BEYOND THE POETIC PRINCIPLE:

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE LYRIC

BY

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CHAPTER ONE: DEFENSE MECHANISMS

I begin with a statement to be defended: what psychoanalysis and poetry have most in common is their tendency to call people (poets, analysts, scholars, disciples) to their defense. Although psychoanalysts and po ets do have their deriders, the great defenses of both disciplines often respond to a perceived rather than an imminent threat. That is, these defenses are often preemptive, anticipatory of a resistance to whatever truth they have to offer. As Freud writes in prefatory remarks to the Dora case study, any reader who at the outset is not already sympathetic to his cause "will find only bewilderment in these pages instead of the enlightenment he is in search of, and will certainly be inclined to project the cause of his bewilderment on to the author and to pronounce his views fantastic…What is new has always aroused bewilderment and resistance."[1]

Resistance is what stands in the patient's way of gaining access to an unconscious desire or repressed material. Resistance is what the analyst therefore has to read, for it carries a significance equal to the actual material that the ego represses. Resistance is also an opposition to insistence, namely, the analyst's insistent interpretation. As Jacques Derrida points out in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, the political valence of the word, not to mention the nostalgic pride in it taken in the French context, cannot be overlooked. In Freud's early works, including *Studies on Hysteria* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he admits that not everything can be interpreted because of this resistance that will not simply back down when faced with the revelation of the truth. "We would have to know

[1] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1901-1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London, The Hogarth Press, 1953), 10.

whether what resists analysis does not also resist the analytic concept of 'resistance to analysis,'" writes Derrida.[2] In other words, is it possible to think of resistance as something that cannot be subsumed under the analytic relation, as something unreadable?

I take it to be the central problem of psychoanalytic literary criticism that if it is resistance that must be read and interpreted, the text cannot say no, as it were. The varying reading methodologies or critical disciplines that take offense at psychoanalysis (including but not limited to surface reading, historicism, and sometimes affect theory) level their critique here. Freud himself anticipated this problem in his late essay, "Constructions in Analysis." He describes the complaint of "a certain well-known man of science" who found that "in giving interpretations to a patient we treat him upon the famous 'Heads I win, tails you lose'. That is to say, if the patient agrees with us, then the interpretation is right; but if he contradicts us, that is only a sign of his resistance, which again shows that we are right."[3] Since the man of science is not exactly wrong, Freud writes what he calls an "apologia" that describes how the analyst treats the patient's "yes" and "no."[4] Both answers are ambiguous, and so "yes" neither means "yes" nor "no." The analyst has more than a one-word response to read, after all. Indeed, Freud proposes that rather than thinking of the analyst's work as interpretation, we should begin characterizing it as construction. Whereas interpretation applies to one curious element

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[2] Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.
[3] Sigmund Freud, "Constructions in Analysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXIII (1937-1939): Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), 257.
[4] I would be remiss to not mention that I write this introduction in a university setting, where questions of what "yes" and "no" mean take a more exigent context given increased attention to campus rape and sexual violence. I will address this further in my chapter on Baudelaire.

of the story, construction tackles the whole incomplete narrative. He likens construction to the work of the archaeologist who must build a theory from fragments, debris, and ruins. The analyst listens to the patient's complaints and constructs a history for him or her, and has only to wait for the response to his work.

The literary text, however, is not a patient (that is to say, a real person), and as such is not endangered by a bad reading. For that matter, Freud claims that a mistaken interpretation harms only the analyst's authority, since the patient will simply reject the interpretation without putting up a resistance. "The danger of leading a patient astray by suggestion…has certainly been enormously exaggerated," Freud decides, adding, "I can assert without boasting that such an abuse of 'suggestion' has never occurred in my practice."[5] Leaving aside the Dora case for the moment, we can be confident that whenever Freud is overly confident (without boasting), he is actually being defensive, responding more to his own doubts than the charges against him. Suggestion is the foundation of psychoanalysis, stemming as it did from hypnosis and arguably sharing historical roots with Mesmerism, shamanism, and spiritualism.[6] But if we are to take him at his word, an incorrect construction will provoke no reaction in the patient, but a correct one, no matter how inoffensive, will provoke some negative response—a resistance. When we read literature, however, we have no response to confirm or deny our "construction," only the feeling that sits with us. Resistance comes from the text, but defensiveness belongs to the one who interprets the text. In this work, I have chosen to read texts that are particularly ungenerous towards our constructions and thus provoke

[5] Freud, 262.
[6] See Henri Ellenberger, "The Ancestry of Dynamic Psychotherapy" in *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York, Basic Books, 1981).

our defenses. The text is apathetic to our feelings, to our lingering suspicion that our analysis is not enough, and so the defense provoked is an unconscious response to our own intimation of insecurity.

