked, it seemed already over. It's a

matter of hours, you'd said. There are not enough in a week. Is their sacrifice worth it for *this*? Somehow, in an old Polish beerhall over iceberg lettuce and pretzels, an old jukebox playing Bowie in the background, I convinced you it was.

∞

The proof we carry with us of time invested, belonging forged in the mutual exclusivities of temporal commitment: proof in the metalhead's jacket sewn with patches, evidencing presence in a past space-time, a particular location and event. Proof in the varsity jacket. Proof on bookshelves, proof in record collections. Proofs in our fabrics and leathers. Proof in the musician's memorization, in the words we use and how we use them.<sup>14</sup> Proof in our comms, our front-facings, our home decors, our websites, bylines. Proof in our networks accumulated, proof in our insider knowledge, proof in the responsibilities we do or do not feel, indicated per the obligations we do or don't ignore. Proof in our confidence. Proof in the thickness of paint.

Henrich, of strong credentials & decorated publishing history: "Natural selection favored social learners who could evaluate potential models and copy the most successful among them. In order to improve the fidelity and

14 Newfaggery and habitus: «Despite the zero-identity principle of 4chan's A-culture, newfags are distinguishable from established users as their post content reflects a lack of social competence within the class habitus of established users: for instance, they lack familiarity or versatility with native speech patterns or cultural capital, indicating a lack of immersion in the site; or they attempt to force content into popularity, implying the egotistical, narcissistic logics of cultural economies of self-publicity. However, quintessential newfag behaviour is typically met with suspicion, as the rhetor may be an experienced user employing these behaviours to troll a community easily offended by them.»

comprehensiveness of such rank-biased copying, social learners further evolved dispositions to sycophantically ingratiate themselves with their chosen models, so as to gain close proximity to, and prolonged interaction with, these models... [Such] dispositions created, at the group level, distributions of dependence that new entrants may adaptively exploit to decide who to begin copying.”<sup>15</sup>

He goes on to refine the fuzzy concepts of status and power, carving their many conflations into the more atomic “prestige” and “dominance”—the former a deference freely given to the accomplished from below, the latter a deference given out of fear of retribution, antagonistically imposed from above. Both forms of status grant greater freedom, support, alliance, access—to spaces, resources, sex, social groupings. Both forms are reified through reminders: grooming, gaze avoidance, lowered eyes, personal space, gifting, and other displays of submission. The prestigious are offered praise, which is denied through polite self-deprecation, which is itself swiftly countered by reaffirmations of praise, thereby completing a ritual exchange. *< i>The ruler rules through conference of the ruled.* Such offerings both corrupt and incentivize inter-model competition, the development of increasingly pragmatically “true” frames, for acquiring and sharing knowledge. Status is marked by asymmetric gaze: *I understood that the best thing to be in New York is watched and heard.*<sup>16</sup>

*Artforum*’s Rhonda Lieberman puts it in her own language: “Apprenticeship is a constitutionally abject activity: you wannabe the Special Stuff you admire in your hero, while

15 Henrich and Gil-White (2001)

16 Natasha Staag, *Sleeveless* (2019)

implicitly cutting yourself off from it as long as you want it. Special Stuff is a real imaginary appendage that is produced and circulated as long as everyone believes that other people have it. The fan is, by nature, split off from this organ of real imaginary plenitude; the glamour industry institutionalizes the lack-in-being when it swerves back and attacks you with accusations that you're not someone else.”<sup>17</sup>

Since time is the default sacrifice by which we acknowledge our allegiances, here I was, *Prada*'s Levi's-wearing Nate, battling it out over the heart of Anteros.

∞

Often, mimics don't know *why* the practice they're copying works; unable to isolate the relevant behaviors, they ritualize instead the entire behavioral structure, i.e. lifestyle, of the successful, imitated model, a form of cargocult.<sup>18</sup> Prestige hierarchies that begin by optimizing for fitness can quickly become autotelic, cycles of prestige breeding cycles of prestige detached from real-world markers. In parts of Melanesia, men historically received prestige for growing larger and larger yams, such that the yams grown today are so large they're inedible. *Cage's music is an example of the tendency for high-status human domains to ignore fit with human nervous systems in favor of fit with increasingly rarified abstract cultural systems.*

~~Like a Midas of the rats, Prestige leaves a grease stain~~

17 “The Loser Thing,” 1992.

18 Where *imitation* is deontological, following ritual procedures, *emulation* is consequentialist and pragmatic; emulation is both more portable and more vulnerable to tail risk.

Prestige leaves a perfume stain—intoxicating, preventing sober vision.<sup>19</sup> Alternate frame: we never cared about intrinsic quality to begin with; sober vision is social vision. Project yourself into an alternate present where “video art,” in the white-walled gallery sense, is merely another genre of YouTube video, a strange corner of the Internet, creators with an interesting and seemingly esoteric discourse but no institutional affiliation, no museums, galleries, course syllabi to project an image of a historically continuous project dating back millennia. Does it still stand out? Does it earn its present distinction? Its privileged cultural valuation, its privileged financial evaluation?<sup>20</sup> The curator knows, Anteros knows: everything is in the frame. Put an artist in a show with one set of peers, her work is old-fashioned; move her to a new context, the work is clever and subversive. Consider the gilding of nostalgia: project yourself into an alternate filmography where this year’s Academy-bait prestige efforts are left intact but released in midcentury grayscale; imagine its feeling of quaintness and naïveté and timelessness, *movies back when they knew how to make them*.

This much is well-documented, Henrich says: When success is conceptualized as zero-sum—*your success at the cost of mine, mine at the cost of yours*—it wrecks economies, throttles

19 Staag, *Sleeveless*: “Did you know that the guy who used to live here, he was this guy who hung out with Andy Warhol?”

20 Cory Arcangel, reflecting on his own practice in light of a larger folk art ecosystem, says nay: “All this stuff out there made by all these people is probably better than the stuff I’m making. How do you deal with that? That’s one part of the question, and the second part of the question is where do I fit in with that, because essentially I’m doing the same thing that they are. As an artist, what is my role in the internet? The first part is like a daily battle. I call it the fourteen-year-old Finnish-kid syndrome. Basically there are people doing things on the internet right now that are above and beyond. I will see stuff daily and think, Oh my God, that’s the greatest thing I’ve ever seen in my life, and in an art context it could work.”

growth by preventing the free-flow of information, preventing the sharing of better business practices, improved technologies, improved techniques.

∞

A WAIST. “The Young-Girl’s self-control and self-constraint are obtained through the introjection of two unquestionable ‘necessities’: that of REPUTATION and that of HEALTH.” Driven to madness by the zero-sum economy of New York’s social-fashion scene, a high-school politics dressed up like sophisti-pop, the elevated pretense of the cognitive wallpapering over? meaningfully transforming? overwriting? the juice of the flesh.

Everyone is interested in scamming, celebrity, branding these days: Tolentino (*Trick Mirror*), Wilk (*Oval*), Staag (*Surveys & Sleeveless*), citing—second to the current administration—Anna Delvey, Elizabeth Holmes, the saga of Caroline Cassady. & what’s the border between vibe and brand, networks of associative feeling?

X: *Heh, like the time I asked Z out in La Caverna and she was so out of my league, wrote for a bunch of culture mags, total baller it-girl, we'd never met. But I found out a mag she helped run was having a party downtown, this giant underground cave of a bar with stalactites and fake cave paintings And I went down and spent an hour asking after her and finally found her in the crowd and said ‘Are you Z?’ and she said yes, and I told her, ‘I’ve been looking for you all night. Put your number in’ and handed her my phone and she did it.*

Y: *Eh, I don’t think I’m affected by reality distortion fields as much as you. I’m not perceiving the social capital I might siphon from her. Imagine the same person in some podunk town, untransformed by the*

city. Do you still care?

X: Can I even conceive of that counterfactual? What would it mean for her to “still be” the “same person”?

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A grand theory of history via Laura Betzig: Evolutionary reproductive strategies are not identical for men and women. Female *homo sapien* mating strategies (in the aggregate; i.e., so highly varied and altered and made specific by culture that it would not be transparent as such) historically appear to select for social stature and resource security. You end up w/ the sexual dimorphism we see today: larger and physically stronger men, evolved from fighting over said resources. (Bonobo monkeys, for instance, do not have hardcore sexual dimorphism like we do, and their sexual culture is entirely different, chicken/egg style.)

But you also, as Betzig points out, get patriarchy and imperialism, both being the organized competition between genetic rivals, and factions of genetic relations unified in rivalry (kin selection) leading inexorably into xenophobia. “In short, reproductive inequality implies economic inequality. At the same time, economic inequality implies political inequality.” The syllogistic flow between types of capital (social, economic, sexual) shouldn’t come as a surprise: it’s a mechanism rife in the world of cultural production, business, and politics—though the latter two circles have at least begun to respond to the abuses and ethical inequities inherent in such a system, with workplace romance rules and norms against harassment, with wage laws that ensure the flow of literal capital—less precarious

than symbolic capital—downward.<sup>21</sup>

Old man black beetle crawling up the kitchen wall. “Theory is a novel where the narrator has lapsed into total solipsism” (Kantbot). A workshop is a bandpass filter—you can crowdsource out the worst but you’ll also scrap the best. Delany: «From my seat in the third row, I heard him begin to read out a section from the third “chapter” of my “novel” (Actually, as has been practically every MFA thesis I’ve encountered in the past decade, my “novel” was a series of loosely connected stories with some common characters—and equally uninteresting.)» [socialist organizer/editor hitting on Alice] *You know, you and I have a lot in common. I get reactionary thoughts too.* [Alice] *I’m not reactionary!* [Editor] *Well... aesthetically.*<sup>22</sup>

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In shelter of/from the hierarchy, conch shells & soft listening sessions, a frisson in the whispers, a gentle introduction welcoming the guests. Introspecting, remembering, “whatever comes to mind is perfect,” *to be enough*, a small coral-lit single-room reading room, a studio really, in Bedford-Stuyvesant? Gowanus?

I tell myself, Stay grounded, ward off conspiracies of intent, recognize badness in the world as by-and-large byproduct. What is conscious intent in considering a self-optimizing system anyway? Those on the lower levels of the totem pole know: sometimes it’s best not to loop in your supervisors. Those on the higher levels of the totem pole know:

21 cf. Wagner et al 2020: “Trends Over Time in Assortative Mating Based on Parental Wealth”: income inequality driven by romantic choice.

22 Whit Stillman, *Last Days of Disco*

sometimes it's best not to loop in the board of investors. The brain as at its best when working under illusions; dirty work the kind of hush-hush affair that provides plausible deniability; motivated but unable justify.<sup>23</sup> The reasons feeling half-baked, post-hoc, convenient. Scott on Trivers on Self-Deception, radically abridged: «There's some controversy over exactly how good our mental lie detectors are or can be... [There's] evidence that there are certain people who can reliably detect lies from any source at least 80% of the time without any previous training: microexpressions expert Paul Ekman calls them (sigh... can't believe I have to write this) Truth Wizards, and identifies them at about one in four hundred people. The psychic unity of mankind should preclude the existence of a miraculous genetic ability like this in only one in four hundred people: if it's possible, it should have achieved fixation. Ekman believes that everyone can be trained to this level of success (and has created the relevant training materials himself) but that his "wizards" achieve it naturally; perhaps because they've had a lot of practice. One can speculate that in an ancestral environment with a limited number of people, more face-to-face interaction and more opportunities for lying, this sort of skill might be more common; for what it's worth, a disproportionate number of the "truth wizards" found in the study were Native Americans, though I can't find any information about how traditional their origins were or why that should matter. [...]】

Trivers' theory is that the conscious/unconscious distinction is partly based around allowing people to craft narratives that paint them in a favorable light. The conscious mind

23 Art, then, is a product over a species-wide confusion over whether we are a tournament species or a pair-bond species.. (R. Sapolsky)

gets some sanitized access to the output of the unconscious, and uses it along with its own self-serving bias to come up with a socially admirable story about its desires, emotions, and plans. The unconscious then goes and does whatever has the highest expected reward—which may be socially admirable, since social status is a reinforcer—but may not be. Trivers' theory has been summed up by calling consciousness “the public relations agency of the brain”. It consists of a group of thoughts selected because they paint the thinker in a positive light, and of speech motivated in harmony with those thoughts. This ties together signaling, the many self-promotion biases that have thus far been discovered, and the increasing awareness that consciousness is more of a side office in the mind’s organizational structure than it is a decision-maker.»

*I said, I said, it's my damn book I'll do what I wanna, and what I wanna is roleplay Isidore de Seville.*

Wark, Aug 14 1995 email to K. Acker: «Mind you, it's true that Sabina has historically fucked whoever has the intellectual skills/contacts she needs at any given moment. But it really is completely uncalculated. She \*really\* and \*actually\* desires that which empowers her in the other. Which is what I think men do. So why shouldn't she? There's a great book about it called *Object-Choice* by Klaus Theweleit. About the wives and lovers of Heidegger, Freud, etc. The idea of women connecting sex to \*anything\* but romantic love seems to be a big phobia<sup>24</sup> out there. *Basic Instinct*,

24 G. Miller: “One thing you realize if you get into debates about polyamory versus monogamy... culture apparently is also downstream from the mating system. So if you really wanna get people riled up you challenge the mating system that actually dominates relations between sexes but also family structure and has knock-on effects of everything from the design of

*Disclosure, etc.»*

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*Across the evening sky, all the birds are leaving /But how can they know it's time for them to go?*

*Gossip Girl* S1E4: B's mom Eleanor, having previously cast B as face of her fashion line, is persuaded by the photo director to take the shoot in a “new direction,” which means casting B’s BFF S instead. S comes in the next morning to keep B company on-set; photog asks her to do some “test” shots; minutes tick into half-hours and B’s still not showing—maybe cuz Eleanor said “not today, sweetie.” B knows she’s been replaced, just not who’s replaced her.

When she finds out she becomes a bullwhip. “Upset? You mean why aren’t I *furious*.” Did S *really* know know? “When you glanced at the call sheet, did you see my name on it? When I wasn’t in hair and makeup, didn’t that seem strange? When the dressing room only had your name on the door, what, did you think they just forgot?” S swears she had good intentions, even as B suspects half-conscious complicity. Jacob Clifton, recapper extraordinaire, casts the scene’s significance within the show’s commentary on wealth, class, & privilege: ...*this is the whole dynamic: Blair instinctively knows, correctly, that she deserves to be loved, which makes it so confusing that Serena’s “it” [factor] makes everybody give her stuff instead. We came into this at a weird time, but it’s their whole relationship: trying to hold onto each other in the constant onslaught of this narrative unfairness. A friend emailed me, before this episode, like, “Why do you care about this show? Why do you care if Serena*

housing and urban systems to the design of careers and the extent to which people can use freedom of association for form little families or polycules “

*and Blair work it out?" And I was like, "Because Serena will always get the thing, and Blair will always lose the thing, and they will try to love each other anyway, and it's riveting. Blair is going to want a thing this week, I promise, and whatever it is, she will almost get it, and then Serena will get it instead, and they will both want to die as a result. And if you've never been on one side of that relationship at one time, and on the other side of that relationship at another time, what have you been doing instead of having friends, because you always feel one way or the other, and you have to recognize how gross it makes you feel to be on either side of that, because it's nobody's fault, it's just how it happens. There's a totem pole, and you're on it, and there's always somebody above you and somebody underneath you, and you have to be kind to them both or else you're in an uncomfortable position, and learning this is how we get ourselves under control."*

One thing S took from B is her BF, N, the same way N's BFF C took B from N, all incestuous Girardian mimesis. They egg each other on, value in one pair of eyes breeding value in another pair (*second-order desire*). This dynamic is so powerful it can flip so-called hard-set identitarian preferences. Interview with a gay woman age 23: *I wanted to win. My best friend always had guys interested in her in high school. Although I was never really interested in guys, somehow this bothered me. So I began to pursue the same men she did to prove I was as good, if not better, than her. When she would convey interest in a particular guy I would immediately pursue him and win him with the offer of immediate sex. This included heavy petting under a desk during class and intercourse in a closet or hidden area of my high school.*<sup>25</sup>

> Freud would say, no doubt, that the [desire for social belonging] is a subterfuge of the sexual impulse. I wonder whether the shoe is not sometimes on the other foot.

I wonder whether, in ages of promiscuity, many a virginity has not been lost less in obedience to Venus than in obedience to the lure of the caucus. For of course, when promiscuity is the fashion, the chaste are outsiders. They are ignorant of something that other people know. They are *uninitiated*.<sup>26</sup>

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Neptune Diner II. A couple next to us, eating cottage cheese out of cantaloupe: X: *I feel terrible when I eat dairy*. Y: *Terrible how?* X: *Like I wanna die, it's so not worth it*. Y: *Like what are your symptoms?* X: *Like, I wanna shit and my stomach hurts*. Happy? Y: *Is it the kinda thing where you acclimate if you consume it regularly? Like Princess Bride, mithridatism*. X: *Why would I make myself sick like that. I save it for rare indulgences when I can't resist*. Y: *Have you gone to a doctor about it?* X: *I'm not gonna eat that bite, I'll just have the cantaloupe*. Y: *Just one bite! It's the best bite!*

Sad Girl Theory, popularized by Cal-Tech MFA'er Audrey Wollen<sup>27</sup>: “the internalised suffering women experience should be categorised as an act of protest. We have historicised gestures of externalisation and violence, because they already fit into our standards of masculinity, and therefore, power. But there is an entire lineage of women<sup>28</sup> who consciously disrupted the status quo through enacting their

26 Lewis, “The Inner Ring”

27 Wollen, 2015: «my summer aesthetic is currently in transition from “school girl Anime princess in Manchester, UK, 1988” to “18th-Century prostitute discovers Bjork CD on syphilis deathbed.”»

28 Audrey Wollen, Billie Eilish, Brittany Murphy, Cleopatra, Edie Sedgwick, Elizabeth Wurtel, Fiona Apple, Frida Kahlo, Hannah Wilke, Joan Didion, Judy Garland, Lana Del Rey, Kathy Acker, Mitski, Persephone, Sappho, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Winona Ryder’s Susanna Kaysen.

own sorrow... I'm writing a book. At least, I'm saying I'm writing a book to justify how much time I'm spending alone in my room freaking out about words. If you're freaking out about words, say you're writing a book. If you're freaking out about colors existing, say you're making abstract paintings, you know? I count freaking out as a kind of work, so right now, I'm freaking out about girls, our histories and our futures, words, and how they change what girls are, our histories and our futures, bodies, and how they change words, and how they change what girls are, etc, etc.”

EVERYTHING IS IN THE FRAME: «Not to romanticize historical eras that would have objectively sucked for me or anything but “the minister’s eccentric spinster daughter, who spends her time in novels and watercolors and is frequently taken abed with Nerves and the Headache” just sounds better than “nerdy depressed millennial with anxiety and migraines who lives with their parents because they have trouble holding down a job or a relationship.” [...] Excedrin I took earlier doesn’t seem to be doing much and I just really feel that if this was the 19th century someone would have given me some laudanum by now.»<sup>29</sup>

Belief water in your hands; motivations cupping it include livelihood, status, caucus<sup>30</sup>; *the work is urgent even “necessary.”*<sup>31</sup> Drown out criticism from outsiders by disqualifying them

29 bramblepatch.tumblr.com

30 GG’s structure: over the course of a season, the main cast pairs off in rotating, rival duos; come season-end, an outsider arrives, upsets their local order, and the gang unites to kick her out.

31 *cf.* Lauren Oyler, “What Do We Mean When We Call Art ‘Necessary?’” or Peli Grietzer’s *Amerikkkka*: “The obvious perversity of [masculinist] avant-gardes is how they never stop talking of exploding the culture around them but seem much more concerned with the insides of their own new utopian spaces.”

for outsideness;<sup>32</sup> count insiders only as insiders if they've so invested themselves in time, in social and financial ingratiation, that sunk cost precludes defecting. *Style acts as passphrase, a shift key, a phase shift, a valuable proxy for speaker identity which then allows the speaker to communicate complexly, reflexively, with reference to self and modified by self. It is reliable because of the intense difficulty of faking fashion, which requires so much insider knowledge that any successful impostor is arguably no longer a fake. There's a reason it's tough to get into Berghain.* Some successfully penetrate cultures—Lauren Weisberger writing *Devil Wears Prada* on the fashion industry; Sam Fussell, son of Paul Fussell, writing *Muscle* on bodybuilding and its optocratic mythos: “The myth sells, not the man. So my education began in distinguishing fact from fantasy. And the facts, once I was out in California, were staring me in the face. The bodybuilder listed at six two, was, in fact, five foot ten. His arms, listed at 22 inches, were, in fact, 20, etc, etc. The rabid heterosexual was, in fact, gay for pay. The ‘all-natural’ bodybuilder, in fact, was a walking advertisement for the pharmaceutical industry.” The publication of *Muscle* marked his exile from the community, just as Weisberger’s *Prada* did hers: “If I were to be honest [about body-building culture], I wouldn’t be welcomed into any hardcore gym for decades.”