Defenses protect the ego from external threat, but sometimes that external threat is a force that tries to make the ego face material that is incommensurate with itself: a repressed memory too difficult to be worked through, a desire too dangerous to be acknowledged. Defense against a perceived threat on the outside is often actually against some excitation that presses from within. The preemptive defenses that are to be found throughout Freud's work are an example of this—the more tendentious his theories are, or indeed, the less confident he is in them, the more he asserts that those who disagree with him only prove the worth of his argument. It is not easy to differentiate whether a threat in fact comes from the external or internal world, since one of the ways the ego can combat internal excitation is, as Freud writes, by "treat[ing] them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defense against them. This is the origin of projection."[7] The urge to defend, therefore, reflects a boundary problem wherein the ego strives to keep a hard line between internal and external world, and to deflect excitation from without and to project out excitation from within. As Margaret Ferguson has written, this particular boundary problem is equally indicative of the rhetorical strategies of famous defenses of poetry. Poets, Ferguson claims, defend poetry by extending its generic claims to all forms of rhetoric that use tropes in order to persuade

[7] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London, The Hogarth Press, 1955), 28.

the reader. By broadening the work of poetry into all forms of persuasive and creative language, the defenders of poetry make the boundary of the genre more inclusive. Ferguson characterizes the work of defense as "a complex process of introjection and projection," wherein the charges against the writer are anticipated and volleyed back onto the one who would charge.[8] Her essay provides a convincing comparison of Freudian defenses throughout the body of his work to key moments in the defense of poetry, from Boccaccio to Sidney to Shelley to Peacock, and for a comprehensive account of the shared rhetorical strategies both Freud and the poet-apologists employ, I refer my reader to her. I cannot resist citing one excellent example of her connection between Sidney and Freud: that both poets and analysts are the "least liar[s]," for each "at least acknowledge his lies, does not establish the writer's innocence, but rather asks readers to see that they too are guilty of feigning."[9]

Perhaps it is little wonder, then, that one of Freud's most consistent lines of defense throughout his work is his recourse to poetry. "The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious," remarks Freud. "What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied."[10] On the one hand, Freud modestly claims that his work is only a systemization of what the poets have described for centuries. On the other hand, he aligns himself with another group of writers oft derided for their discoveries and only appreciated after death. Perhaps this doctrine of preemption helps explain the need for poets to rush to the defense of their own art. After

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[8] Margaret W. Ferguson, "Freud and Defenses of Poetry" in *The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 159.
[9] Ferguson, 179.
[10] Freud, quoted in Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 9.

all, while some may write off poetry as pretentious, privileged works of navel-gazing, who debates the political import of poetry or its worth to society more than poets themselves?

In this work, I will consider psychoanalysis and poetry as two disciplines invested in "navel" gazing. I refer here, of course, to the moment in *Interpretation of Dreams* when Freud reaches his limit:

> There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unraveled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.[11]

In the face of such resistance, staring down such an unknowable limit, he wonders how a dream can even come to be. As Derrida points out, Freud has a premonition earlier in the text, when detailing his dream of Irma's injection, that "something exceeds the analysis…a hidden meaning (*verborgene Sinn*) exceeds the analysis," something that has a sense but that cannot be accessed with sense.[12] Derrida proposes that Freud's concept of the navel is the radicalization of this presentiment of excess as he localizes the origin of the dream in obscurity, in a tangled mesh of threads that we are nonetheless cut off

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[11]Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume V (1900-1901), The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) and On Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 524.
[12] Derrida, 4.

from. The navel, Derrida writes, is a knot-scar, "against which analysis can do nothing."[13] This reading of the navel passage illuminates Freud's work, but is more or less in keeping with it except for one key point—Derrida realizes that at no moment does Freud entertain the notion that this knot-scar may be apathetic to analysis, that "a resistance might be something other than a resistance full of meaning to an analysis full of meaning. Even if it is definitive, resistance belongs, along with what it resists, to the order of sense, of a sense whose secret is only the hidden secret, the dissimulated meaning, the veiled truth: to be interpreted, analyzed, made explicit, explained."[14] Resistance may have less to do with a defense and more to do with the drive that Lacan tells us insists, that cannot be assimilated and that always exceeds analysis. Psychoanalysis gazes towards this ineluctable navel, frustrated by its nonviolent resistance. But resistance is also woven into the "intricate network" of psychoanalytic thinking. It is part of the methodology and the rhetoric of psychoanalysis, and serves as both its spark of inspiration and its limit. As Paul de Man writes about resistance to literary theory, which goes as well for psychoanalytic theory, "Resistance may be a built-in constituent of its discourse, in a manner that would be inconceivable in the natural sciences and unmentionable in the social sciences. It may well be, in other words, that the polemical opposition, the systematic non-understanding and misrepresentation, the unsubstantial but eternally recurrent objections, are the displaced symptoms of a resistance inherent in the theoretical enterprise itself."[15] In the pages that follow, I will

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[13] Derrida, 11.
[14] Derrida, 10.
[15] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University press, 1979), 12.

examine how resistance runs through psychoanalytic literary criticism and ask whether resistance, as Derrida has it, might serve as something other than a call for interpretation.