And I said, you only *think* you’re reading theory; really, you’re reading biography, a biography of Pothos.

Henrik Lundberg & Göran Heidegren put it for us best: “Every participant who wants to succeed within the field of philosophy must be prepared to engage or invest in the game in some way. *Illusio* is Bourdieu’s term for the tendency

32 Purging yourself of external feedback loops works like amplification: genius into breakthru originality, error into unfettered disaster. (The functional opposite of a workshop’s bandpass filter.)

of participants to engage in the game and believe in its significance, that is, believe in that the benefits promised by the field are desirable. [...] Whatever the combatants on the ground may battle over, no one questions whether the battles in question are meaningful. The considerable investments in the game guarantee its continued existence. *Illusio* is thus never questioned.”

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Rhonda Lieberman in “The Loser Thing”<sup>33</sup> recounts Beckett’s attempted imitation of his neurotic hero James Joyce,<sup>34</sup> who wore painfully small shoes out of vanity.

Brian Timar, via Guzey, “radically” abridged: “I’ve been a graduate student in physics for almost three years, but I only recently figured out why. I had to tackle a simple question do so: Why does this matter? I realized that I’d never forced myself to answer this honestly... Why had I spent so much time in purposeless hard work? I arrived at a simple mechanism: an excessive sensitivity to the desires of others, and a competitive environment...The second [trap] was a positive feedback loop that encouraged me to spend ever-increasing amounts of time on my work. Humans inherit convictions mimetically from each other—we learn what to value by imitating our peers. As my desire to excel academically grew, I spent greater amounts of time in and around the physics department. The more time I spent there, the greater my desire to excel. I’d never given physics much thought at all before my senior year in high school—but once I was surrounded by other physics students,

33 *Artforum* ‘92

34 Cargoculting: copying that which is not important, being unable to disentangle the variables which count from those which just don’t matter.

competing for the same pool of grades and research positions, I could think of little else. This inherited desire was unchecked because I had no life outside of academics—no fixed reference point... The social reward signal [was decoupled] from the rest of objective reality—you can spend years ascending ranks in a hierarchy without producing anything that the rest of humanity finds valuable... Academics have uniformly rather low salaries, increasing our tendency to focus on social status as a measure of success. Salary gradations are useful for disrupting mimetic effects because they tie effort expended directly to units of universal economic value—convertible to kilos of rice, oil, and stuff in the physical world. A price is a lifeline to reality: all else being equal, the job with the lower wage is probably less valuable. Without this signal, the goals of a peer group are easily decoupled from the outside world, making it easy to drift into time-wasting pursuits.”<sup>35</sup>

Here’s Girard, arguing the same thing. [*As if reciting:*] Desire is triangular; not just a relation between subject and object, it is influenced by a third party, a model other whose desires we take as our own. Instead of experiencing “spontaneous” desire—cf Karen Horney—Emma Bovary “desires through the romantic heroines who fill her imagination.” Following Jules de Gaultier, this is the defining characteristic of Flaubert’s characters: “The same ignorance, the same inconsistency, the same absence of individual reaction,” which makes them “fated to obey the suggestion of an external milieu, for lack of an auto-suggestion from within.”<sup>36</sup> I am wary of this distinction—what is this virginal “within,” unaltered by an outside?—but should we

35 “Mimetic Traps,” 2019, via Alexey of Petersburg

36 from *Deceit, Desire, & the Novel* (1961)

accept it, we would say: They have outsourced their desiring; someone else is doing it for them.<sup>37</sup> This external model is found either in fictional works,<sup>38</sup> such as a literary character—Girard makes use of *Don Quixote*—or else Real Human Beings; in the latter case, both parties—imitator and imitated—are frequently thrown into rivalry, given they now share a desire for some resource in short supply. [*Tones of authority, slightly giddy*:] The upper classes continually evade this rivalry by updating their specific totems of belonging (desired by lower classes, in order to belong). This process is known as fashion, and it is the source of many pop-psychological contagions.<sup>39</sup> [*Thx for coming 2 my TED talk!*]

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But Henrich’s prestige leads us somewhere special. Because the specific criteria—the context of the reproductive problem—in relation to which a person is evolutionary “fit” is inevitably highly “gendered” (i.e. sexually dimorphic), mimics look first and foremost toward members of one’s own sex for behavioral norms and models. In other words, men and women evolve *separate cultures* through mimesis,

37 cf. Long Chu, *Females*

38 Here, desire is transmitted through exemplification and association: the *specific traits of a kind of person*. The imitator reverses causality, falls into the metonymic fallacy of a two-way street. *Successful artists are often alcoholics*, believes the failed artist as he heads, once more, to the pub. Sometimes this reversal is still effective because the associative link persists in social signals: An aura of alcoholism can help land a book deal, even if it hinders the writing of the book.

39 Also Girard: “Religious prohibitions make a good deal of sense when interpreted as efforts to prevent mimetic rivalry from spreading throughout human communities.” See the mimetic “aura” around cigarettes, for example—the associations built up & reified largely through visual media which continues to drive their adoption & use (& continues to thwart vaping enterprises).

which govern and structure their values, desires, & traits.

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TV Host: What do you make of these latest developments?  
It is a little disturbing, no?

Pothos: I think it's exciting to be alive during such a turn in our grand gender experiment.

Host: The way you say it, it's as if you didn't care.

Pothos [*concerned, with gravity*]: Please do not mistake my detachment for pathology; there are too many tones already of anger and misery, and though the outrage is understandable, it is also exhausting. If we believe this great experiment is something both complex and important to get right, and also that we are exhausted by anger, then detachment is obligatory.

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And I said, *The slipperiest slope is between self-protection and aggression, patrolling your own boundaries and policing others'*.

X: *Ok I have a Big Thesis for ya*

X: *not quite the Great White Whale of “caffeine brought europe out of the dark ages into the renaissance” but big if true*

X: *ok, remember US intellectual history? 19th C: strong division of private/public spheres. Feminism comes in, says “women need access to public sphere too,” the first step of the process, we’re all familiar with it*

*X: but the last decade or two, rather than being an extension of this project, are the failure of this project (cf. red scare contra capitalism). or if not the failure but the butting up against the original project's limitations. How come an apparently progressive movement led us to a neoliberal hellscape? Was the public sphere as liberating as it seemed? Was the object of it all to get women out of oppressive domestic spheres, only to land them in oppressive public spheres?*

*X: so things are starting to shift to a project of domesticating the public sphere: gen-Z zoomer stuff where public realms and public speech are held to domestic standards. "lean-in" overtaken by "decrease office hostility." hugs replace handshakes, homewear businesswear. less emphasis on the "polis," a reaction to a business world of cutthroat competition, more emphasis on subjective individual needs over economic bottom-lines. the subsumption of etiquette under ethics or rather, into ethics. I'm still trying to think it all through it's all very tentative, Silicon Valley's a complication but... exhibit A.... letting people bring their dogs into the workplace!*

Following Kneeling Bus, Allbirds, athleisure; following Venkat's domestic cozy; following Chenoe Hart a design trend toward synthesizing consumer electronics with fabrics & textiles. Chenoe's giving a presentation about how, in the future, there won't be many stationary storefronts, just a moving grid of kitchen-equipped vehicles and robo-chefs, hooked algorithmically into commuting patterns. I stretch my legs out and you put your head on my thigh. The room is sticky-warm, the air stuffy-thick, and my under-arms are wettening their linen shirt. The next presenter is an eco-conscious graphic designer from Berlin, giving a lecture on the ethical mandates of degrowth; his first slide features the cover of Wilk's *Oval*.

Scritti's *Cupid & Psyche* 86. Wainwright's Poses, Friedberger's Nice to Be Nowhere, Neil Young's Razor Love. Cocteau Twins' Lorelei, Russell's Habit of You, Camera Obscura's Country Mile, Courtney Barnett's Sunday Roast, Your Dream Coat's People Like You, Drake's Northern Sky. Laying on our backs by the Egyptian obelisk, behind the Met, staring up.

You're telling me about the process of adjustment for new clothes: you wear them to the supermarket, you contort yourself in the mirror, anything to naturalize the garment, to domesticate it; to make the costume mold itself to you, to mold yourself to the costume, to discover common ground between you, so that when you go out at night, it will have become an extension of your self, or body, or identity—you're not sure which.

We go into the Met and there's a show on fashion from the 20s and 30s: huge furs and slim, slinky, sequined evening gowns. Odd how it's all changed, sophistication now shown through minimalism, nostalgia, basics made with high-quality textiles.<sup>40</sup> I've been reading FL Allen's *Only Yesterday*, a history of the 20s written at decade's-end; been provoked the parallels with present decades: Palmer raids, Red Scare and preference falsification, culture war and the sudden transformation of morals.

In *Manhattan*, Allen's universal man aspires to God but is only an ape (see the classic shot of the bio classroom,

40 What some ethologists would call conventional signals: the relationships between signified and signifier rotate, but the general mode of signification remains the same. "If navy is the upper middle class color, purple is the prole equivalent... Avoid purple under all circumstances" (Fussell, *Class*),

prehistoric skeleton against the wall, or else the seduction attempt upstairs at a literary-elite social gathering: “It’ll be great, because all those Ph.D.’s are in there, you know, like... discussing models of alienation and we’ll be in here quietly humping.”) The quasi-literary pretensions of the film-making (the infamous introduction, “Chapter One”; the black-and-white artsiness; the Socratic love hetero-style). To Alvie, like Trivers, the brain’s production is merely post-hoc justification for the wants of the evolved body. Who syncs whom? Meryl Streep’s Jill Davis does Diane Keaton’s Annie Hall one better, not just growing past Woody but past men period. The gossip of her previous life with him gets turned into kindling for a tell-all memoir, an early tremor of the Wronged Woman Thinkpiece Industrial Complex.

Trapped like Herakles in the “trauma” of our roles. «The web of social relationships we’re embedded in helps define our roles as it forms and includes us. And that same web, as the distributed “director” of the “scene”, guides us in what we do. A lot of (but not all) people get a strong hit of this when they go back to visit their family. If you move away and then make new friends and sort of become a new person (!), you might at first think this is just who you are now. But then you visit your parents... and suddenly you feel and act a lot like you did before you moved away. You might even try to hold onto this “new you” with them... and they might respond to what they see as strange behavior by trying to nudge you into acting “normal”: ignoring surprising things you say, changing the topic to something familiar, starting an old fight, etc. In most cases, I don’t think this is malice. It’s just that they need the scene to work. They don’t know how to interact with this “new you”, so they tug on their connection with you to pull you back into a role

they recognize. If that fails, then they have to redefine who they are in relation to you—which often (but not always) happens eventually.”<sup>41</sup>

Y: *The philosophy of escape we've been talking about: get out of whatever box you find yourself in. Gender, genre, genus, genere. You want flexibility, but every rep. has its baggages; ambiguations become ossified, attract their own preconceptions. Others' expectations can't be avoided, only strategized around; cannot be erased, only updated. Categories not as pitfalls to be avoided, but situationally useful divisions or maps deserving conscious manipulation, which become dangerous when reified, when taken as sole window on truth.* fn Chris Kraus here: “Where there are no walls there is only chaos. And so you break it down,” erect barriers, which is why there’s section breaks in this text. Seeing categories as true in relation, true in chronotope. Boxes are degrading, they reduce something high-dimensional into lower dimensions. But the degradation comes when it goes unacknowledged that such a compression has taken place.

We were talking Myers-Briggs; I said, “What’s the Myers-Briggs type where you go ‘the answer is indexical to the local situation’ for every question?”

Y: *The prompts are like, ‘Do you prefer staying in or going out?’ Well, if I like the people and I have the energy that night, I'll go out. If I don't like the people, or I'm tired from work I won't. Or they'll ask, ‘In discussions, do you care more about the truth, or keeping the peace?’ If it's a situation where there are real stakes for a wrong belief, it's probably worth risking social friction, otherwise not. So inevitably I end up checking the middle option on each question, ‘Unsure’ or ‘Neutral.’*

X: *I feel like I know exactly where I am on a bell curve: I don't like*

41 Valentine, “The Intelligent Social Web,” offering a fake framework (constructed but useful)

*going out, circa fifth percentile.*

*Y: Is this just me being young? Anyway it feels like most identity-framings of questions end up obfuscating instead of clarifying the situation. Am I a wife, a mother, or a writer? is a nonsense question; you ‘aren’t anything’<sup>42</sup> but ‘What are my priorities between my partner, my children, and my work?’ actually gets you somewhere—at the very least, away from dichotomous, essentializing thinking and into a pragmatic balancing of limited time and personal preference. Keep it pragmatic; you are what you do, no more no less. «Hey, I’m telling you about how narcissists hurt people and all you can think about is “Do I seem like a narcissist?” instead of ‘Am I hurting people?’»<sup>43</sup>*

*Y: Is it categories or category/instance errors? General indeterminacy? Purge the fallacies of essence, of mutual exclusivity—the way words betray us when we treat them as discrete, determined entities rather than containers filled with whatever we put in them. But Nelson’s is a foundational anxiety, stemming from the conditions of human existence: We are organized beings, but we are not the authors of our organization.<sup>44</sup>*

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Long slogs of preparation followed by intense everything-on-the-line this-is-what-you-prepared-for sprints (the finite games of test-taking, interviewing, or the performance arts) vs. paced long-term projects operating on accumulation but with constant counting (the infinite games of on-job performance, of skill-building, craftsmanship, culture-as-evolving-discourse). Interview as form, the

42 Friston: “an important example of a high-level prior is the belief that one has a particular personality and set of characteristics and views” (REBUS and the Anarchic Brain, Pharmacological Reviews, July 2019)

43 Hazard in the Discord, riffing on TLP.

44 Alva Noë, *Strange Tools*

generativity of the style, the voice, the set of constraints, a clear audience—improvisation allowed by the existence of a model, a GAN-like extension of the existent into the possible.

*My boss is killing me. My coworkers are killing me. My email is killing me. My schedule is killing me. My network is killing me. My unpaid, manyfold, overpledged obligations are absolutely killing me.*

*My friends are killing me. My hours are killing me. My feet are killing me. My back is killing me. This drink is killing me. This rent is killing me. Paying for drinks, at places which are themselves being killed by rent, is killing me.*

*My habits are killing me. My flattery's killing me. My libido is killing me. My anxiety's killing me. My transit is killing me. (Packt Like Sardines in a Crushd Tin Box.)*

*My rent is killing me. My old ways—killing me. I'm being killed—by my desire to please. (Kick drum.)*

A volunteered regiment, mostly female, toiling through dawn's burning factories at the galleries and institutions which preside over their fates. Newfangled bureaucrats taking advantage of labor markets by dangling diminishing opportunities over the heads of the young. *I don't know why I'm telling you this / Except that I think Gallery Girls / Have something to do with / What some women want and do and are. (What about Gallery Boys, which is / To say Art Handlers. / They count too. Bleh.)<sup>45</sup>*

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Eula Bliss: I've never found the taxonomy of genre particularly accurate and there is something about it that feels... um, like a charmingly pointless pastime? Maybe even a little colonialist and slightly macabre, like the pinning of butterflies. And maybe a tad gendered, too?<sup>46</sup>

Ghost of writer past:<sup>47</sup> Does intentionality matter? Critical consequentialism put to the ultimate test: David Cooper Moore's "The Scary, Misunderstood Power of a 'Teen Mom' Star's Album" discusses Farrah Abraham's infamous pop record *My Teenage Dream Ended*:

It's tempting to consider *My Teenage Dream Ended* alongside other reality TV star vanity albums, like Paris Hilton's excellent (and unfairly derided) dance-pop album *Paris* from 2006 or projects by Heidi Montag, Brooke Hogan, and Kim Kardashian that range from uneven to inept.

But the album also begs comparisons to a different set of niche celebrities—"outsider" artists. On the I Love Music message board, music obsessives imagined the album as outsider art in the mold of cult favorite Jandek or indie press darling Ariel Pink. Other curious listeners noted similarities to briefly trendy "witch house" music, a self-consciously lo-fi subgenre of electronic dance music. In the *Village Voice*, music editor Maura Johnston compared Abraham to witch-house group Salem: "If ['Rock Bottom'] had been serviced to certain music outlets under a different artist name and by a particularly influential publicist, you'd probably be reading bland praise of its 'electro influences'

46 Interview in *Gulf Coast Mag*

47 S. Reason, college sophomore.

right now.”

Johnston’s quote summarize it best—that the way an artwork is framed and conceptualized has a make-or-break impact on how it’s received. There is no idea of absolute “success” or “efficacy” without criteria by which to be successful and efficacious. Whether works are found effective depends on what the critic thinks it’s trying to do, and genre (framing, tradition, identification) becomes a marker of these criteria.

In rock music shared priorities traditionally include personal authenticity, essentialist authenticity, either technical virtuosity or passion, a certain defiant attitude (especially towards capitalism, labels, “the man,” older generations). Expression should be particular and specific, drawn from personal experience, rather than archetypal, general, or vague (hence rock’s condescension towards lyrical clichés). It leans cynical, coolly detached, or sneering rather than optimistic (though rock has its own forms of naïveté). Pop frameworks, meanwhile, encourage the generic, the universal, the uplifting empowerment anthem. They place more weight on melodic appeal and instantaneous accessibility than esotericism or abrasion. Vocal ability is crucial, and technical chops more important than affect or grain, which are arguably rock’s primary criteria for distinguishing successful singers—from Reed to Verlaine to Casablancas.

This is the problem with Barthes’ DOTA: we understand—can *only* understand—language, expression, communication—that is, *choices* and *moves*—within their gamic context, their space of possibles, the set of constraints and traditions which gives a move meaning. And much of this context is biographical-personal; there is no escaping the

intentionalist hermeneutic mode, there are only fantasies of formalism.

*Genre provides an opportunity—the basis—for distinction, setting up a class of expectations capable of tactical undermining. Genres include built-in audiences, sets of ostensible intents or implied goals, which become the assumption ground on which interpretation, evaluation, and two-way communication are predicated. “You cannot be gorgeous without someone to be gorgeous for,”<sup>48</sup> nor sans standards for what constitutes gorgeousness.*

The red herring exists because readers expect—*predict*—narrative economy, expect Chekhov’s Gun, expect that foregrounded elements pulls their weight in a plot. In almost dialectic fashion—surprise!—the subverting of expectations requires expectation to exist; misdirection requires the directing of a user. (Chesterton’s fence for creatives: break rules deliberately, knowing when and how the rules are useful and why that doesn’t apply here.)

*What happens when continents collide, when islands gain natural land bridges, when the barriers that incubate diversity are gone?*

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*Y: maybe northrop frye is right that criticism can/should only comment on the relation of art to its genre (paraphrased)*

*X: shit, he says that?! that was my idea!*

(B)LOG ENTRY // JAN 26 '18 //

48 Andrea Long Chu, *Females: A Concern*. In other words, appearance definitionally requires an audience; dressing up is a kind of communication. Self-expression cannot be pure, but is rather always social.

Coverage of Lana Del Rey by indie-champion *Pitchfork* begins August 30th 2011 with a feature by staff writer Ryan Dombal in the magazine’s “Rising” section. What starts out as a biographical background piece maneuvers, almost inevitably, into asking the sort of questions rock critics have long been notorious for: whether Del Rey is a “character or studio creation” versus a genuine self, whether she’s been tempted by the “industry” to change her “sound or look.” These questions, we’ll see, are inappropriate—Dombal just doesn’t know how inappropriate yet.

(Can we trace the archetypal patterns of subject and object in our culture? Springsteen’s *Born To Run*: a subject at its most agentic, determined to be free at any cost. LDR’s *Born To Die*: an object without power, doomed to either decay or be glamorously wiped away candle-in-the-wind style.<sup>49</sup> “Together we could break this trap” versus “The road is long, we carry on... Let’s go get high.”<sup>50</sup>)

The rough critical framework Dombal’s questions are working out of gets called rockism, the dominant frame for pop criticism the past half-century. The rockist critic prioritizes sincerity over theater, rawness over polish—these being an ideological priority and its aesthetic proxy, respectively. He works off a dual-faceted conception of authenticity as both “personal” and “essentialist,” referring respectively to an artist’s truthful representation of his genuine self and the natural, “primitive,” “close-to-nature” quality of his culture or society. Poor is more authentic than rich; industrial

49 “Said you had to leave to start your life over / I was like, no please, stay here / We don’t need no money we can make it all work / But he headed out on Sunday, said he’d come home Monday / I stayed up waitin’, anticipatin’ and pacin’ but he was / Chasin paper / Caught up in the game, that was the last I heard.”

or urban civ less authentic than rural township.<sup>50</sup> Rockism is the ideology of those who “idoliz[e] the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lioniz[e] punk while barely tolerating disco; lov[e] the live show and hat[e] the music video; extol the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher.”<sup>51</sup> Dombal’s application of rockist standards onto the work of Del Rey, whose performance seems so obviously predicated on falsity, theater, and persona—seems bizarre to us in hindsight, but she plays ball anyway. She’s an ex-singer-songwriter after all, a genre which Abebe notes is “allergic to pretense.”

Rockism as a critical framework has been consistently ceding ground in the critical landscape by this point. Kelefa Sanneh’s 2004 *NYT* op-ed “The Rap Against Rockism” is an early, high-profile rallying call against the (previously implicit) framework, and subsequent years witness a shifting of critical bedrock. The new poptimism attempts to move past the (consciously and unconsciously) racialized value judgments of rockism—that certain cultures, esp. those ethnically African, are authentically primitive, guileless, and in-touch with nature in some uncorrupted, Rousseauian sense.<sup>52</sup> Disco, former rockist bane of effeminate hedonism,

50 See the romance in *The Notebook*, where minimum-wage Gosling shows high-society McAdams how to be “free,” teaches her to get in touch with her desire: “Not what other people want. What *you* want.” This liberation from a tyranny of shoulds is why she’s dating him in the first place.

51 Nitsuh Abebe, in a 2011 thinkpiece “The Imagination of Lana Del Rey,” puts it another way, arguing that in indie rock (a genre whose value judgments are heavily influenced by rockist thought), “the music itself is allowed to follow its aesthetic imagination off in strange directions, but the artists are often expected not to... When a musician tries to embody [persona and imagination] in person... fans start grumbling about being imposed upon.”

52 This is the Eileen Myles fallacy, that structure is inauthentic; it is the modernist myth, that modernism “came from nowhere.”

becomes Brooklyn's new language of retro appreciation. By 2015, this paradigm shift in critical thinking will reach critical mass; *Pitchfork*, though relatively late to the game, begins in the early 2010s to give high-profile coverage, and higher album scores, to pop stars; EIC Mark Richardson will confess at a Vassar College guest lecture that his staff members are "big fans" of Swift's nostalgic *1989*.

But in 2011 the critical landscape is still in transition, still becoming. Lindsay Zoladz's review, one year later, of Del Rey's debut LP *Born to Die* notes that while the "grainy homemade" quality of Del Rey's breakthrough "Video Games" had previously "brought to mind... the indie sphere" (and thus the artistic, non-corporate authenticity of said sphere), *Born to Die* exemplifies an artist securely within the realm of "big-budget" pop, with the implication of betrayal: her early releases promised one thing; her listeners received something else, something lesser despite or because of its budget. The end result of this corporate tampering is that *Born to Die* sounds "out of touch... not just with the world around it, but with the simple business of human emotion." The language here shows a clear failing of the album by rockist standards, the authenticity of the everyday lost with corporate patronage. It's the "album equivalent," Zoladz writes, "of a faked orgasm," a metaphor which, of course, further channels the language of deceit and betrayal, while emphasizing discrepancies between presentation and "fact." There's some reconciliation or compromise of these ideals on Zoladz's part: she acknowledges that—quoting Ellen Willis—"Blatant artifice can, in the right circumstances, be poignantly honest"—but *Born to Die* lacks the self-aware "tension between image and inner self" to give it emotional "fire." The conflict

Zoladz herself feels in attempting to reconcile the artistic worths of theatrical and confessional expression parallels the greater music community's own struggle, grappling for handholds within the crawl space between rockist and pop-optimist frameworks.

See, where rockism correctly observes that populist interests can compromise artistic values, it fails to acknowledge that all artistic decisions are between a host of options, and that the act of choosing is necessarily a compromise of one value for another. If an artist supports a model of art which prioritizes entertainment factor over innovation, the temptation of commercial success is not a compromise but the very game itself. A quasi-poptimist critic prioritizing beauty and mass appeal in zero values hierarchy could see institutionalized art-world pressure as a temptation towards compromise—via its network of connections, its weighty influence in critical circles, and the kind of prestige that accompanies academic and/or highbrow acceptance—in the same vein that the Old Rockist critic sees corporate money. *Positive vs. negative liberty; agency vs. lack of constraint*. Even if terminal aesthetic values like lush and layered beauty, or the sense of the sublime, are held above “mere” entertainment factor, corporate money still ensures, rather than precludes, their actualization. Old Rockist notions of money’s inherent detriment are made ironic by the fact that acts like Del Rey, when relegated to the underground, have to significantly compromise their artistic “visions” due to lack of resources.

But just as all well-meaning ideologies eventually become vicious, all democratic taste movements evolve their own snobberies; any worldview formed in the absence of power

will warp once it assumes ubiquity. Zoladz, in an open letter on *Vulture* introducing herself as the publication's new head music editor, writes: "I've recently started to suspect that bragging about cultural omnivorousness has become its own form of snobbery, and that the new face of music-nerd elitism is not the High Fidelity bro but instead the Twitter user who would very much like you to applaud him for listening to Ke\$ha and Sunn O))) and Florida Georgia Line and Gucci Mane." NYT critic Saul Austerlitz notes in "The Pernicious Rise of Poptimism" that "contemporary music criticism is a minefield rife with nasty, ad hominem attacks," and laments that the "most popular target, in recent years, has been those professing inadequate fealty to pop."

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Another image from pop culture of passive & agentic: Kar-wai's *2046*, Chow (M, playboy) betting in high-card draw against the Li-zhen (F, gambler). Their draw determines whether she will share her past, which is to say, become intimate. Watch the hands as they draw: "If you win, I'll join you." She takes the closest card in the stack, acquiesce to fate. Chow flips between cards, select carefully but blindly in a grasp for control. Li-zhen takes the hand, but neither wins.

Helen DeWitt, *The Last Samurai*: "The interesting thing is that according to Hainsworth's classic article on Homer + the [Icelandic] epic cycle, the mark of Homer's superiority to the cycle is supposed to be the richness + expansiveness, + yet it seems as tho barenness is the thing that is good in the Icelandic saga." Schoenberg on Japanese prints; Adorno on jazz; literary profs who evaluate pop lyrics with poetry standards. *In chemistry, there's a process called reagent testing. You*

*add a reagent—Chemical A—to a reactant—Chemical B—and see if a reaction takes place. If B is an unknown chemical, and we’re trying to figure out whether it’s chlorine, we need to add a specific kind of reagent. If A is, in fact, chlorine, Chemical B will turn it (let’s say) bright green. If A isn’t chlorine, it might turn a host of different colors, or no color at all. Obviously if you add the wrong type of reagent to the reactant, it might be perfectly good and high quality 100% chlorine, but it still won’t turn bright green—the quality won’t show up.*

The pop-sugar/avant-protein spectrum. The \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ spectrum. Take Miller’s Law of Communication—to properly understand someone’s claim, you must first assume it’s true, then figure out how. Adapt it, call it Spendy’s law of criticism: to properly appreciate a work, you must first assume it’s good, then figure out how. This isn’t a matter of “truth” but of utility. There is no “true” perspective; there are only perspectives—reagents—with varying payoffs.<sup>53</sup> “Generosity is the only spirit in which a text as hot to the touch as the *SCUM Manifesto* could have ever been received.”<sup>54</sup> *Generosity: from Latin “generosus,” “genus” (birth, origin) + “ōsus.” Well-born, well-bred, noble. (By extension) magnanimous, honorable.*

In naked molerat colonies, there are always a handful of molerats who do no work all year long, instead passing the days fattening up on food. When the rainy season comes, these molerats are tasked with plugging the entrances to

53 And what is genre but an interpretive schema, the reagent a reactant was designed to light up in? Look how everything changes once a better reagent is found: *Upon its release, [McCartney’s] Ram was poorly received... Jon Landau called Ram “incredibly inconsequential” and “monumentally irrelevant,” and criticized its lack of intensity and energy... The 2012 reissue of Ram received... “universal acclaim” ...AllMusic editor Stephen Thomas Erlewine wrote: “In retrospect it looks like nothing so much as the first indie pop album, a record that celebrates small pleasures with big melodies.”* [Wikipedia]

54 Long Chu, *Females*.

the colony tunnels with their bodies, to keep water from seeping in. // When one is busy one has so few downtimes that each is filled with flooding relief, and of course while so busy one has no time to wonder whether one is happy.

Failures to disentangle interiority for outside world: taking dreams as omens, interpretations as fact, feeling as truth; illusions of transparency; typical mind failures; projection of feelings onto the other, self-judgment onto the other, personal failures onto the other, or the system; an inability to separate desire from ontology, priors from praxis in the forming of moral judgments. Humility humility humility. A sticky sour month, hot and stagnant air.

Ze trusts, ze2 takes advantage. Ze does not trust, loses out on the benefits of cooperation. Ze's brokering peace treaty allows ze2 the subterfuge for sabotage. Ze's distrust prevents a peace treaty. Mother bats share food cooperatively, such that an unlucky mother who has failed to catch insects one night will have her child supported by luckier hunters. But intercept a mother in flight, inflate her gullet with air such that it appears she has a catch she isn't sharing, and her peers will burn her in retaliation, refusing to feed the child until mother renews the cooperative pact. Game-theory and mathematics rediscover nature's solution: tit-for-tat, with variations allowing for slightly lower bounds on forgiveness and retaliation, outperforms all known strategies.

I said, *not losing with minimum effort vs. winning most with whatever effort required*. The ethics of \_Reducing to starter packs, parts standing for wholes, consumption standing in for character: book covers shirt logos families of influence.\_ To what extent ought private life bleed into public life?

The sickness that permeates the *Neapolitan Novels* is Lina's recurring sensation of "dissolving boundaries," an anxiety of the universe rearing up, an anxiety of losing control. "She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogenous materials, a merging and mixing. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that—it was absolutely not like that—and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped."<sup>55</sup> The sensation is psilocybin-like, where priors about the world are relaxed and re-figured, including category distinctions and boundaries (often those between self & world).<sup>56</sup> Similarly the soft power of neuroplastic youth: "Children aren't rigid, the way we are: they're flexible." The feeling of being a child at once the stress and possibility of the unknown, the unpredictable.

(The soft power of plastic features.)

Jenny Holzer: YOU MUST KNOW WHERE YOU STOP AND THE WORLD BEGINS, the way out of teenage ontology; Virgo leo cancer gemini taurus aries pisces aquarius capricorn sagittarius scorpius libra, *new & accepted ways of carving up people*, Reines giving readings at \$400 an hour; her service provides frameworks for understanding,

55 *Story of the Lost Child*. "However much she had always dominated all of us and had imposed and was still imposing a way of being, on pain of her resentment and her fury, she perceived herself as a liquid and all her efforts were, in the end, directed only at containing herself."

56 Carhart-Harris, Friston. "REBUS and the Anarchic Brain: Toward a Unified Model of the Brain Action of Psychedelics." 2019.

measures subjects with Wittgenstein's ruler.  $\bowtie$

$\infty$

What do we know about boundaries? They are an “inherent, universal feature of complex systems.” They “arise at all scales, defining the entities that they surround and protecting them from some kinds of outside intrusion.” In order to be functional, “boundaries must be permeable, allowing the entities to take energy and information from outside themselves. If we are looking at complex systems, we will find boundaries everywhere. Boundaries are structures that protect what is within them and allow their contents to solve smaller, more manageable design problems than would be possible in a perfectly interconnected system,” hence why the text in your hands is broken into three sections, themselves each divided by lemniscate.<sup>57</sup> But in order to be organically re-drawn, they must first be dissolved. The high modernist optimism of Design—lofty plans drafted up by knowing committees dragging behind them best practices—always loses to culturally evolved practices, tested and adjusted across generations.

Boundaries between systems simplify impossible complexity; boundaries between islands lead to ecological diversity à la Galápagos, the protected incubation of the vulnerable. Perry quotes blogger Viznut as a metaphor for identity: *Tell a bunch of average software developers to design a sailship. They will do a web search for available modules. They will pick a wind power module and an electric engine module, which will be attached to some kind of a floating module. When someone mentions aero- or hydrodynamics, the group will respond by saying that elementary physics is a*

*far too specialized area, and it is cheaper and more straight-forward to just combine pre-existing modules and pray that the combination will work sufficiently well.*

«The extraordinarily difficult task imposed upon the child’s primary caretaker not only by the culture but also by Being itself is to induct it into relationality by saying over and over again, in a multitude of ways, what death will otherwise have to teach it: “This is where you end and others begin.”»<sup>58</sup>

The web breaks and bridges old boundaries; what was previously private discourse, whispers passed inside semi-permeable drywall boundaries, sideyards and picket fences, opinions circulated informally and verbally among groups of friends, now occurs in the open, a never-ending town hall.<sup>59</sup> Local politics are governed by global oversight, James Scott’s greatest nightmare. The distinctions between public and private, public and personal, flattened; a self-fueling anxiety because no one remembers a time when there was so much public resentment and vitriol, because no one remembers a time when there was so much public. Out-in-the-openness allows rapid preference cascades,<sup>60</sup> epistemic epidemics, info contagions. The nodes are always in contact, ready to spread; very little separates the subunits.

FH&C’s You’re My Peace of Mind, MFSB’s Sound of Philly, Gibbons’ Ten Percent, Clark’s Take Me I’m Yours, Koze’s Pick Up, Murphy’s Narcissus, Murphy’s Dance Yrself Clean, Holloway’s Love Sensation, Loose Joints’ Is It

58 Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of my Flesh* (2009), quoted in *The Argonauts*

59 There is a joke passed around: Old Internet—no one knows if you’re a dog—New Internet—use your racially appropriate emoji!

60 Timur Kurhan, preference falsification, h.t S.P.

All Over My Face? Idris Muhammad’s Could Heaven Ever Be Like This. Moulton’s mix: Don’t Leave Me This Way.

I said, factor concepts? Why not? What can we import from one walled garden to another? Call it *Tractus* in a formal nod to *Bluets*, and to obfuscate all the damn uncertainty I feel.

∞

### *TRACTUS:*

Words and concepts do not have essences; their vagueness is inherent and the point; the flexibility is what makes them useful. To “carve” them precisely is precisely beside the point. Understand them instead, following Wittgenstein, as yarn spun from many short threads: the threads are connected, strengthening one another, holding each other together and difficult to disentangle.<sup>61</sup> Even the natural world, following Yudkowsky, “has no joints” but comprises clusters in thingspace, sets without necessary or sufficient properties which we unite out of pragmatic or analogic similarity.<sup>62</sup> Perry uses the term *zoom* as an example; the sense of *zooming* as in the rapid movement of a train, and *zooming* in a camera lens, have similarities that bind them together but lack any meaningful essence. *Zoom* exists only as amalgam, a grouping of relations, a family of similarity.

Wittgenstein made explicit what the pragmatists thought

61 The works referenced, the thoughts thought, the stories told across the text in your hands do not share an essence but are related like a family, are interwoven like threads in yarn.

62 It was only recently that philosophers at last gave up on “natural kinds”—the final blow being that biological speciation is continuous rather than discrete.

obvious:

*If we should inquire for the essence of “government,” for example, one man might tell us it was authority, another submission, another police, another an army, another an assembly, another a system of laws; yet all the while it would be true that no concrete government can exist without all these things, one of which is more important at one moment and others at another. The man who knows governments most completely is he who troubles himself least about a definition which shall give their essence.<sup>63</sup> (I said, for 200, what is art? What is textual meaning?)*

Second: a history of philosophy arguing unproductively over the essence of essence-less concepts. *We were betrayed by Plato’s forms.* Beyond the “If a tree fell in a forest with nobody around” fallacy, debates over free will & determinacy, or the Sorites paradox, taught in undergrad courses as a meaningful question about the world rather than a simple bug of linguistic ambiguity. Carve up “does it make a sound?” into subdefinitions: “A tree falling in a deserted forest matches [membership test: this event generates acoustic vibrations]. A tree falling in a deserted forest does not match [membership test: this event generates auditory experiences].”<sup>64</sup> Now there no conflict or “paradox,” that terribly misused phrase of premium-mediocre academics—we do not dispute the core facts that the tree has generated acoustic vibrations which are heard by no one. We have only been led into the belief that we are encountering a paradox because the concept of *making a sound* groups the similar, but essentially different, ideas of *generating sound waves* and *generating an auditory experience in a sentient life form*. There is *ambijlectivity* in play.

63 William James

64 E. Yudkowsky

We disagree not on facts but on how we round them.

## II.

Can conflations be avoided? «*The map is not the territory*, as the saying goes. The only life-size, atomically detailed, 100% accurate map of California is California. But California has important regularities, such as the shape of its highways, that can be described using vastly less information—not to mention vastly less physical material—than it would take to describe every atom within the state borders.» Patterns and nebulosity, blogger Dave Chapman would tell us. «Hence the other saying: *The map is not the territory, but you can't fold up the territory and put it in your glove compartment.*» How to catch conflations? «Where you see a single confusing thing, with protean and self-contradictory attributes, it's a good guess that your map is cramming too much into one point—you need to pry it apart and allocate some new buckets.»<sup>65</sup>

And the regularities we catch and name, keep as pets, are fundamentally pragmatic. Our abstractions are born of concrete, grounded needs & uses. Plants, before the Enlightenment, were categorized into the medicinal, the edible, and the poisonous; “pests,” “weeds,” “herbs,” and “crops” continues this tradition. Borges’s taxonomy—animals that are embalmed, trained, suckling, mermaids, belonging to the Emperor—implies not that taxonomy is arbitrary, but that a very foreign set of purposes are at work. «Suppose you travel back in time to ancient Israel and try to explain to King Solomon that whales are a kind of mammal and not a kind of fish. Your translator isn’t very good, so you pause to explain “fish” and “mammal”

65 Ibid.

to Solomon. You tell him that fish is “the sort of thing herring, bass, and salmon are” and mammal is “the sort of thing cows, sheep, and pigs are.” Solomon tells you that your word “fish” is Hebrew *dag* and your word “mammal” is Hebrew *behemah*. So you try again and say that a whale is a *behemah*, not a *dag*. Solomon laughs at you and says you’re an idiot. You explain that you’re not an idiot, that in fact all kinds of animals have things called genes, and the genes of a whale are much closer to those of the other *behemah* than those of the *dag*. Solomon says he’s never heard of these gene things before, and that maybe genetics is involved in your weird foreign words “fish” and “mammal”, but *dag* are just finned creatures that swim in the sea, and *behemah* are just legged creatures that walk on the Earth. You try to explain that no, Solomon is wrong, *dag* are actually defined not by their swimming-in-sea-with-fins-ness, but by their genes. Solomon says you didn’t even know the word *dag* ten minutes ago, and now suddenly you think you know what it means better than he does, who has been using it his entire life? Who died and made you an expert on Biblical Hebrew? You try to explain that whales actually have tiny little hairs, too small to even see, just as cows and sheep and pigs have hair. Solomon says oh God, you are so annoying, who the hell cares whether whales have tiny little hairs or not. In fact, the only thing Solomon cares about is whether responsibilities for his kingdom’s production of blubber and whale oil should go under his Ministry of Dag or Ministry of Behemah. The Ministry of Dag is based on the coast and has a lot of people who work on ships. The Ministry of Behemah has a strong presence inland and lots of people who hunt on horseback. So please (he continues) keep going about how whales have little tiny hairs.<sup>66</sup>»

66 “The Categories Were Made for Man, not Man for the Categories”

*The only thing Solomon cares about is whether responsibilities for his kingdom's production of blubber and whale oil should go under his Ministry of Dag or Ministry of Behemah.* In other words, getting from ‘all models are wrong’ to ‘some are useful.’

Ambiectivity:<sup>67</sup> the state of an object meeting some criteria of a category but not all, in a way which makes its categorical identity ambiguous-subjective. We do not disagree on the *facts* of Pluto, just where to draw lines in conceptual space. The conceptual borders matter because they are rules for behavior—if this, then that. If *dag*, then the purview of the Ministry of Dag. And yet strange things result from this unconscious syllogism: Rather than shift the categories—rather than dispute the binning—we bend facts, hold definitions steady while re-aligning properties. Or we strategically re-bin instances in order to change the implicit behavior rule. Or if we do dispute the binning it is by diluting the referent-set of a loaded signifier, widen the bin while porting the full connotaton of its previous meaning to the new, wider extension.

Common understandings of a book: a collection of paper filled with printed symbols between covers; a lengthy text with an organizing principle; a media object created and distributed by a publishing house. Is the present text, in PDF form, “more” or “less” a book than printed collection of photos? At what length does a PDF start or stop being a book? Is this question subjective, ambiguous, or incoherent? Is there an answer beyond “it depends what you mean by *book*”? Does the inquiry bring us somewhere further than we started, arguing over the rounding up or rounding down of entry features?

«The [Pragmatist] method of resolving disputes and the theory of meaning are on display in James's discussion of an argument about whether a man chasing a squirrel around a tree goes around the squirrel too. Taking meaning as the “conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve,” the pragmatist philosopher finds that two “practical” meanings of “go around” are in play: either the man goes North, East, South, and West of the squirrel, or he faces first the squirrel’s head, then one of his sides, then his tail, then his other side. “Make the distinction,” James writes, “and there is no occasion for any further dispute.”»<sup>68</sup>

### III.

I said, in other words, the “meaning” of a text is not contested, what is contested is which of many meanings of “meaning” ought achieve supremacy! In other words, «I said, divide the word “meaning” onto a simple grid with an X-axis of subjective-objective and a Y-axis of elusive-discoverable and then in counter-clockwise from upper-right quadrant, call it “formalist textual meaning,” “reader-response (experimental),” “reader-response (implied),” and finally “classical interpretive” and just call the whole thing off, can we please move on.»<sup>69</sup>

Which is to say hermeneutics’ meaning wars is just people pointing out different aspects of the definition of meaning, modulated relationally (meaning \_to whom\_: the author? the reader? the average reader? the dictionary?). Which is to say that the encompassing meaning emerges from the: “infinite intra-work relationships between a work’s parts”

68 Stanford Encyclopedia. Dave Chalmers, reinventing Yudkowsky, reinventing James, calls these “verbal disputes.”

69 prelude to *La Vento*

and the “equally infinite set of facts which existing out in the world, including but not limited to the composition of society in its entirety, both at the time of the work’s creation and every time before or since; the position of the artist/author within society during every moment of zir lifetime and also before/since; all facts and biographies about audiences/readers both real and hypothetical; every included word’s complete etymological history and complete history of usage (also, important in their negation, the histories of excluded words as well); all physical facts about the universe.”<sup>70</sup>

Or in Acker’s words, “every part changes (the meaning of) every other part.” Back to the hermeneutic circle, baby! *Don’t judge books by their cover, of course—but books can’t exist without one; even stripped books have de facto covers; and the point is you update while turning over pages.*

Meaning as entailment, meaning as delta, meaning as the difference between “before” and “after.” School-based readings (formalist, reader-response, psychoanalytic, etc) are just tools to access sub-strata of meanings but never “the” meaning, which is uncapturable and irreducible. Foxily slipping between frames, treating them as complementary, using them instrumentally, the only way outta provincialism.

And I said, whew! I’m exhausted! but really quick,

#### IV.

In the fifth century, the bishops Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople exchanged a set of

70 Suspended Reason, “A Possibility for Artistic ‘Meaning’,” 2017

letters debating the nature of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Nestorius, arguing against the conventional Greek term *theotokos* (“mother of God”), defended the reference by an Antiochene priest to Mary as *christotokos* (“mother of Christ”). Mary, he asserted, was mother to neither man nor God, since Christ’s dual nature was unique, could not be categorically reduced to either. Cyril, potentially driven by political motives, but as far as we know simultaneously sincere in his belief (*cf.* Serena and Trivers, these are not either/or), began campaigning against this argument. The correspondence between the two men proving inadequate, it took an Ecumenical Council at Ephesus to formally resolve the issue in favor of Cyril and *theotokos*. Nestorius was exiled after bloodshed and power struggles at the highest level. Still today there is a split in orthodoxies; the Church of the East, including Syriac, Iranian, Indian, and Chinese dioceses, actively dissents from the 431 AD ruling.

Yet reading the correspondence between Cyril and Nestorius for schoolwork one day, Pothos comes to believe that there is a fundamental linguistic confusion underlying their argument. In hindsight, Nestorius’s claims seem not so much heretical but a product of translation discrepancies. Nestorius appears to have taken the Greek *prosopon* to mean “person,” while Cyril took it for “mask” or “appearance,” leading the two to talk past one another on the nature of Christ. There is an eerie discursive corruption at play here, a corruption eerie because of how familiar it feels, eerie because of its rippling effects on Christian orthodoxy and organization, eerie because we can only see the mistake clearly with fifteen-hundred years of hindsight.

## V.

And I said, I think I believe, with the post-structuralists, that borders are drawn for reasons political and motivated, that inclusions and exclusions can be blatantly corrupt, that the constructed reality which words carry inside them deserves regular challenge. But I also believe that challengeing taxonomies can be equally interested, equally lopsided, equally biased by the interests of challengers. That categories are inevitable and net-valuable, that borders are necessary because words and concepts first and foremost are tools of identification (reference) and distinction (difference). Perhaps what I believe is that more concern ought be put into refactoring, clarifying, engineering category, not for its own sake, not under the illusion of anarchist orderlessness, or of revolutionary sabotage, but instrumentally to build a more coherent world. The dangers of wartime language should be obvious by now: the discourse becomes hung up on terms, cannot advance to questions of territory because of disagreements over map. We cast those who use words differently from us as inherently motivated, politically and rhetorically wielding their definitions—rather than as members of a foreign epistemic community, as differing in perceptual schema. Forget Theseus's Ship, this is Neurath's boat: "We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction."

I said, oh blush am I embarrassed, earnestness the death of me. Just one more ghosts of people past, one more self that once felt real and constant and eternal, was revealed as anything but. *My first year of undergraduate study, I was adamantly opposed to the ideas of Judith Butler. I had not read Butler, but the college I attended sat directly across the street from the most prominent women's college in America. Many of my social circles were composed of radical feminist thinkers (I use the term radical non-pejoratively), and from them I learned, or rather, was informed, constantly, of Butler's ideas. This included the idea that a given gender was akin to a garment of clothing in an almost infinite closet. Upon waking each morning, a person merely picked out that garment which they felt most like wearing on that given day, "performing" said outfit as if a costume. I found this thinking absurd. It was only one morning in Maine, while reading, at a friend's impassioned recommendation, Nelson's Argonauts that I re-encountered Butler's thought. I stumbled upon a passage, quoted at length, from an interview with Butler:*

The bad reading [of *Gender Trouble*] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism... When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that "performativity" is not radical choice and it's not voluntarism... Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them

to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.

(Snav: UGH, the *entire* confusion is linguistic; Butler thought it'd be clever to make a pun conflating Lyotard's "performativity" with the normal, dramaturgical sense—now look where we are.)

*Butler's concept of performativity had not been strawmanned by some opponent; it had been misrepresented, egregiously, by her self-proclaimed advocates, and this misrepresentation undermined its reception. There is an entropy, not unlike the game of telephone or Chinese Whispers: the idea is misinterpreted, overly simplified, or passes through a chain of witnesses who encounter the original text only indirectly; each link mutates the text's idea telephonically so that soon, it resembles the original only superficially or thematically. Fred Allen's Only Yesterday on Freud's mimetic spread through 1920s culture: "Sex, it appeared, was the central and pervasive force which moved mankind. Almost every human motive was attributable to it: if you were patriotic or liked the violin, you were in the grip of sex—in sublimated form. The first requirement of mental health was to have an uninhibited sex life. If you would be well and happy, you must obey your libido. Such was the Freudian gospel as it imbedded itself in the American mind after being filtered through the successive minds of interpreters and popularizers and guileless readers and people who had heard guileless readers talk about it."*

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And I said—keep it light, keep it pretentious keep it irreverent—o God, what have I done? Do I get off the hook for admitting it? Owning up's the first step, but are self-aware sinners less sinful? [Kristen Bell vox:] *According to the Catholic Church, mortal sin can only be absolved through the sacred*

*act of mortal confession, but it looks like a certain WASP princess has recently found herself desperately in need of a little unburdening.* For future readers, that's "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant," not to be confused with Jewish-American Princess. Dasha and Phoebe blush while Blair Waldorf dirty-talks her priest: "*I'm ready for my punishment... Flogging, fasting, putting that thing with the teeth around my thigh like Silas.*"<sup>71</sup>

I take the 5 up to the Bronx Zoo, get off a stop too early at East 180. I'm there to see their new komodo exhibit; I have heard that komodo dragons have been observed reproducing asexually in a zoo. Scientists think perhaps asexual reproduction is the missing link for how life, castaway on driftwood and bobbing coconuts from the South American mainland, ended up colonizing the Galápagos. They think perhaps that grief or loneliness—emotions observed in plenty of non-primate species—may be emotional triggers of solitude that might enable physiological changes in the reproductive system from sexual to asexual.<sup>72</sup> This only occurs in females, who have a reproductive system set up and eggs with the complete cytoplasmic material necessary.

Pollen is just plant sperm, allergies a product of over-planting male trees, spreading widely and freely via flowers carefully evolved to the aesthetic preferences of local bee populations. The female's stigma is choosy; she selects because there is a fundamental supply-demand problem, millions of pollen and a limited quantity of eggs, which will become seeds. The pollen land on the stigma, come down

71 G.G., "Seventeen Candles"

72 What's brilliant is how Spielberg's Ian Malcolm, for all his unlikeable personality—rockstar ego pretension anxiety—is also fundamentally right: *Life will not be contained. Life breaks free, it expands to new territories, and crashes through barriers painfully, maybe even dangerously, but, uh, well, there it is.*

the style shaft, and, being accepted, come into contact with the ovary and embryo sac where proto-seed is stored.

Which is to say, across species, sperm search; eggs wait. In some species, if eggs sit and wait too long, the system changes from sexual to asexual. If there is some fundamental M/F mechanism at play—not binary but bimodal—it appears to stretch back to the common ancestor of both plants and mammals, a photosynthetic, single-celled, ocean-dwelling creature. If one wanted to speculate: <i>But so long as you have two gamete types, you'll end up with two sexes who inevitably follow similar patterns of self-optimizing reproductive strategies.</i>

(*Fungi*, meanwhile have at least 50 different mating roles.)

// A well-known aspect of sexual selection, in evolutionary biology, is the theory that characteristics like the tail of a peacock evolved as direct signals of some trait important for natural selection. The handicap principle suggests that cumbersome secondary sexual characteristics evolved as costly signals of mate quality: they are hard-to-fake, hence reliable, signals of traits such as the ability to survive while encumbered, or low parasite load, or being the correct species, or some other auspicious trait. <br /> A less well-known possibility, surprising in its arbitrariness, is the sensory exploitation or sensory bias hypothesis: that traits evolved to capitalize on some pre-existing sensory capacity for pleasure and beauty. Under this framework, animals have built-in sensory and discriminatory capacity, that is, aesthetic capacity. This capacity is then exploited in sexual selection, directing the color sound, shape and other features of sexual displays. Frog calls evolve not to signal any particular adaptive trait, but to optimally stimulate frog

hearing organs.

I remember going to see the Brooklyn Botanical Garden's stinking corpse flower that summer, *amorphophallus titanum*, which produces its rotting-meat smell to attract flesh flies and other carrion insects. Afterward I took the train to the Lower East Side, got dumplings at Dim Sum Go Go, the delicately folded dough floral all pinks and greens. Ended up on a Chinatown roof with Ballantine 40s looking down at New York Media, migrating from watering hole to watering hole. *Spotted: two girls and a guy in leopard print tracksuit; rumor has it one is a 30k-follower bluecheck—guess which!* Someone below shouts "accelerationism!"; someone else shouts "degrowth!"; up top Antonio is explaining one of his Type of Guy theories: "The type of guys these gals like, they never have Instagrams or even smart phones; they're like 45 and Gen-X and wear their out-of-touch'ness like a badge. They go on rants about how celebrity culture is vain and trivial. They change their flip phone every six months because they're worried the government is listening in, and they have some weirdly private art practice like developing photographs in a dark room or playing drums in a band that's never released any recordings. It's kinda like how gals w/ anxiety fetishize guys who drive on broken transmissions or think nothing of smuggling pills across an international border. It's a reprieve from the value system of their work worlds, where living is public and the public is performative. Which of course ends up, necessarily, being their own value system so long as that's the ecosystem they're trying to win at. You can't succeed without drinking some kool-aid, because it's the kool-aid that justifies all the striving and effort."<sup>73</sup>

73 Do we *think* in archetypes? Tversky and Kahneman's Linda fallacy

Dutton's aesthetics (*is it a coincidence that traditionally beautiful landscapes are also those with advantageous resources for human survival?*) are probably partially correct but low on explanatory power. (The beauty of barrenness: southwest deserts, northern ice tundras, Icelandic lava flow.) Beauty as a two-player game makes a little more sense, even if it can't explain the barren.<sup>74</sup> There is the beautiful (e.g. a flower) and the desirer (e.g. a pollinator). The beautiful thrives by making itself attractive to the desirer—by recruiting animals and insects into acting as sperm couriers, by recruiting audiences into acting as memetic vessels. It becomes *fit* relative to the aesthetic schema of its reproductive vehicle. The creation of beauty, then, is a collaboration—what is selected sticks around, is propagated and imitated and preserved; the selector wields enormous responsibility: what do they choose to incentivize? What do they choose to promulgate?

Its perceptual cues promise more behind them; their beauty is deceptive and honest simultaneously. The *ophrys apifera* orchid resembles and smells like a bee, tricking its preferred pollinator into mating with it. Perceptual biases are exploited, catered to, since in the evolutionary game, plants that attract pollinators outlast and outcompete those that don't, or don't as well, and a positive loop begins. Kevin Simler can't quite convincingly apply this logic to postmodern art but Bourdieu can: suddenly the desirers are mostly

argues as much. *Linda is 31 years old, single, outspoken, and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social justice, and also participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations. Which is more probable? 1. Linda is a bank teller. 2. Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement.*

74 Simler, *Melting Asphalt*.

artists, or individuals invested (“tied up”) in the field of production. Thus the rhetoric of the Desired adapts itself to the bees who will consume it, who visit regularly and form a part of the local ecosystem, rather than those afar who are largely indifferent to begin with. This is how subcultures are born, how they develop local standards of excellence. *The utterance is always TO a modeled receiver; the utterer’s concept of the receiver’s interpretive scheme determines how the message is encoded.*

:// ...many carnivorous plants also make flowers. But note that they take pains to keep their two activities separate. Their flowers look nothing like their mouths, and they hoist the flowers high up off the ground (away from their sticky parts) so their pollinators won’t accidentally get eaten. Like any agent interested in sustained collaboration, they learn not to prey on their partners.

There is another kind of beauty, whose influence also bears on contemporary visual art practice, who emergence also stems from the rhythms of desire and attraction: *le beau monde*.

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Calm technologies. Soft gradients. Software.<sup>75</sup> Rounded edges on Marsh’s Perforated Vessels, hips and body-like. White & pink shower tiles. The colors dissolve. Soft ontology: *the society we live in is rigid and unforgiving, it creates narratives of sharpness, of rigidity, to tell people to be hard. what is being soft? being cozy, having pride in the quiet, crying on the subway,<sup>76</sup> fostering care. being soft is a revolutionary act.* The city swims with value

75 TENDER BUTTONS

76 How you know it was written in New York, a specific kind of message for specific kinds of people.

systems, and transplants can struggle to adapt to their new host. *Sporting vs. herding culture; niceness vs. honesty culture; inclusion vs. excellence culture; straight-talk vs. power-talk.*

Master morality, slave morality; the good life as accomplishment, the good life as pleasure. Excluding, including. The enemy exists to set the self against, ruthless efficiency countered by “responding to one another with beauty and tenderness.” Each worldview-cum-strategy (action being a logical extension of perception, ideology a way of navigating the world) has its own failure modes; our precedent is the Nonviolence School of Joan Baez, where “response to one another is in fact so tender than an afternoon at the school tends to drift perilously into the never-never.”<sup>77</sup>

We are discussing Anne Boyer’s poems, our shared love of “This is not my hole,” Y’s skepticism of her “Provisional avant-garde.”

*Y: This is what worries me about Boyer’s model of a 21st C avant-garde, where domestic modes of interaction become an expectation of the public sphere, complete with all their emphases on mutual affirmation and “soft” unworded social rules. The first problem is evolutionary: if you want great cultural production rather than a sea of mediocrity, you need tough discourse that’s willing to publicly sort wheat from chaff. The second problem is harder to articulate. We already have so many soft social rules,<sup>78</sup> and they lead easily, unthinkingly, to suffering.*

77 Didion.

78 And isn’t the not-admitting, the covering up, what’s objected to in the first place? “At the time that I was writing *I Love Dick* and immediately after, I was driven by this agenda to take all of the business that went on under the table and put it on the table, and it seemed to me that BDSM was doing that with the little rules of heterosexuality. It was externalizing all the rules of heterosexuality and making of them a game or a farce or a Grand Guignol.” (Kraus, N. Miller @ Guernica)

*because when norms clash, people get hurt. It's the privilege of those who can easily, thoughtlessly, fluently navigate the softness of social rules that they so unthinkingly defend and further their construction in all spheres. This is not to attempt to carve out more space for victimization but to point out the inherent tradeoffs in all things, and the ways in which we can be blind to tradeoffs whose consequences we do not suffer. This is not mere speculation!*

Lierdumoa: «To my friends on the [autism] spectrum, let me explain to you an unspoken social rule that possibly nobody has ever explained to you before If a neurotypical asks you, “What game are you playing?” they’re not asking you to describe the game. They’re asking you if they can play too. If a neurotypical asks you, “What are you watching?” they’re not asking you to explain the plot of the movie/tv show to them. They’re asking if they can watch it with you. When neurotypicals ask you “What are you doing?” What you think they’re asking: “Please explain to me what you are doing.” What they’re actually asking: “Can I join you?” Now here’s the really fucked up part. If you start explaining to them what you’re doing? They will interpret that as a rejection. What you think you’re saying: [the answer to their question] What they think you’re saying: This is an elite and exclusive activity for a level 5 friend and you are a level 1 acquaintance. You are not qualified to join me because you don’t know all this stuff. Go away. This is why neurotypicals think you’re being cold and antisocial.»

X: *The downside of strict, explicit rules is that they eschew spirit for letter, create new goalposts, new targets to optimize for that aren't the thing itself. Perversion, economists call it. Campbell's law, in sociology.*

Y: *But the downside of soft law is that it is quiet and hidden and*

*thereby imprisons even its competent practitioners, who are unable to point to the rules which enslave them. In a culture of sensitivity, toe-stepping by the uninitiated outsider is easy and constant and punishable. Hence always the needs for a liberal commons, for a public utility mindset, a explicit baseline that keeps everyone getting along*

**X:** *I think, separate from whether one model of public norms would work better than another, we can agree that it's a problem when groups police each other according to their own norms, ignoring—despite lip service to the contrary—the lessons of cultural relativism.*

Compare these soft rules to the more libertarian premise of public space, which purposefully seeks to minimize how much knowledge of localisms is required to navigate said space. Rules etched into stone for the public à la Hammurabi. [Y: *I'm not saying one is inherently better; I'm saying that the scope of debate needs to account for the benefits of each in a range of contexts. Instead, each side pretends the other's points are illegitimate. You see this in capitalism vs. socialism discourse all the time!*]

«A long time ago, I was active on the original involuntary celibacy listserv. It was founded and at the time still administered by the lesbian third-wave-feminist women's studies major who coined the terms “involuntary celibacy” and “incel” in the first place.<sup>79</sup> When I was there, it was an inclusive place. There were male, female, cis-, trans-, gay, straight, and bisexual members, and with very few exceptions, we treated each other with respect and nobody pretended the root causes of our romantic problems were gender-specific in any way. The root cause, by the way, that we identified was this. People use a whole semi-verbal language to communicate romantic and sexual interest or lack

thereof to each other. Speech patterns, style of dress, body language, that sort of thing. It's almost completely subconscious, but it's still learned behavior. Those of us who were not able to pick up that language in early adolescence for whatever reason—being a social outcast, autism-spectrum disorders, hiding and/or coming to terms with homosexuality or trans-sexuality, parents who weren't physically affectionate, social phobia, etc.—will have practically, if not absolutely, no romantic success until they learn it later in life. Trying to hit on someone without using that language invariably comes off as creepy,<sup>80</sup> and if someone tries to hit on you, you won't notice if you don't understand the language. That was the only real common thread in everyone's life story. Involuntary celibacy is not limited to one gender, or to the physically unattractive, or to nerds, or even to narcissistic assholes. It's a result of missing out on learning the language of attraction.»<sup>81</sup>

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Nelson: “in the Wittgenstein passage I quote where he talks about how anytime you draw a line on a plane, you've kind of made a form of a boundary, but you haven't yet said, as he says, what that boundary is for, so it makes a game. But the game could be do we stay outside a line, do we cross a line.”<sup>82</sup> One approach to politics is as a zero-sum game

80 The opposite of legibility, predictability is creepiness: “The perception of creepiness is a response to the ambiguity of threat. [...] While they may not be overtly threatening, individuals who display unusual patterns of nonverbal behavior, odd emotional responses or highly distinctive physical characteristics are outside the norm, and by definition unpredictable.” McAndrew and Koehnke (2016) via J. Falkovich

81 User howlingfrog, Jezebel comment section, discovered by the raw data from a Ghostbin dump

82 “Freedom & Discipline in the Shed,” interview at Poetry Foundation

of re-aligning the in-group/out-group boundary: *Your problems matter; yours do not.* Which is to say, implicitly: *You are human; you are not.* The other approach requires acknowledging trade-offs, and finding Pareto frontiers of optimality between them.

*It is convenient to think that sexual misfits violate rules. The matter is subtler by far. They are not concerned to oppose the rules themselves but to engage in competitive struggle[-play] by way of those rules.* Boundaries are tested & pushed against. Interpersonal limits are skirted just on the edge, inching fingers slowly up the skirt à la Rose's minister in Munro's "Wild Swans."<sup>83</sup> *[In this model,] sexual attractiveness, or sexiness, is effective only to the degree that someone is offended by it.*<sup>84</sup> The attraction of the rule-breaker: (1) through his rejection of it, he sets himself as if above the existing social order (a status-grab) and (2) increases the future possibilities, opens up otherwise foreclosed avenues by sheer disregard for the limits of the social.

"The true revolutionary position is hysteria, not perversion," Zizek writes—"Perverts merely *in*-vert orthodoxy; they *need* orthodoxy, and orthodoxy needs them."<sup>85</sup> And yet aliens, coming from a cultural schema all their own, combine the explosive power of hysteria with the internal logic of perversion. "The chthonian triumphs in *Medea*, as in the later *Bacchae*. The plays are symmetrical: citizenship is

...w Anthony McCann.

83 The story's title echoes Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Wild Swans"; the story's climax, Millay's query: *I looked in my heart while the wild swans went over. / And what did I see I had not seen before? / Only a question less or a question more; / Nothing to match the flight of wild birds flying.* Nelson's swans, meanwhile, blur in flight, become fuzzy objects: *The sky is amazing / tonight, full of blurry swans.* (fr. *Something Bright, Then Holes*)

84 Carse, *Infinite Games*

85 @souchousama, Twitter.

denied to a sexually ambiguous magic-working alien,<sup>86</sup> who vengefully debases and liquidates society's arrogant hierarchs.”<sup>87</sup> Through their deviance, the outside world must come to re-reckon with their morality and norms. This re-reckoning re-opens the space of possibility, allows newness and change, keeps the structure limber and flexible. Anohni, like a New Age Paglia, testifies to this same power of transgression, with the surprising twist of biological essentialism, a self born in “blood” which society tries and fails to overwrite, such is its power. : «Gay and trans people, in particular, I feel, are the children of nature. We manifest despite the very best efforts of society to crush us. We

86 What would it look like to follow the rationalist dictum: never judge preferences, only their acting-outs. *According to Gary and others in the community, just as a heterosexual or homosexual person is drawn to people of a particular gender, they find themselves attracted to either boys or girls within specific age-ranges below the legal age of consent. They call themselves “Virtuous Paedophiles –or “VirPed” for short—because the vast majority of them claim to have never gone down the path of sexually engaging with a minor. They also claim that they never intend to. “Being dismissed from university based solely on my sexual orientation was certainly most traumatic,” he says. “Being interrogated by the state police and banned from the only hospital in our county was certainly not fun. I was also abandoned by a counsellor without a referral in 1999. As soon as I came out to her, she freaked out and said: ‘I can’t deal with that.’ She refused to meet with me again. [ Alexander McBride Wilson ] // In studies, pedophiles show signs that their sexual interests are related to brain structure and that at least some differences existed in their brains before birth. For example, pedophiles show greatly elevated rates of non-right-handedness and minor physical anomalies. Thus, although pedophilia should never be confused with homosexuality, pedophilia can be meaningfully described as a sexual orientation. [ James Cantor ] Who has power, who is powerless?*

87 C.P., *Sexual Personae*. Similarly, technological advances “by their nature, tear the world apart. They carve a piece away from the existing order – de-condensing, abstracting, unbundling – and all the previous dependencies collapse. The world must then heal itself around this rupture, to form a new order and wholeness. *To fear disruption is completely reasonable.* The more powerful the technology, the more unpredictable its effects will be. A technological advance in the sense of a de-condensation is by its nature something that does not fit in the existing order. The world will need to reshape itself to fit.” (Sarah Perry, “A Bad Carver”)

are the naturally allocated foot soldiers of nature. We have a unique relationship, a non-Christian relationship, to the goddess... We were born as disruptors into this society. We reorganized the conversation. This is in our blood.»<sup>88</sup> The take isn't necessarily *wrong*, it's just so fundamentally in conflict with the poststructuralist thought that usually props up queer theory, with all its emphasis on cultural construction. That juxtaposition makes our case for us: trans disruption, the “born in the wrong body” argument, calls into question the arguments of earlier feminisms, which pushed gender as purely constructed. This is the dialectic by which we evolve!

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Pothos: *I don't think you should do that.*

Anteros: *I think she wants me to step in.*

Pothos: *I think you're taking a risk by trying to read between lines instead of taking her at face.*

Anteros: *This is what I'm here for! To be there for things she doesn't know how to ask for!*

Pothos: *I defer as always, you know her better than I.*

Anteros: *These are the terms of friendship.*

Pothos: *Maybe!*

I said, “this is not my grave.” I said, “is this my genre?” I said,

88 *Paper Mag* interview, 2019. In-groups tend to push back on essentialism when leveled at them by outsiders, while internally propping up a (different) essentialist view of themselves which serves to justify the community's existence, continuity, and exceptionalism.

“are you my mother? Are *you*? ” I said, romantic red flag: people who like “Death of the Author”! I said, Tumblr’s at its best when it’s either someone working through their thought process, where you can see the evolution of their thinking, or when a group enacts the requisite lengthy dialectic arc among members. I said, I realize now the role that X and perhaps *The Last Psychiatrist* by extension occupy: not a “writer” writer but a sort of court jester, putting in the hours whittling observations into social insight. The a(r/c)t is in the daring to suggest, extra-limbically, which is the central activity of the political anyways: putting onto tables what is not currently on them.

Frothing at the mouth, a little spittle jumping onto the collarbone of my interlocutor, I said, your culture of “emotional volunteers” only reveals the inherent narcissism of mothering, the impossible-to-sidestep fact that to volunteer help is to diagnose the other as in need of help, and to identify the self as important, one whose solutions and care are needed by the other. I must shoulder these burdens, perform emotional labor, soften the blows of my own words, the narcissist-as-mother thinks, because I am needed, because the other is sensitive to me, to them. Is the giving even ABOUT the beneficiary, or is it about the benefactory?<sup>89</sup>

I said, OK, this was the libertarian in me speaking, I will try to be soft now.

89 Nelson tells of the same dynamic in a different context: «[The Tuareg] are desert nomads who were famously unwilling to be converted to Islam: thus their name. Some American Christians have been bothered by this idea of a blue people abandoned by God living in the Sahara, traveling by night, and navigating by the stars. In Virginia, in 2002, for example, a group of Southern Baptists organized a day of prayer exclusively for the Tuareg, “so that they will know God loves them.”»

Mama: I'm sending you more masks and Purell for your plane flight, honey!

Niña: We already have hundreds of masks and several gallons of Purell from previous care packages... We couldn't possibly use even half of what we have.

Mama [*sends anyway*]: But it makes me feel so much better!

The bad news: this dynamic appears to underly most charitable giving, which means little interest in charitable efficacy, and lots of interest in the feelings of the giver.

∞

X: *Prompt: Men who optimize for freedom, women who optimize for implication.*

Y: *She worries about her father, who is separated from her mother but starting to go out on dates. Sometimes her father seems really lonely, so she calls him up on the landline, talks to him for hours late, asks him about his life, says things to give him confidence. When he drives up to visit her she takes a week off work, tells her friends she's booked, cancels other social plans so he won't feel neglected. She keeps him company, is attentive to his moods. Sometimes he gets distant, or seems like he wants something but doesn't want to ask for it, or doesn't know how. Then she does the thing he wants, or that she thinks he wants. She lets him sleep on her floor when he comes and stays. Sometimes friends join the two of them for lunch, or coffee, or dinner, and then she makes sure he always feels included in the conversation.*

X: *What are the rules by which we ought to give gifts?*

Y: *I can only refer to the principle of sacrifice, which is that the result*

*must always outweigh the martyrdom, the gain outweigh the cost.*

X: *Is this [gestures at butterfly] utilitarianism?*

Y: *Can we understand the difference between positive sum and negative sum? If it is easy to me, but benefits the recipient far beyond my cost; and in turn, when it is easy for my partner in giving, but benefits me far beyond zero cost; we both end up better. When it takes more from the givers than the recipients gain, we both end up worse. Cultures of gift-giving which reallocate goods and service to improve net benefit can be called healthy; cultures of gift-giving and indebtedness which decrease net benefit can be called toxic.*

We were arguing about James Blake's new record; I said, Blake may be losing the fashion game on *Assume Form* but the point of the album is that now he's in love, he no longer gives a shit. Your values hierarchy might put smushy sincerity as bottom-tier, but Blake's doesn't and his abandonment of the edgy aura cultivated in his S/T debut is mainly evidence he believes in higher principles than the evasion and distance that such a status requires. Earnest principles that include beauty, mind you! I'm sure that Elaine Scarry monograph has something to say here, but I just haven't read it yet!

And I said, Dr. Sato's cyborg beetles with their nervous systems all hijacked, circuit boards commanding them to walk at certain gaits, to run, to fly, to turn, become hungry. I said, Gloomp: if you're reading this, please reach out. We met in an IRC channel somewhere between 2007 and 2009. You knew sidke and PALEMOON. You liked Xiu Xiu. I have looked and looked for you.

He is so... *lo siento, mi amor.*

Women who optimize for freedom, men who optimize for service. Everyone in the NY dating pool is talking about how it's the men anxious to clamp things down, two or three dates in, and the women who could take it or leave it.  
*Social constructivists 1, evolutionary biologists 0!*

A man wishes to give his wife the world. He walks every corner of his kingdom and of all the neighboring kingdom's sear ching out the best. It took many wagons, and wag-ondriver s, but the objects were collected and stored over many months. When it came time for the gifting, he prepared all the great objects on the lawn, displayed in their opulent glory. ?I don't want any of it,?she said, ?I'm no materialist? you haven't realized by now??

La Luna: I've been going to the gym. It's... fine. The problem is I keep throwing up whenever I work out.

El Sol: Still?

Luna: Yeah, still. It's whatevs.

Sol: That sounds like a big problem. That's definitely not normal.

Luna: I mean... we'll see what happens.

Sol: The first couple times you started exercising again, I mean, I could see that. But after months? Sometimes I feel like throwing up when I lift, but I never actually do. There's almost certainly something up. At that point I would have started troubleshooting.

Luna: Mhm.

Sol: What kind of exercises do you do?

Luna: Uh, I start with some basic yoga, down-dog... Some time on the elliptical. Some stuff on the circuit.

Sol: When do you start getting nauseous?

Luna: Near the end of the circuit reps.

Sol: Have you tried stopping before you get to that point?

Luna: Uh, sorta, but I also feel like maybe I should exercise through it?

Sol: Well what if you stopped. See what happens. What're you eating? Do you eat before?

Luna: Usually not, usually there's nothing in my stomach or at least nothing comes up.

Sol: Try eating? I usually lift on an empty stomach or like, a small meal of eggs, but also the empty stomach could cause it. Are you on a low carb on high carb diet? Are you taking any medications? When in the day do you exercise?

Luna: Is this twenty questions?

Sol: I mean, what's your goal with the gym?

Luna: Uh...

Sol: Usually the two reasons people lift are they want to feel good about their body and they want to get strong. Maybe

they want more control over their daily life. There's one thing nothing can take away from you, your gains. You always know you can get them back. If you put work in, you get results out.

Luna: I guess I want strength and health. But like, it's not that big of a problem.

Sol: I mean, you said its causing you distress and making you feel bad. That's like... the definition of a problem.

Luna: I guess.

∞

Y: Nelson, G84: *I looked at dozens of apartments and when I entered the hallway of this one I moved into next I knew I could live there because it was cheap and the hallway was baby blue. My friends all told me it smelled as bad there as it did in the last one but I found a heads-up penny on the threshold and anyway I don't live there anymore.*

X: *I mean, the passage works because you're not totally exculpated; Sun's algorithmic pragmatism is failing to engage on the emotional level that Moon is asking for ("vomiting before workouts reminds me of my mom!"), and by confessing/heading off that counterattack your claim lands true. ("well, stop doing that.")*

Suppose that I'm planning to meet you at noon. Unfortunately, I lose track of the time and leave 10 minutes late. As I head out, I let you know that I'll be late, and give you an updated ETA. In my experience, people—including me—are consistently overoptimistic about arrival times, often wildly so, despite being aware of this bias. Why is

that? My total delay is the sum of two terms: *Error*: How badly I messed up my departure time. If this term is large then it signals incompetence and disrespect. *Noise*: How unlucky I got with respect to traffic (and other random factors). This doesn't really signal much.

“When I arrive at 12:10, I want you to attribute the delay to *noise* rather than *error*.<sup>90</sup> Packing mags in the *Artforum* office, clipping on personal notes from editors—to big-name galleries, to big-time advertisers. Overhearing through white Apple earbuds.

“She slept with him and she’s a certified lesbian.

“I follow his ex on tumblr. Susan?

“The review was that his socks smelled, and he left his phone charger.

“Where was this?

“West Village.

“Is that where they met?

“No they met Dimes Square somewhere, Clandestino or Metrograph maybe?

*Eve Babitz, Kaitlin Phillips, A\*\*\*\* G\*\*\*\* in Russia, part of these stories seem to be about realizing the set of powers available to you as a woman, and then leveraging them to get what you want. Babitz muscling into the California cultureworld with soft power; Phillips showing up in a city with no money and nowhere to sleep, leaving*

*months later triumphant.*

The platform is bristling. I can see One Freedom Tower on the skyline across the East River. It is early summer and garments have been shed. The body (Spinoza) is *a machine capable of being affected and producing affects*; the object is a machine whose identity centers on the former affordance, the subject is a machine centered on the latter. The Paglian idea that in Italy and Brazil, where female exhibitionism is so prominent, sexuality as a social fiction feels owned by women, a central form of power. In the States and Western Europe, centuries of Puritanism followed by a predominantly Puritanical feminism means that its culture's sexuality is understood (and to an extent feared) as something controlled by men, a set of perversions and fantasies projected onto woman that are outside her control.<sup>91</sup> There's a reason Anna Khachiyan reads *The Last Psychiatrist* alongside Camille: "the progressive delusion is that looking good for men is synonymous with submissiveness, so while you're allowed to [wear makeup], it should always be [to look] good for yourself. This is madness. You are enhancing your outward appearance, which is great, but then you pretend it's for internal reasons?"

Ours can only be described as a culture motivatedly ignorant to the strategic dimension of moves, which knows that denial of the strategic, down to buried levels of the unconscious, constitutes the highest form of strategy. And yet

91 K-Punk: When Grace Jones "has the opportunity to 'express herself,' she ruthlessly exploits her own body and image much more than any (male) photographer would have dared to. 'In a recent poll by Men's Health magazine, the male readership named Grace Jones [...] Among the women who scared them the most.' (Brian Chin)." Recall glamour, the casting of a spell, a kind of hypnosis or witchcraft.

when we keep the hidden hidden, we preclude understanding, prevent discourse; we evade responsibility for actions and their effects by pretending that our actions have no such effects. It is not that cosmetics constitute a high moral crime but that the underlying psychology, the superset of cloaked motives and motivated ignorance, leads fine people into moral crimes. (If one denies one's power, one bears no responsibilities in wielding it.) We lack a good sense of the ethics activated in deploying soft power, the delineation between using and abusing. *In this essay I will*—

Men who build idols of themselves come in two varieties: the aesthetic idol, *à la* Bryan Ferry, and the ideological idol, *à la* David Berg, founder of the Children of God. Among the latter camp, a self-righteous appeal to moral justice (often a tendency towards performing leftist politics, as in the socialist prof who sleeps with grad students). An obsession with abstract politics—with “possessing” the “correct” moral & theoretical constructs—releases the subject from the nagging obligation of everyday empathic or self-sacrificing living. He is revealed not as a person built out of principles but as a narcissist built out of image.

∞

Drinking Sixpoint Sweet Actions in Sunset Park, after work. Feeling my bodyload, feeling the stifling muggy warmth in the last hours of the day. Domesticating, naturalizing new garments, wearing them til they integrate w/ a concept of self. Queer-centrist salon: Maggie Nelson,<sup>92</sup> Judith Butler,

92 “These days, in which so many seem not to know how to deal on any front with the burdens of human and non-human relations, including the brutal distributions of power and force which can accompany them, with much else besides a can of gasoline and a match, I’m hoping to chart a

Andrea Long Chu, Camille Paglia. (Doesn't matter if none of them get on.)

The moments that set *The Argonauts* apart: the constant undercutting of her own yearnings & belief in fluidity, the non-categorical, the post-gender, by way of observing the usefulness of categorization, the way humans are the only species which compartmentalizes space (purity, tainting; you don't shit where you sleep, or eat where you shit). It is by way, too, of wondering at the power of hormones, their deep, sub-psychological effect on cognition: "That hormones can make the feel of wind, or the feel of fingers on one's skin, change from arousing to nauseating is a mystery deeper than I can track or fathom. The mysteries of psychology pale in comparison." Or when, in her thirties, a 'biological timer' is implied to begin its countdown: "Whenever anyone asked me why I wanted to have a baby, I had no answer. But the muteness of the desire stood in inverse proportion to its size." Those who read the book as manifesto miss its deep ambivalence.

«Another piece of context: when I was first diagnosed and maybe dying (the doctors were uncertain), my mother asked me if there was anything she could get me to make me feel better. I think she thought I'd ask for, like, a pedicure, or maybe an iPod. Instead, I went into my room, brought out the Lily Cole and Marilyn Manson editorial in the "Fashion Rocks" supplement of the September issue of Vanity Fair. I pointed to the Miu Miu Baroque Wedges that Cole was wearing with a McQueen bubble-hem mini-dress next to Manson, ghostly in the Los Angeles sun, palm trees and pool glistening. *These shoes would help*, I said. When they

different path." [intvw with M. Nelson: on Hannah Black, Dec 2017]

arrived in a box from eBay, they were too small, I could barely squeeze into the sharply pointed toe. They still sit on our living room bookshelf like holy objects in a home altar, patent totems of survival, desire, and gratitude.»<sup>93</sup>

You are Dallesandro, bandana'd and handsome, long hair, a jaw which arcs so perfectly it cannot be believed. You've got a tough guy look on your face, the biceps bulge at the tee.

∞

Kitchen on comp tics watching modern dance: Trajal (Harrell) with troupe perform a hoochie-koochie reenactment Caen Amour. Harrell in a pastel shirt, satin, particolored. Three solo dances open up the show: one with *Black Orpheus* vibes, one a Kate Bush tune, one unidentified and unremembered.

Choreographies of clear-cut four-step. The affect where it really shines: hybrid o' tragedy n celebration, Bas Jan Ader's "Too Sad to Tell You" with the ecstasy of a Beatles cut. Main dance merges carnival and modernism, Destroyer's Dan Bejar & *Kinfolk* magazine props & Arabian pointed arches & a periwinkle backdrop. A sole female dancer standing behind a wax-papered window, spotlight penetrating such that her shadow was clearly visible, detailed down to the cameltoe. It has been several nights since I saw you last, so busy with work, long nights at the office. But it comes back; after a few hours, we start to soften.

*All the intimacy, the casual exchanges of inside jokes and gossip, the*

93 Audrey Wollen, Sex & the City Diary, Aug 22

private languages<sup>94</sup> and ritual choreographies, observations leveraged with shared history and time-put-in that characterize a subculture and an intimate relationship alike, *provide the cement to glue things together*.<sup>95</sup> *Do you remember the feeling that sense was provisional and that two people could build around an utterance a world in which any use signified?*<sup>96</sup> Two whackjobs, WW or if youd rather, 2W. better than WW2 or just W-2, flip one of the Ws and you get an M, Man/Woman. Bend, hold, tuck, tailbone, heavy—heavy—bend stretch pulse. You fall, you are Bernini, Bernini has sculpted you, you have sculpted yourself, into a Bernini. You ask, what came first, the poses in paintings or the inclinations of body? Which organize, and which are being organized?<sup>97</sup>

Like that moment at 1:07:00 in *The Man Who Fell To Earth* when Bowie's car drives through the compound entrance and the harps roll in. Like that moment at 0:1:28 in "Motion Picture Soundtrack" when Thom's voice cuts and the harps come in. Like that moment at 0:1:21 in Joy Division's "Atmosphere" when chimes enter the room.

∞

94 [Y] But there's nothing to do; you've got to forget whatever the MFA program taught you about how to write; you've got to live and work without and in the absence of someone else's rules, inevitably create your own, and that's what's most exciting, right? Criticizing these programs in a vacuum, of course, picks up on the opposite end of a spectrum of what art should be ("everyone can" vs. "Romantic genius"), and both ends of the binary seem too limited and constraining for the playful act of artmaking. My only advice: approach your craft with humility and openness; become fluent (analogizing art to language); and make the process enjoyable for you.

95 Grothe & Castronovo

96 Lerner, *Hated of Poetry*

97 Acting vs. acted upon.

Another night, another cultural event, another set of bad social interactions. Humidity causing lacrimal eyebrows and matted clothing, and everyone who's everyone here: the PR agents and the culture writers and Kaitlin Phillips, who's both; the Red Scare gals and Natasha Staag; an unnamed Semiotext(e) staffer and a guest appearance by Constance DeJong.

Twenty-somethings with openingitis, struck by FOMO a fear of missing out, and everyone clustered around the wrong genre of consumables, delicatessen over design. Being valued for your taste, what you like and therefore associate with; the magical perfume power of objects. Watching the wildlife, reminded that I too am wildlife. Whether I like it, whether I want it. *Strategic ignorance!* someone said, but it was just me, talking to myself, and before long I was saddled up to by a fast-talker in Berghain fatigues: "Saying you don't play the game is just a way to play the game"; sweat beading down his shaved head. Snatches of chatter around us; both of us paying more attention to new interactive opportunities than each other. "...and I said, go off I guess."

The balcony is hazy, mobbed. "Smoking orchestrated time, gave it a rhythm, punctuated talk, theatrically mimed both masculinity and femininity, was the intellectuals' essential accessory, was also an erotic gesture, enhancing the mystery of some unknown drinker seated at her table, veiled in a blush haze."<sup>98</sup> I get pulled into a conversation and said, yes, factually, Republicans exist so there can be a national mood for artists to work under. "I mean, I agree, I feel good about the popularization of Bourdieu's idea that gossip is valuable social information, a contextualizing gossamer of

context for the formal utterances of a field (public appearances, *publications*).”<sup>98</sup> But I also felt bad about the neglect of acknowledgment that gossip is *also* a form of policing obedience to norms, of surveilling, of reifying the existent social structure by implicitly demonstrating to fellow gossipers, *should you step outside acceptability, this will happen to you too.*<sup>99</sup>

But the late hours come & everything is beautiful, the people and what they wear, beautiful, a poignancy draped over evening and when the right song comes on it feels almost eternal, *infinite-seeming*, this, the most evanescent of things. “The impossible perfection of a Moment or an Image—it could be a lover, or the tableau of the in-crowd scene—that is the ever-receding quarry of the glamour chase.”<sup>100</sup> I am a glossy photograph... in colour and softly lit... You can look at me for hours; I won’t mind, I let you dream.<sup>101</sup> At 2 a.m. retreating diners where the elegance is re-romanticized in the context of the dingy & retro, symbol of late hours transmitted, *exemplified and spread*, through film.

I pictured my most obnoxious, party-fouling self, plastered and pretentious: “Th e things wh ich elit e cultur e circ les pre ten d is ess entially demo c ratic, lik e cann i ng mastery o r crafts manship i n fa vor of fluid game smanship, on

99 Meston: «Women risk being labeled with one of the dozens of derogatory words, in the English language alone, for a woman who pursues a short-term sexual strategy. Modern terms include slut, whore, skank, tart, and tramp, while more archaic terms include harlot, hussy, strumpet, wench, bawd, mattressback, window girl, fast-fanny, canvasback, hipflipper, breechdropper, trollop, spreadeagle, stump thumper, and scarlet woman... psychologist Anne Campbell conducted several studies of the sexual reputations of girls and observed that “it was the girls themselves who were most vocal in enforcing this code.”»

100 *Shock & Awe*

101 Amanda Lear, “I Am a Photograph” fr. *I am a Photograph* (1977) Ariola Records.

ly reifying existing hierarchies. Judgment of belonging, as ever, is founded on soft ways of speaking and dressing, the set of implicit attitudes and subtle signifiers. The ‘democratic’—here I imagine moving my fingers in the air—“anti-art of the momentary, in that it is low on ambition and could theoretically be fabricated by anyone, is so thoroughly *anti-democratic*—here I pitch my voice up on the “a” in “anti” and “as a rt”—“that it does not register *as art* to any but a small fraction of first-world populations. Success means learning the language of the elite community which can only be done by *being a part of it* long enough to start replicating it. Our rule here is Dobie Gray’s by way of Ferry: *I’m in with the in-crowd, and I know what the in-crowd knows.*”<sup>102</sup>

Charisma as reality distortion field.<sup>103</sup> The connection between success & being a desired object is known as networking: you build positive feedback loops of prestige (accolades, social connections, job titles) that allow you to acquire further accolades and prestige. If you want to be someone in this world, you’ve got to be a great object or a great subject, and objects flourish in not just modeling or acting but in art, business, politics. “Lais of Corinth,” he says, “used to gain a great deal of money by the grace and charm of her beauty, and was frequently visited by wealthy

102 Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (1969): “Natives never appreciate how well-trained they are in the arts of detection until they find an alien among themselves who is trying to pass. Then, ways of doing things that had always been taken for granted stand out by virtue of the presence of someone who is inadvertently doing the same things differently, as when milk is put in a cup before the tea, or the numeral four is written with a crossbar, or pie eaten from the apex, not the side.

103 Unreleased *Bluets* fragment, cut from the final draft: *luminosity doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with clarity*. People thought my windows... were stars.

men from all over Greece; but no one was received who did not give what she demanded, and her demands were extravagant enough.”<sup>104</sup> They are not spared; no one is. BLANCHE: «I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft—soft people have got to shimmer and glow—they’ve got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a—paper lantern over the light... It isn’t enough to be soft. You’ve got to be soft and attractive. And I—I’m fading now! I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick.»<sup>105</sup>

Later to read Pablo Helguera: *It is essential for the visitor to walk through the gallery and approach the event with absolute elegance and indifference; carefully displayed indifference can be an indicator of power.* (Also Pablo: *The subtleties of social and financial interaction can profoundly confound the purposefully or accidentally naive visitor who may come to an opening just to “see the art.”*)

Symbolic currency is swapped fluidly with social, sexual, and literal capital, without boundaries everything is permeable and linked in a chain of causality. An inability to evaluate quality on first principles (a general muddiness of values, a lack of consensus or clarity on what matters in a creative work) leads inevitably to a reliance on associations and vouching.<sup>106</sup> Reputations taint, infect, rub off,

104 Aulus Gellius, quoting Peripatetic Sotion

105 ^X [THU 12:58PM] So is Blanche the ultimate object and Stanley the ultimate subject? (only semi related) If you’re a woman the line you need to toe is between the expression of desire and neediness. If you’re a man it’s between expressing desire and committing assault. Which I guess is just saying neediness and assault are variations on the same drive. The principal difference is a function of power. The desiring object prostrates, the desiring subject imposes. Assault and neediness are both forms of forcing the self on the Other, one through “help me” and the other through “I’ll help myself.” Acting vs. enticing to act.

106 “In one study, [Joseph] Henrich found that babies engaged in social

disease-like.<sup>108</sup> The optics of an affiliation can bring ruin, guilt or irrelevance deduced by association.<sup>107</sup>

Who one is friends with, who one likes, all affect the public optics; dedicated game players choose for perception of purity. *McCarthy seemed to believe, years afterward, that leaving Rahv, who loved her, for Wilson, who probably merely desired her, was just a matter of class warfare... Once done, though, the ambition behind her move rather escaped her attention... she felt free to sneer at Simone de Beauvoir for having ridden to literary fame on Jean-Paul Sartre's coattails...*<sup>108</sup> <sup>108</sup> Hot as in trending, hot as in hot. Edgy as in fashion, edgy as in innovative. Sexual currency is swapped fluidly with symbolic, social, and literal capital. Zizek himself admits there are no more Marxists (his stance is a *signal to a corrective*, audience-oriented ontology); Dasha Nekrasova is left seducing liberal arts refugees into trad socialism. “It was clear to me even then that her corner of the literary universe would always be sexier, funnier, and *cooler* than the stuff you’d find at *n+1* parties and other Harvard-adjacent spaces.”<sup>109</sup>

I said, for the record, de Beauvoir was twice the thinker—and twice the person—Sartre ever was.

referencing four times more often when an ambiguous toy was placed in front of them. When faced with an ambiguous toy, babies altered their behavior based on adults’ emotional reactions. In their early years, babies depend on elders to navigate the world and outsource their decisions to them.”

107 YT’s ContraPoints tells us: we experience a special kind of cringe toward those who *pass as*, or are socially understood to be, representatives of our present tribe, but who we see as false members, misrepresenting the group. The cringe of contempt serves as strategy for self-distancing; “don’t confuse *me* with *them*;” “X is not a *real* member of the group.”

108 Groth, Castronovo, *Edmund Wilson, Critic in Love*

109 Kaitlin. Phillips, *The Cut*.

I said But have you seen m y books? Nelson's *Argonauts*, *Bluets*, *Art of Cruelty*? Grietzer's *Amerikkka*, Lerner's *10:04*? wait, you can't stand him . *Tropic of Capricorn*. Sexual *Personae*. *I Love Dick*. T he *Iliiad*. T he *Odyssey*. D efinitely N ot A Little Life. O kay, *A Little Life*. Against Interpretation. Lasch? s Trueand Only H eaven. T he M odern Temper. Genealogy of M orals. T he Com plete Kaf ka. T he Com plete Benjamin. T he Com plete Adorno. DasKapital. Collected Eliot? wait, you can't stand him either. M y Struggle, the com plete series. All four Neapolitan Novels. Houellebecq? s Submission, Atomised, and Platform. M ap and the Territory. Ever y blogger ever. Tao Lin. Ever y book by Ty rant. Ever y book by Ver so. Ever y book by Sem iotext[e].)

Who one works with, where one writes, subsumes the production itself as common barometer of quality—in part because associative thinking is a human universal; in part because of its ease. Where first principles are time-consuming, overwhelming, where the quantity of production is overflowing, insane, losing its mind, one's network is graspable, operable. «The art trader is not just the agent who gives the work a commercial value by bringing it into market; he is not just the representative, the impresario, who 'defends the authors he loves'. He is the person who can proclaim the value of the author he defends (cf. the fiction of the catalogue or blurb) and above all 'invests his prestige' in the author's cause, acting as a 'symbolic banker' who offers as security all the symbolic capital he has accumulated (which he is liable to forfeit if he backs a 'loser').»<sup>110</sup> *The scam was that the parties were cooler because they were getting written up, while the writers were getting to go to the coolest parties*

*because they had the power to make them so.*<sup>111</sup>

What does Jaguar Paw know? “It’s easier to feel intimacy and love from people if you have the Thing, because the Thing draws them in and gives them the motivation to see you for who you really are. You probably won’t have to do nearly as much as people who don’t have the Thing, and the standards for you will be set lower.” Chana calls this the “shininess” of people when she + Pothos walk across Midtown together one afternoon.

What is The Thing? It isn’t beauty, though beauty is part. It isn’t money, though money is part; money merely prox, happily converted into status & standing via conspicuous consumption, a better neighborhood to be around the ‘right’ people, to get better dates, more exclusive bars, honorary galas...<sup>112</sup>

∞

What more can one say about gossip? That it is a tool, for better & worse, which undermines authority and legitimacy? That it turns the “real” into “fake,” punctures swellings, breaks the bonds of narrative? That it permeates our worldwide web, our *de facto* global gossip network, relay tracks like the bluffside brush that’s built to burn. A thousand hectares under high wind speed, all connected,

111 Natasha Staag, *Sleeveless*

112 The cosmetics of a new car, a home with a pool (more often cleaned than swum in), higher quality fabrics. We need Georgism before UBI, sure, but we also have to confront: “No longer were silk stockings the mark of the rich; as the wife of a workingman with a total family income of \$1,638 told the authors of *Middletown*, ‘No girl can wear cotton stockings to high school. Even in winter my children wear silk stockings with lisle.’” (*Only Yesterday*, F. L. Allen’s account of the 1920s)

without the fireline perimeters, the boundaries between local spaces that prevent brushfires spreading. Hector, lying in the dirt!

That the social status of the talked-about party is undermined, while the talking party receives a boost? (I said, restributive justice?) What is stigmatization if not the withdrawal of status for engaging in behavior some demographic believes does not deserve standing? The good, the bad, the slumming beauty in tattered mink: The irony, as always, is that market economies are not nearly as zero-sum as games of symbolic capital.<sup>113</sup> That others fall amidst your rise is “part of the famous ‘way things are’—alongside factory-farming, growing old, car wrecks, or the prevalent dysfunctionality of intimate relationships. The way things are might change, but not right now and not for you. These are the defining tradeoffs of pragmatic life, balances of pleasures against pains (sometimes your own pains, sometime of others and sometimes both).”<sup>114</sup> The only known escape from zeroness being to go local, create branched-off sub-groupings with internal standings—within which one can hold prestige and standing, even as in other domains ze is stripped of it. The wage slave IT guy who by night is a well-respected DM of his D&D group. For two-hundred I said, “*What is the literary-Brooklynites-playing-highschool game?*”

“Benzer began to notice that whenever he read something about rII he felt bored, and whenever he read something about behavior and personality he felt alive. He was using what Crick calls the ‘gossip test.’ Crick believes that ‘what

113 Girard’s rivalrous desire accords with our understanding of symbolic capital. Covet what thy neighbor covets, and one has entered competition with them. Covet otherwise, both parties might attain their desire.

114 Peli Grietzer, *Amerikkkka*.

you are really interested in is what you gossip about.”<sup>115</sup> OK, so turn this document into a fan object, photo album, a fetish, what denim-jacketed young women would pass amongst themselves with solemn seriousness and emoticonned margins. Angel Olsen lyrics, resonant baring of internal life, a Tiqqun graphic sense, paragraphs ended by rhetorical questions. Are we entering into stereotype?

∞

Imagine you are Tut. You are draped in royal finery. You are presented with a gorgeous dagger, its handle and sheath heavily gilded, engraved and decorated with deep reds and blues. The blade is literally fallen from the heavens: it is taken from a meteor of which your people are aware. They go out in search parties for these meteors, looking for its precious iron, the cosmic gift of an unbreakable sword. What is the mind of the person whose inherent egoism is confirmed, who learns the world really does revolve around zer? What is the struggle of the person whose inherent egoism is confirmed, who first believes the world revolves around zer, then sees this belief substantiated instead of contradicted? Who sees all eyes on zer, who can move mountains with the magic of gaze?

Soft power: international relations & diplomacy term referring to the power of attraction, seduction, reputation, prestige, desirability. Of *implication*: ‘it’s cold in here, isn’t it’ vs. ‘shut the window.’<sup>116</sup> How else can we explain this scene from *Crashing*?<sup>117</sup> opening episode? French-affecting

<sup>115</sup> Weiner, *Time, Love, Memory: A Great Biologist and His Quest for the Origins of Behavior*.

<sup>116</sup> Robyn Lakoff, George’s first partner.

<sup>117</sup> dir. Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Typecasting, and its subversion or

late-twenties Melody takes a drag of her cigarette, taunts a middle-aged Collin to stick his hand down a toilet bowl. “[Kate] wouldn’t have hidden anything in a toilet. She’s not that kind of person. Trust me, I work for her.” Melody: “Let her surprise you. It’s the most attractive thing a person can do. So rare to be surprised.” Collin takes it as the challenge it is; Melody shrieks “I can’t believe you did that!” once he’s elbow-deep in toilet water.

Or the episode’s plotline: It’s only when PWB’s longtime BFF gets a GF that she suddenly wants him to drop the second “F.” Serena goes hermitic in S1, haunted by the boundaries she crossed in Dionysian excess, but when she re-enters society it’s as her best friend’s competitor; they’re playing the same zero-sum power game, after all. You sync up with the values and desires of people around you, but this draws you inexorably into a competition with them for scarce, mutually desired resources. *Blair* to *Serena*: “*You take Everything from me. Everything!*”<sup>118</sup>

// During the Republic only high ranking men of stature wore purple and during the Imperium only the Emperor was allowed to wear a purple toga. In the Byzantine Empire the direct offspring of the Basilieus who

surprised, is all over the show: Kate’s *not that kind of person*; Melody finds nothing more attractive than surprise; “*I can’t believe you did that.*”

118 *Gossip Girl*. “Gibson and Hoglund (1992) describe evidence that animals imitate each other in choices of mate and territories; for example, female guppies are more likely to choose males to mate with whom they have observed being selected by previous females. The propensity to imitate is presumably an evolutionary adaptation that has promoted survival over thousands of generations by allowing individuals to *take advantage of the hard-won information of others.*” This is the problem with “authentic” desire, an ideology in which being “true” to oneself means gratifying felt impulses; the problem with “blameless” desire, which damns its byproducts as irrelevant in the pursuit of self-expression.

were born in the Purple Room of the Imperial Palace were called porphyrogenitos or ‘born in the purple,’ indicating their legitimacy and likelihood for one of them to be the heir. Billions are spent associating high-prestige people with products, hoping, with good cause, that the status rubs off. I said, “This book is dedicated to David Bowie!”

*Tyrian purple aka imperial purple, from Tyre Lebanon, prod. fr. the mucous of the hypobranchial gland of Mediterranean sea snails, themselves collected upon the rising of the Dog Star [Pliny the Elder]. A single garment is said to have required the smashing & boiling of tens of thousands of snails.*

Or purple’s pressures. «Just as the clandestine and casual “love under the palm trees” is the pattern irregularity for those of humble birth [92], so the elopement has its archetype in the love affairs of the *taufio* and the other chiefs’ daughters. These girls of noble birth are carefully guarded; not for them are secret trysts at night or stolen meetings in the day time. Where parents of lower rank complacently ignore their daughters’ experiments, the high chief guards his daughter’s virginity as he guards the honour of his name, his precedence in the kava ceremony or any other prerogative of his high degree. Some old woman of the household is told off to be the girl’s constant companion and duenna. The *taufio* may not visit in other houses in the village, or leave the house alone at night. When she sleeps, an older woman sleeps by her side. Never may she go to another village unchaperoned. In her own village she goes soberly about her tasks, bathing in the sea, working in the plantation, safe under the jealous guardianship of the women of her own village.»<sup>119</sup>

119 Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*

Or purple's dangers. *Desiring and hunting are members of the same genus, one symbolizing longing, the other longings acted-upon.*

∞

... “*Muse poetry*,” linked to ancient cults that worshipped the moon, accessing the imagination without involving the intellect. As existentialist turned occult historian Colin Wilson noted in 1971, “The moon goddess was the goddess of magic, of the subconscious, of poetic inspiration.” Hence a “*Moonage Daydream*” might represent an ecstatic, instinctive path to creativity...<sup>120</sup>

Ziggy’s flamboyant makeup, rooster comb of spiky, razor-cut red hair, and futuristic costumes designed by Kansai Yamamoto turned him into an alien rock ‘messiah’ (Bowie’s term), leader of a band of space invaders come to redeem errant earthlings.<sup>121</sup>

Ideologies need hosts to replicate and spread; the depressive is lit up by narrative when ze comes into contact with the Meaningful Man or the manic pixie.<sup>122</sup> “They are *impregnated* with Foucault”; the word is no accident, the theory is the intellectual foreplay for the main event.<sup>123</sup> Eminent boy-girl Bowie forms a link that connects Andy Warhol, Bertolt Brecht, William Blake, Charlie Chaplin, Antonin Artaud, Salvador Dali, Marlene Dietrich, Philip Glass, Nietzsche, Hollywood glamour, graphic design, platform shoes, film, music, Kurt Weill, Berlin, New

120 Monina Ladaw, Are.na block

121 Paglia, *Theatre of Gender*

122 MPDG: The doe-eyed doll lets her guy experience enthusiasm without the status hit or loss of face. He keeps composure, chides her bubbliness, but they’re both in on the bit.

123 C.P: «Foucault is nothing, nothing, okay Nothing! Okay? And the reason why I know he’s nothing is because, you know, he was influenced by, you know he pretends to be such a mastermind but in fact he’s just a collection of influences...» (In the words of MoMA’s 404 code, Oof.)

*York, London, Alexander McQueen, the 2012 London Olympics, Jim Henson, the moon landings, Kansai Yamamoto, Kate Moss and Marshall McLuhan.*<sup>124</sup> Idolatry.

The correlate to mothering is fathering, the pull to instruct, to endlessly reproduce your habitus and worldview. A Woodie Allen complex, a Socratic love. Dan & Serena work because Serena wants fixing, and Dan wants to affirm his withdrawn superiority by fixing her. That's why his lovey-dovey flashbacks to their prehistory are either 1) her ignoring him, or 2) her so fucked-up she nearly gets hit by a taxi cab. Winning her allegiance and cleaning up her mess go hand-in-hand.<sup>125</sup> *When you say Thailand is tolerant of gender variance, you're referring to the "ladyboy" you almost had sex with who turned into a zombie and threw an arsenal of coconut bombs at your head until you went into a coma... You think "ladyboys" are so articulate and earnest and innocent, you want to take them out to restaurants to teach them how to use forks and knives, you want to take them home and make them cook with Lite Coconut Milk from Trader Joe's, because the real kind makes you fat. You make them give you massages every afternoon at 3, you make them put tiny little orchids in your cocktails.*<sup>126</sup>

∞

There is a fine line between becoming the male *enamorada* and starting a cult.

*[Talia's father Larry] could also be charming. He was a good listener and engaged the group on heady concepts like truth and justice. [...] He*

124 Broackers, Marsh: David Bowie Is catalogue

125 *Gossip Girl*

126 collaged in Jai Arun Ravine's Romance of Siam, taking for its section title a chapter header fr. Collis's 1936 Siamese White

*screened Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* in the common room, where the students watched from pillows on the floor, and followed it with an impromptu lecture on the nature of the universe. At night, he'd retire to an air mattress in Talia's room or the common-room couch.*

*Isabella had come to Sarah Lawrence on a full academic scholarship from an all-girls Catholic high school in San Antonio. After her breakup, she seemed to take comfort in Larry's company. "I'm 19, I was having a lot of difficulty making sense of things, I wasn't in a good place," Isabella says. "He started to help me kind of process and make sense of a lot of things I just couldn't make sense of." Talia's boyfriend at the time remembers seeing Larry and Isabella reclining on Talia's bed. Larry was stroking Isabella's hair, soothing her. "He's like, 'Nobody's going to hurt my baby girl,' " the ex-boyfriend says. Larry said he was going to start sleeping in Isabella's room, an arrangement that made the boyfriend uncomfortable.*

*Larry returned to Slonim 9 for the spring semester, spending most of his nights in Isabella's room. [...] One night, Larry gathered everyone in the common room and began lecturing on Q4P, a philosophy based on the supposition that all energy in the universe is powered by the "quest for potential."*

You provide a positive values system, a philosophy which fills the vacuum, organizes the noise into a meaningful pattern. «Teenage boys fret about how the shirtless men on Harlequin covers are so often #badboys, but the presence or absence of a kill streak is unimportant. What matters is that the man is persecuted, misunderstood, different—much like that other Shirtless Man, if you know what I mean. (Bonus points if you trace the walk to Calvary to the wounded shuffles of Frankenstein's monster, the beautified Beast, and Robocop.) This distance is necessary to set up the ending: consumed by fate, assimilation—she joins

Christian Grey on his pirate ship or whatever—which maybe accounts for the vampires and werewolves, boys with value systems that are literally infectious.»<sup>127</sup> Pirsig-style personal philosophy isolates you from the world, but if you meet a baseline of charisma others will fall behind you in isolation.

This way of looking—this single-colored bead (Emerson)—becomes the only possible way of looking. As Zizek writes, ideology is carefully designed to incorporate all its possible contradictions as confirmations; this prevents prediction errors, because none of the predictions are falsifiable.

*Isabella spent winter break with Larry, Talia, and Talia’s boyfriend in a one-bedroom condo on East 93rd Street owned by Lee Chen, an old friend of Larry’s. Talia and her boyfriend slept in the living room, while Isabella and Larry shared the bedroom. “He controlled every aspect of our lives once we were in the apartment,” the boyfriend says. “When we ate, what we did, when we went to bed.”*

The leader poses as a therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist, a manifestation, maybe, of the general conceit that one knows best on others’ behalves, but also a fast-track to intimacy and advisory, a way to collect pressure points of shame and guilt. The quick ramping up of personal disclosure reverse-engineers the trust that normally precedes such disclosures, like the old “contrived smiling increases subjective happiness” trick.<sup>128</sup> *Another roommate, Claudia, was particularly intrigued by the presentation and began having weekly counseling sessions with Larry... Claudia began telling people she thought she might be schizophrenic, a diagnosis that Larry, who had no medical training, had given her during one of their sessions.*

127 H.C., Distance/Closeness

128 Mask becomes face?

A hot-seat technique: you get others to lower self-esteem through self-criticism until they no longer trust their own thoughts. (Can we find this relationship in the commons, in certain political rhetorics?) Authority is ceded in return for the sense of certainty, the desire to believe in an external source of truth. The object loses control as the subject grips tighter. *Near the end of the school year, Daniel found himself unmoored. His relationship with his girlfriend was crumbling, and he had nowhere to live that summer. Santos and Claudia urged him to speak with Larry. The two met in a Starbucks one afternoon and talked for hours. Larry gave him advice that felt refreshingly straightforward: Dump your girlfriend. On the question of Daniel's sexuality, Larry shut down the suggestion conclusively: "Oh no, you're not gay," he said. "I can tell you that for sure."*<sup>129</sup>

Love is limited; *a tribe must exclude people*<sup>130</sup>; gardens need walls;<sup>131</sup> the definition of community is a system of exclusion. What's yr border policy? You sever ties to the outside, to the reality checking feedback that keeps us sane. Your version of reality syncs up to your partner's. Your version of reality syncs up to your job. You make friends with those who travel the same grooves as you, minimizing conflict & dissonance. These people are special; they are not like the others; they can be trusted; they are good; they perceive the important things in life.

Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*: Chinese brainwashing takes as its basic techniques milieu control,

129 «Larry suggested Daniel live there for the summer with him and some of the other Sarah Lawrence kids. He agreed. "I didn't want to go back home, and this was my alternative," Daniel says. "Part of why I got in a cult at all was because I had no idea how one finds a place to live in New York."»

130 S. Godin

131 S. Perry

demands for purity, confession, mystical manipulation, ideological sacredness (ultimate, unquestionable truths), loaded language and “thought-terminating clichés,” a belief in abstract doctrine over concrete human interests, and a “dispensing of existence,” a dehumanization tactic whereby outsiders will not be saved (Christianity), are somehow irrevocably tainted or intentionally malevolent (social justice, Catholicism to Puritans) to the point that their opinions cannot be trusted, cannot be listened to.

Outside voices act which would act as a stabilizing voice toward normality are exorcised. Turning off such voices enables delusion, a delusion which is sometimes necessary for radically innovative work, allows the creation of new subjective realities—but leads to destruction in equal measure. Theories of original sin tear down self-esteem, leading the sinner to renounce his own opinions or concerns in favor of an authority’s; the sinner cannot even trust himself, and is easily overtaken.

*The meetings would often end in “breakthroughs” that followed a disturbing dream logic. On one occasion, Larry convinced Daniel that the reason he played the ukulele was because of trauma inflicted on him by his father. Larry told Daniel to smash the instrument in front of the group as an act of catharsis.*

You shut off doubts in yourself—self-deception the key to deceiving others—and you advise others to turn off similarly. The high stakes help: if the self-deception shatters, the meaning floods out of it like wine from a cup.

*Larry himself never seemed to get tired. He preached the benefits of prescription amphetamines and, according to multiple acquaintances, took them in such high doses he rarely needed sleep.*

You preclude criticism by pushing a program of self-criticism, shifting the default assumption from guilt inward. You don't quite understand the new logic, but the others seem to, and that's enough to assume any incoherences are a result of your own confusion, rather than the ideology's.

*On 93rd Street, small mistakes weren't just symbols of childhood trauma. They were evidence that the kids were trying to "sabotage" Larry's program of self-improvement. Subversive behavior was explored in painstaking detail and required written, signed confessions.*

The pressures of conforming seal the deal. “*It was a combination of feeling like, This is unusual, and I feel kind of weird,*” he says, “*but my immediate next thought was, Everyone else seems to think this is really good.<sup>132</sup> Maybe there's something wrong with me, and I need to lean into this.*”<sup>133</sup>

The Lacanian switch from depending on the mother  
—> aspiring to the father is the flip from objecthood to

132 Asch conformity study: 50 Swarthmore undergrads grouped into rooms of eight. Seven designated study stooges, planted and instructed; one a naive participant, blind to the deception. The room is shown three vertical reference lines of different heights, as well as a target line, and asked to match the target with a reference line of corresponding height. Individually, the problem can be answered correctly by toddlers. With social pressure, the seven planted students all agreeing on the same, incorrect reference line, three-quarters of the naive participants conformed at least once, agreeing to an obviously wrong answer.

133 Kuran's concept of preference falsification, preempted by Twain and expanded by Perry, refers to the tendency for public opinions to differ from private opinions due to social pressure; an Emperor's New Clothes situation emerges in which large groups of people may all hold the same private opinion but, not knowing others' interiorities, falsify them in public, giving the external impression of a pressuring consensus. The only way out of mass preference falsification is enough public disavowals of the public consensus, such that others realize they are not alone in their beliefs.

subjecthood, a necessary strategic shift in response to impending changes in conditions, a necessary retraining for the eventuality of autonomy.

(And you might ask yourself, does the *two gametes types inevitably leads to common reproductive strategies* theory explain away the conflict between Georgia O'Keefe's subject matter and her whole "I don't paint vulvas" stance? In other words, given the female anatomy of a flower, she both is and she isn't?)

∞

*What did it give me, what you're reading?*

*Aristotle scholar Martha Nussbaum explores how crappy it is for humans to live outside of a story, even in heaven, in her essay "Transcending Humanity." Here, she considers Odysseus' choice to give up eternal youth and pleasure with Calypso in order to return to his wife and the certainty of inevitable death. She says,*

*What, in the face of the recognized human attachment to transcendence, could justify such a choice? Odysseus has little to say. But what he does say makes it perfectly clear that they key is not any surpassing beauty in Penelope herself. He freely grants that from this point of view Calypso will be found superior. And he points to no superiority in Penelope that could counterbalance Calypso's divine excellence. So he is not, it seems, choosing a glorious prize in spite of the fact that he has to face death to get it; that is not at all how he sees the issue. He is choosing the whole human package: mortal life, dangerous voyage, imperfect mortal aging woman. [...] We don't quite know what it would be for this hero, known for his courage, craft, resourcefulness, and loyal love to enter into a life in which courage would atrophy, in which cunning and resourcefulness would have little point, since the risks with which*

*they grapple would be removed.*<sup>134</sup>

Penelope, matron saint of weaving,

*If we look at something like the Odyssey, we have two different kinds of heroes: Odysseus and Penelope. Odysseus is a pretty Campbellian hero. He leaves home, he does deeds, and returns home, having earned some kind of mantle of authority. Penelope, on the other hand, is left at home with the challenge of figuring out what to do with herself. She waits for Odysseus and she fends off a series of suitors. The Heroine's Journey is about learning to suffer, endure, and be subjected to indignity while maintaining grace, composure, and patience.*

*The modern heroine looks like Kristen Wiig in Bridesmaids, a movie that pulls indignity rugs out from under its protagonist for two hours. The modern heroine also looks like Sylvia Plath, who has both become a symbol of female suffering (trite, traditional), and of an interpreter of suffering that is female in a human sense. The post-wounded woman is one who is never suffering in the present, but is instead always contextualizing and nervously proving ownership over that suffering. 'You're a big, ugly wound!' one yells. The other yells back: 'No, you're the wound!' And so they volley, back and forth: You're the wound; no, you're the wound. They know women like to claim monopolies on woundedness, and they call each other out on it.*

*If the graceful negotiation of composure and things that threaten composure is the essence of female value, and fetishes originate in the secret and taboo, then well, of course the destruction of female composure would become deeply, repeatedly fetishized.*<sup>135</sup>

“October, 2007, and the Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus. A friend and I risk the

134 The View From Hell, “Living In The Epilogue”

135 The Sublemon, [thesublemon.tumblr.com](http://thesublemon.tumblr.com)

widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words HARD TO GET across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible<sup>136</sup> fruits. Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad." The grace of self-knowledge, the glory of self-elevation. *His fatal flaw is he lives in books*, by which I also meant myself—synthesizing, aggregating maps, as if it were dealing with their territory.<sup>137</sup> Attempts at re-approbations of the real, attempts at grounding.

Even though it purports to, did this text actually do the "Nelson as genre-fiction thing"? Have I really cross-dressed, or was the performance—as I think it was—a little less than convincing? Despite all the make-up, certain clashing attributes end up coming through. What's the difference, anyway, between 1) picking a voice that represents one of many selves, then passing reality through its filter, or 2) being a wolf dressed in lambswool? Is it the difference between taking up a way of seeing and dressing up to be seen in some way? In other words, Is this *drag* or *disguise*, and is there a difference?

2W's swapped \_\_\_ for Niagara, sung an alba of mourning before a canícula of ch-ch-ch(anges) that doesn't take away from the original Porgy or the fact that neither of us are penal colonists, and if you doubt me on any of this you can cite Bruce Conner at MoMA.<sup>138</sup>

136 *Argonauts*, opening graf.

137 The hope that, if I overlay enough boxy frames, at the right, complementary angles, they'd add up to a perfect circle.

138 cf. Boyer's avant-garde:" It will develop many languages, all of them like lovers to each other or parents to their child. These will probably be

CHANT I will face my shame. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the shame has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

Oh & go get your haircut at Tony's. Tony's been at it since 1965. Same spot off 5th n' Sunset, the same old cabinets and chairs. Everyone wanders in and out, chatting, about the news, about whether he'll ever retire, go to Florida? Tony? Nahh.

∞

“Ngai’s landmark argument in *Ugly Feelings* [is] that a work of literature can, through tone, represent a subject’s ideology—and so, both represent a structure of her subjectivity and touch upon the structure of the social-material conditions structuring her subjectivity.”<sup>139</sup>

Quoting Batuman: *A “rain/grey/British vibe,” for example, incorporates the walk from a Barbour store (to look at wellington boots) to the Whitney Museum (to look at “some avant-garde shorts by Robert Beavers”), as well as the TV adaptation of Brideshead Revisited, the Scottish electronic duo Boards of Canada, “late 90s Radiohead/global anxiety/airports” and New Jersey. A “vibe” turns out to be something like “local colour,” with a historical dimension. What gives a vibe “authenticity” is its ability to evoke—using a small number of disparate elements—a certain time, place and milieu; a certain nexus of historic, geographic and cultural forces.*<sup>140</sup>

embarrassing.”

139 Grietzer, “Theory of Vibe.” Q

140 Elif Batuman, The Guardian, via Peli, responding to Koenig’s 2006 blog

(Some synesthetic vibe-kinship is the result of cultural associations, but some appears innate. Survey societies around the globe, even pre-industrial and “untouched” island cultures, & the sound of “Catty Acker” will be drawn as a hard, spiky object, where “UbuWeb” will inspire bulbous, rounded, illustrations.)

What could “gestalt documentary” signify, in a purely aesthetic sense?

The house band kicks in for the night’s last song, vox the timbre of stone over canyon, synthesizer echo and a bassline monument.

∞

The die slows. What did it require, what you’re reading? Was it birthed, was it always there? Are things just that which we summon from chthonic matter, draw boundaries around, observe and name? Or are they the recombination of existing modules into new relations? How is it, how attention can *generate*; the non-negligible effect of recognition on reality.<sup>141</sup> “As you learn someone’s personal language, you grow to love them, it is unavoidable. (See also: Stockholm Syndrome.)”<sup>142</sup>

He giggles. He is holding a clear violet marble up to the

141 Nerst: “In Why I Love the ESC I said that I’m no longer as much of a fan as I used to be, and that I look upon it with old-friend fondness in my eyes more than anything else. That’s actually changed somewhat. Starting to write about it two years ago made me also start reading about it more, and that dragged me into the whole online circus around it. And it turns out that the more you read about something and the more you surround yourself with others who are also into it, the more significant it begins to feel.”

142 Hotel Concierge, “How To Be Attractive.”

window, turning it in the sunlight. Euripides' *Bacchae* with the worst case. *Pentheus, perhaps psychically influenced by Dionysus, thinks a little bacchanalia—dipping his toe, using irony for internal justification—can't hurt him. He dresses up as a woman to spy on the Bakkhai women in the hills, perhaps catch them in cunnilingus, and this fissure, this personal allowance to let a bit of Dionysus in, does in fact destroy him—tears him apart limb-by-limb, what classicists love calling “sparagmos,” in a literalized destrueturing of the symbolic order. One of the women who does the tearing is his own mother, arm from socket, drunk off Dionysus.* But this, to me, is the point at which Euripides' fear eclipses his wisdom. Until this point, it is not his flexibility but his rigidity which has brought Pentheus's empire down around him. It is his unbending unwillingness to recognize, his fear that mere recognition will legitimize, encourage. Maybe it's just too late.

“Among other ideas, Eastern aesthetics suggests that ordered structure contrives, that logical exposition falsifies, and that linear, consecutive argument eventually limits... The structure in the multiplicity of strokes that make up the aesthete quality, one which they imply and which we infer.”<sup>143</sup>

You look down & foaming tide washes up on yr feet, whets the stones underneath, every color, ombre, ochre, a clay-like orange red, a dark crimson, a blunted jade, a dark maroon and mauve. “I remember when I was a boy going upon the beach and being charmed with the colors and forms of the shells. I picked up many and put them in my pocket. When I got home I could find nothing that I gathered—nothing but some dry ugly mussel and snail shells. Thence I learned that Composition was more important than the beauty of

individual forms to effect. On the shore they lay wet and social by the sea and under the sky.”<sup>144</sup> That’s the transcendentalist Emerson; Nelson cites a similar quote by him in *Bluets*: “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world in their own huge, and each shows only what lies in its focus.” Deadly, she calls it, to be stuck in any one bead. Hyperpriors that shape perception...

This is fit, when sum of parts become other. An emergent property: coherence, beauty, appropriateness, a classical unity. Organisms are fitted to their environment, works to their contexts. The pragmatic, contextual approach—success relative to *what*, success *at what*—is everything. As Emerson also writes in his diary: *Every thing is a monster till we know what it is for... A lobster is monstrous but when we have been shown the reason of the case & the color & the tentacula & the proportion of the claws & seen that he has not a scale nor a bristle nor any quality but fits to some habit & condition of the creature he then seems as perfect & suitable to his sea house as a glove to a hand. A man in the rocks under the sea would be a monster but a lobster is a most handy & happy fellow there.*

Can we understand the difference between symmetry and asymmetry? I am in a black box theater which a gathered group of friends has rented out for a wedding. Misha, Sam of *Saner Than Lasagna*, Guzey & his wife Nastya, Gabe of *Lipoblog*. Jules Pitt, Chris Wage & Chris Beiser; Tao with Nifty & Sara, Simpolism’s J\*\*\*, “Other James.” Shreeda’s SadMoon as bridesmaid; Sol as flowergirl; Plover teaching dance lessons. Danny Klein’s manning the door alongside Lambdaphagy; Sarah Perry, wearing a long linen dress with

144 From R.W.E.’s journals.

her hair neatly up, is officiating the ceremony.

Ben & Yena, old friends from the city, had come for breakfast in the morning, gone with Anteros and I on a walk toward the lake. “Your ability to visualize text, to translate between words and image, goes far beyond mine,” I told A. Your Robbe-Grillet love, maybe, or my own frustrations with *Jealousy*. A window into another ontology, her eyes.

Dinner that night was ginger mashed sweet potatoes walnut cranberry salad prosciutto but not for me, all stuffed grape leaves and acorn squash. Best man speech by the Asshole at Delphi, a self-described marriage skeptic. Recounted the story of Leonidas’s trip to the oracle on the eve before battle: her urging him to stoically accept failure; his disregard of her foretelling. A metaphor for your typical wedding, the Asshole says—the brink of a doomed enterprise, blood soon smeared on participants’ cheeks. It was less melodramatic, his speech, more knowing than I am conveying here. It was even touching, the punchline that even our polyamorous Delphic believed *this* wedding would be different.

Someone reads a passage from Annie Baker’s *John*: «I remember moving towards him through Terminal 4 and it was like emerging from the cold and into the sun... And all the confusion and fear and self-hatred that I’d always felt in the presence of other people... I was shedding it like a skin... I remember thinking: everything is possible. If this is possible, anything is possible.»

Someone reads from Kegan’s *Evolving Self*: «Reciprocity now becomes a matter of both holding and being held, a mutual protection of each partner’s opportunity to experience and exercise both sides of life’s fundamental tension.

Reciprocity now becomes a matter of at once mutually preserving the other's distinctness while fashioning a bigger context in which these separate identities interpenetrate, and to which persons invest an affection supervening their separate identities.» Then there is a three-part round sung by the audience, which goes better than expected.

Before vows Sarah gives a speech about a quality with no name, the strange fitness between human beings, and afterward at reception I come up to her, we chat about a pattern we've both noticed, in Murray Davis's "That's Interesting," in Schmidhuber's compression, Clark & Friston's predictive processing or Dennett & Hurley's *Inside Jokes*. To merely affirm the beliefs of your audience is to be redundant, a difference that makes no difference. It's utterances that update their beliefs which are valuable. And you may ask yourself, why the inclusion, what is the motive for speech? *Audience-oriented ontology*: Correctives that indicate the position of the stick is slightly askew.

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*B/log entry xx-xx-2018. Midnight now. Drink: a 1:2 ratio the Goldilocks zone for a gin and tonic. When I try to sleep I think of Beckett's Endgame, a trashlid shutting out the light. The wall is a kind of dusty lavender, darkening in shallow gradient toward the corner. Enjoy the bower, A.*

<p>We'll be looking at the historic terrazzo sidewalks of Downtown Los Angeles, talking about the weather. Do you miss the seasons?</p>

<p>It'll be a periwinkle sky, with only a scattering of clouds each seemingly miles apart, and I will wonder whether I can

accurately gauge the space between them from below. I'll be smoking a cigarette, and I will not be inhaling because I no longer smoke, have no tolerance for it, would only give me headswarms, but I am with you and you are smoking and for the sake of company I join you, if only from the outside.</p>

<p>Would you be jealous if you knew? Would the interior-exterior gap disturb you? Would you think yourself betrayed?</p>

<p>You'll make your legs command distances down the Angelino avenue, stretching the fabric of your Ralph Lauren pants with the length of your strides. After a bit of walking and perhaps a cab, we will see the silver light of the Gehry concert hall in the distance; we will emerge from air-conditioned shops into warm-if-dry heat; we will enter a movie theater and see the new Coppola films, double-headers, and in the intermission between them we'll emerge sunblinded by the last image of day. Will you be saddened to miss it as we step back inside?</p>

<p>When I think of you it is as your Platonic form. I have heard rumors that to love someone is to accept their faults, and I am theoretically certain that you have a few—faults, I mean—but when I think of why I love you it is because I feel you have no true faults at all. </p>

<p>The intricacies of your mannerisms astound me. You will show me a picture of yourself as a child when we retire to your apartment. You are you, just before college, your dark hair in bangs and you will disclaim, “I wish you knew me when I was young and beautiful.” I do not. The girl who is looking out at me from the photograph knows nothing

of what she wants. You *<do>*, exactly*</do>*, and it is what compels me about you. It is in your mood, your bluntness of presentation. So little exhibition to it, not the way some people we know perform.*</p>*

*<p>*“I used to buy flowers for myself and carry them on the subway, so that people would think I was wanted.” I say, “I was awkward too once,” met only with a shaking head. Eve’s apple to Cohen’s Chinese oranges, I guess.*</p>*

*<p></p>*

*<p>*You’ll be wearing a dark, faux fur coat, dyed so that the tips are lighter, and I’ll think you’ll look fabulous in it, and you’ll think so too, which is really the best thing of all. California, you’re so good to me I’ll think, while I watch you cross the street, end to end.*</p>*

*<p>*Where are you going? To MoMA? I can’t see you across even the emptiest of trains. We’ve switched geographies. I can only describe the places, around us together, soft and sharp, but perhaps such places are memorable only because, in my memory, you’re in them. *</p>*

*<p>*You’ll have a soft spot for Marsden Hartley, a successor artist in your personal canon of bests (after I tease you gently for loving Benton, loving him unduly). You’ll be riding one of those bright red Spacelander bicycles with the bubbled fiberglass cut-outs, and possibly two racoon-tail handlebars, looking very chic. It’s the last day before it gets too cold to leave indoors. I’ll look past a Robert Zettler wood carving in mahogany, a bulbous Tiffany lampshade all leaded glass, and wish they were ours.*</p>*

<p></p>

<p>A winter mix coming down outside the windows. I'll go to bed with you, praying for feet of snow, and in the morning it comes.</p>

<p></p>

<p>I'll be in the kitchen and you'll be sleeping, our little second-story apartment. "Chelsea Morning" on the stereo; me making drip coffee. You'll get up and walk-cross behind me on the parquet hardwood floor, to a small balcony looking out over the street—a balcony cramped yet noble, and I'll bring you a cup on the veranda, no Montana in sight.</p>

<p></p>

<p>I am a Papageno. I have seen you in a flash and sizzle of the pan before you left. I have played the fool; I have initiated; I have talked to you in my cell against all predicate. <i>Disclosure of love too early is its death; guard the secret as if it were love's survival itself.</i> </p>

<p>I am like the man who stencilled "Not Art" in crate-barrel typeface on the wall outside the Brooklyn Museum. (Through the statement, intending to prove himself an artist.) So I'll be a man in love.</p>

</body>

I said, *Time my change me. But I can trace time.*

# A

“Bricolage. Collage. Geodes. Bright silver ore running through boulders. Jagged fragments. Stained glass shatters. Crystalline snowflakes, gathered...”<sup>1</sup> “...less a unified novel in the realist mode than a richly kaleidoscopic meditation on female identity as it evolves over time... one feels the presence of predecessors such as Renata Adler’s *Speedboat* and Rachel Cusk’s *Outline*...”<sup>2</sup> “...fragmentary and intimate first-person address, one drawing for support on a range of cultural discourses, echoes a characteristic 21st-century mode of writing that, with inspiration from Bernhard and Barthes, Sebald and Berger, traverses several different genres from fiction to criticism and even to poetry and the graphic memoir...”<sup>3</sup> “...hybrid, associative, poetically inflected, and rooted in both the concreteness of the world and in metaphysical and ontological questioning... drawing freely on other sources in a way familiar from contemporary art, music sampling and the Internet...”<sup>4</sup>

“Prismatic. Sundry. Sea glass nestled in sand. A literary medley... Sedimentary. Kaleidoscopic. Onion-like. Russian-doll-ish. It fluctuates, builds and unravels, flutters from flower to flower.”<sup>5</sup>

1 H. Huff

2 O’Rourke, *Bookforum*

3 J. Pistelli

4 J. Moran

5 H. H.

“I emphasize both the current popularity and the distinguished pedigree of this literary mode because I want to play fair. The truth is I am not sure how much I like it. At one time, I liked it enormously. When I was younger, I thought it was the height of profundity to concede the humility, contingency, and contradictoriness of one’s own discourse. I was stunned in a seminar, late in college, to read Barthes’s *S/Z* and Ondaatje’s *English Patient*, and I wanted to write criticism like Barthes and fiction like Ondaatje, or maybe even vice versa. Now, and I can’t say why for sure, or when the change came, I am far more impressed by those who actually make the doomed effort of coherence, of continuous argument, of epic narration.”<sup>6</sup>

“The consequence of this unusual relationship between part and whole is that the collection, like the individual fragments of which it is composed, is open-ended, and it, too, depends upon the reader’s imagination in order to become completely comprehensible... a potential structure in which implicit relationships are left to the reader to be realized.”<sup>7</sup> “As for form, I will say that compression and distillation of grand themes feels particularly anti-patriarchal to me.”<sup>8</sup> “Elevating the fragment over the scene, the notation over narration, such writing testifies to a loss of faith in fictional or nonfictional storytelling. This is an older idea than it looks, going back at least to Romantic aesthetics and the modern (not postmodern) collapse of faith in traditional theology and systematic philosophy.”<sup>9</sup>

“It refuses genre, or, alternatively, is such a hybrid thing, a

6 Pistelli

7 D. Ferris on Jena Romanticism

8 Jenny Offill, of *Dept. of Speculation*. Earlier origins of fragment writing: Coleridge & Byron, Schlegel & Novalis to *The Cantos* & Zukofsky & Benjamin, to Barthes and beyond.

9 J. Pistelli

trans thing, that it defies easy categorization. It is memoir and poetry, criticism and personal essay, series of fragments and book-length work...”<sup>10</sup> “...fragmentary but not disconnected, certainly not a series of discrete contextless meditations or aphorisms in the style of Marcus Aurelius. Nelson lists insights, hers and others’, to convey her learning and her vexation. She discovers links between many PURPLES and their associations...”<sup>11</sup> “Hybrid essays, lyrical essays, nonfiction novels, memoirs in fragments...”<sup>12</sup> “...Nelson interpolates between the poetic and the encyclopedic... the warp thread and waft thread of which writing itself is woven...”<sup>13</sup> Gertrude Stein: “Think in stitches. Think in sentences.” “Kaleik (1975) talks about strategies of tying together, filling in, and serializing as signs of women’s desire to create continuity in conversation...”<sup>14</sup>

“The decayed fragment (Sappho); the contemporary fragment (text messages, twitter, blog posts, etc); the modernist fragment (T.S. Eliot; fragment as mark of psychological disintegration); Freud’s fragment (dreams, slips, etc. as thruways to the unconscious); the sampled or plagiarized fragment; the fragment as waste, excess, or garbage; the footnote; fragment as frame (Degas, Manet); life narrative as fragment: we can’t see the whole until we’re dead, and then we can’t see it (pathos, *pethos*); fragment as psychological terror (castration, King’s head); fragment as fetish, or as ‘organ logic,’ as pornography; fragment as metonym & synecdoche; fragment as that which is preserved, or that which remains; fragment as the unfinished or the abandoned...”<sup>15</sup>

10 R. Silbergleid

11 T. Larson

12 A. Rowbottom

13 M. Popova

14 Maltz & Borker, “A Cultural Approach to Male- Female Miscommunication,” 1982.

15 M. Nelson, interview with Ben Segal.



- page 10      See Cecilia Corrigan's *Titanic* (&NOW Books, 2014), the exchange on p. 85: "My sword is bent."
- page 25      (sleeping at Virginia's place)
- page 30      I said, I said, 'I spent the week deciding Kant was the first Modernist, then spent the weekend discovering that Clement Greenberg called Kant the first Modernist. Which is exactly what I hated about childhood the first time around: you thought you and the world were having a conversation but actually you were talking back to the recorded message on the world's answering machine.'
- page 36      See the brilliant story by Artemisia, in *Topics of Conversation*, of her husband, who began as her undergrad prof in Buenos Aires: how the roles and power shifted, at the relief which comes in the second-story encounter which ends their marriage. "It was not because I was released from shame that I found relief in his violence. It was because I was released from control."

- page 36                   B: I'm into you in control. You taking charge. I like it. It ah, it relaxes me. You know.. I don't have to do anything. I don't have to guess anything. It's not like you're a rapist. Or anything like that. I just like. You know. The drama.
- A: Uh. [Fr. Reines's *Telephone*]
- page 41                   Yr neck and back pulsing with pain all day, all night, from yr torso (and hence, yr lungs) having been constricted for almost thirty years. You tried to stay wrapped even while sleeping, but by morning the floor was always littered with doctored sports bras, strips of dirty fabric—"smashers," you called them. (MN's *Argonauts*, on partner Harry's chestbinding)
- page 44                   Reines, in her debut, *Coeur de Lion*: "I don't know how people/ Understand their lives, measure/ Their sensations against "objective"/ Or so-to-speak democratic estimations." Here is your purpose as artist.
- page 58                   (sleeping at Nicholas' place)
- page 58                   Terry Craven, of Madrid bookshop Desperate Literature: books are often treated... as trimmings, as signifiers of cultural capital (a horribly cynical interpretation of John Waters' famous ditty: "If you go home with somebody, and they don't have books, don't fuck'em!") and that probably accounts for why we get so many first dates through the door.

page 61

There are memes circulating that are known as “bingo cards,” in which each square is filled with a typical statement or trait of a person who belongs to a given constituency... The idea is that within this grid there is an exhaustive and as it were a priori tabulation, deduced like Kant’s categories of the understanding, of all the possible moves a member of one of these groups might make, and whenever the poor sap tries to state his considered view, his opponent need only pull out the table and point to the corresponding box, thus revealing to him that it is not actually a considered view at all, but only an algorithmically predictable bit of output from the particular program he is running. The sap is sapped of his subjectivity, of his belief that he, properly speaking, has views at all. (Justin E.H. Smith)

page 72

From Fiona Alison Duncan’s *Exquisite Mariposa*: “I was, and still am, very into reading signs. The world is full of them, and I’m full of it—convinced of reality’s divine design, believing in magic, magnetism... and maybe, that everything happens for a reason.” Later: “I guess what I really believe is that it serves me to believe that everything happens for a reason.” And: “My father’s strictly an empiricist.”

page 90, fn

Cecilia Corrigan: “*Titanic* is both like a garbage bin and a variety show of styles.”

- page 90 Barthes: What I am looking for ... is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance. Now there is a teacher of nuance, literature; try to live according to the nuances that literature teaches me. [Cited by Nelson as a guiding principle in writing *Art of Cruelty*]
- page 109 The case made by Willis in “Lust Horizons” has so far proved the enduring one. Since the 1980s, the wind has been behind a feminism which takes desire for the most part as given—your desire takes the shape that it takes—and which insists that acting on that desire is morally constrained only by the boundaries of consent. Sex is no longer morally problematic or unproblematic: it is instead merely wanted or unwanted. In this sense, the norms of sex are like the norms of capitalist free exchange. What matters is not what conditions give rise to the dynamics of supply and demand—why some people need to sell their labour while others buy it—but only that both buyer and seller have agreed to the transfer. And yet Willis insists: “a truly radical movement must look ... beyond the right to choose, and keep focusing on the fundamental questions. Why do we choose what we choose?”
- page 146 Pedro Almodóvar: *Sometimes a love story and a horror story are the same thing*

page 175

Of Flea's cruelty in the first season, and her direct addresses to the audience, Rachel Syme writes: "Fleabag is practically pleading with the audience, begging us to witness her ghastliness. She's simultaneously asking for absolution and for someone to smite her, which is why it is appropriate that the second season [is] all about God." In *Topics of Conversation: A Novel*, Miranda Popkey describes a mother's advice to her nanny, casting light on Flea's S1 childishness, why God is a *pater*: "The boys," Artemisia said, "crave boundaries. All children do. The precise boundaries matter less than the fact of their existence. Tell them," Artemisia continued, "what it is they must not do and when they do it anyway," she shrugged, "punish them."

Elsewhere from Popkey: "[T]he narrator is a perceptive observer of her own habit of falling into, and her ultimate inability to accept, a series of stock roles: bright but naive grad student; professor's wife; suburban mother; clever daughter; single parent... The problem with those narratives for a bright young woman, after all, is how claustrophobic, deforming, and one-dimensional they are." Staag, *Sleeveless*: "What defines our time, generally? We are, as always, hoping to appear sexier than we feel."

page 178

page 203 I was a straight-A student... dance class five days a week at Luigi's studio, edited both the school literary magazine and newspaper, and was horrified when my college guidance counselor suggested that I might prefer Brown to Harvard because I was, as he put it, "offbeat." I had been planning to go to Harvard since I was 6. On adult life: I have no ability to compromise. Most people say that as a statement of principle, but in my case, it is about feeling trapped when I am doing something I don't like, and it is probably more childish than anything else... it has also meant that I have not disciplined myself into the kinds of commitments that make life beyond the wild of youth into a haven of calm. ("Elizabeth Wurtzel Confronts Her One-Night Stand of a Life," *The Cut* 2013)

page 204 from a *Red Scare* intvw with Brontez Purnell, Dasha reading fr. *100 Boyfriends*: "I get fucked a lot, Doc. Like so much. Figuratively speaking I don't have a mother, last name, or purpose in life; I'm just a hole." I stopped just short of saying, "My only desire is to be desired. I feel like the whole equation cancels itself out and what it really means is I have no will. I can, at will, rip out all sense of self just so a boy can have one more hole to fuck me in. I'm afraid of this terrible power [...] I just wait to be wanted, it's killing me doctor."

Dasha: "And I felt like that was a very astute

description of a very specific feeling... it speaks to a universal experience of being... being a bottom." Purnell: "You know, most of the people who connect to this book are women."

- page 250 Ariel Levy, in "Ottessa Moshfegh's Otherworldly Fiction" (2018): "McGlue is unreliable, intoxicated, and trapped—as are the narrators of Moshfegh's other two novels," *Eileen* and *Rest & Relaxation*. See the titular Eileen, who "guzzles vermouth and feels enslaved by her abusive, alcoholic father... spend[ing] much of the novel fantasizing about escaping from her frigid New England home town"; see the unnamed 'Tag, who blacks out on Infermiterol.
- page 264 Levy, ctd: Several years ago, a Vedic astrologer Moshfegh consults—"One of the most intelligent people I've ever met, probably one of the top five"—told her that love was inescapable. This struck her as a kind of threat. "The exact thing that the astrologer told me was *This is coming for you*," she said. "*If you move into a cabin in the middle of the woods, someone will come knock on your door*." Fiona Duncan tells us of her L.A. group apartment: In Alicia and Miffany's room, we'd talk about it all: infinity, etymology, astrology, spirituality, empathy, epigenetics, trauma, rape, ...race, class, sex, gender... fashion, art... souls... spirit animals, family, branding, anxiety.

- page 269      I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me. This fundamental thing settled, the next point is, in what internal respect does the whale differ from other fish... in brief they are these: lungs and warm blood; whereas all other fish are lungless and cold blooded. (*Moby Dick*, cited in Chalmers' 2011 "Verbal Disputes.")
- page 302      The 21st Century's birthed (a short list) Hannah Black's pro-gossip argument in *Tank* ("Witch-hunt"), Holly Pester's "Gossip as method" in *Jacket2*, Emily Janakiram's "Gossip Girls" for *Verso*, Ramaya Tegegne's conceptual work *Bzzz Bzzz Bzzz*, Jaime Serra's *Un Diagrama Familiar*, the dual-gallery "Sie sagen, wo Rausch ist, ist auch Feuer" group exhibition, Adrienne Drake's "Pssst...! A Play on Gossip," Sarah Hamerman's "Gossip as Communication System," Karina Hagelin's *Gossip as a Site of Resistance*, Pamela Stewart's *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*.
- page 305      Tainting—a trace, a contamination, an unscrubbable stain; the correlate to trauma's tragic inescapability, to nurture's determinism—at least in this frame, where the unsavoriness of evolution and genetics give way to an equally unsavory cult of upbringing, history, and etymology; *la trace*.

page 305      Groth, Castronovo: [McCarthy] is certain Rahv suspected nothing sexual, she thinks he interpreted her jealousy [at Wilson's affection toward Peggy Marshall] as a loss of master Wilson's attention, a literary loss of face in this *Partisan Review* World.



A DVD extra on the mode of this text:

One must encounter difference to become different, to *change*; the hermeneutic reflection/echo that characterizes highly indeterminate encounters is only the sameness of a mind unchallenged. The amount of indeterminacy in a text matters. Not just aversion to polemic, but Nelson 2011: “I’m sure one could write a book of very disconnected fragments that didn’t so overtly weave into a whole... the mind will always work overtime to put disparate things together... to let the reader make the connections, but it’s important to me as a writer to make sure that the connections, when made, actually point toward what I want to be pointing at, rather than just reflecting the human’s capacity to make a bridge.”