To His Hysterical Mistress

For the past century, psychoanalysis has found a home in literary criticism as a hermeneutic that reads the text the way an analyst might interpret the stories of her patient. It follows that psychoanalytic literary criticism is largely devoted to narratives. While Sigmund Freud's works are often peppered with poetry, his most sustained textual readings are of drama or prose: *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *Gradiva*, "The Sandman." Nevertheless, the safe haven psychoanalysis finds in literary studies is somewhat ironic, since Freud often vehemently protested against reading his work as literature. "I am aware that—in this town at least—there are many physicians who (revolting though it may seem) choose to read a case history of this kind not as a contribution to the psychopathology of the neuroses, but as a *roman à clef* designed for their private delectation."[16] Thanks to Freud, we are more adept at reading the subtext in the parentheses: the revulsion is his own, stemming from his troubling awareness of the literary quality of his own works. Indeed, critics such as Steven Marcus have argued for treating the Dora case history as a modernist novel.[17] The case has also been made to read his more technical works as literature (Peter Brooks on the narrative structure of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, or conversely, Harold Bloom on the same text as a

[16] Freud, *A Case of Hysteria* 3.
[17] Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History" in *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminsim*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 56-91.

dialectical lyric).[18] Other critics have outlined how his aesthetic exploration of the uncanny is replete with the literary effects it aims to describe (Sarah Kofman, Neil Hertz, Samuel Weber, Hélène Cixous, to name a few well known examples).

Psychoanalytic readings of poetry, however, tend to orient themselves around the poet more than the poem. This kind of reading is rather dated: the biographical diagnosis of the poet, à la Marie Bonaparte; the heroic and aggrandizing treatment of the Poet, à la Bloom. That is to say, they have little to do with poetry as a genre distinct from prose except for their treatment of the either noble or sick soul who writes poetry. Considering the fact that so many defenses of poetry, particularly in the Romantic tradition, concentrate more on the role the poet plays in society than what constitutes a poem, the critical attention given to the poet as person is perhaps not surprising. Nevertheless, the foundational text of psychoanalysis, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, lays the groundwork for a poetics of the psyche, outlining a philosophy of dream composition that evokes the economy of language characteristic of poetry more so than the narrative structure of prose. He even likens the dream-work to the process of poetic composition, as he explains how dreams take an abstract idea and turn it into a concrete picture, and likens words to concrete things as though he were a proper Modernist poet.[19] As Lionel Trilling spells out in a foundational text of the field, "Freud and Literature," Freudian psychoanalysis "makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind. Indeed, the mind, as Freud sees it, is in the greater part of its tendency exactly a poetry-making

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[18] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Harold Bloom, "Freud's Concepts of Defense and Poetic Will in *The Literary Freud: Mechanism of Defense and the Poetic Will*. Derrida, in fact, cautions against classifying Freudian works as literary texts in "Speculations—of Freud."

[19] See *Interpretation of Dreams*, pages 313, 329, and 355.

organ."[20] Why, then, does narrative seem to be the natural home for psychoanalysis in literary studies?

The answer may have something to do with the narratives we have built around Freud's relationship to literature. "When you write about psychoanalysis," admits Catherine Clément, "it's hard to avoid this kind of exercise in style."[21] Clément refers to a peculiarly repetitive practice in analytic literature: the rehashed case study. The critic recounts Freud's telling of the case history with the knowledge that his or her own retelling becomes a revision of the story. He or she then adds a twist to the tale, a critical contribution, an angle Freud missed, in short, a repetition with a difference. The same pattern applies to literary psychoanalytic readings; for example, we see the same phenomenon in the *mise en abyme* of responses to "The Purloined Letter." The "exercise in style" thus becomes an exercise in repetition. (Think of how many times the tale of poor Nathanial gets rewound and repeated in the critical literature on the uncanny.) That there is a certain urge towards mastery in psychoanalytic criticism has not gone unremarked on, nor has the phenomenon of repetition compulsion been disavowed by critics caught up in it. As Samuel Weber writes in his essay on the uncanny, "If the reading that follows appears to do little more than simply *recount* Hoffman's text and *repeat* Freud's analysis of it, it is in the hope of reaching a point where repetition allows not identity but significant differences to emerge, with important consequences for the problem of the uncanny, a problem which, we begin to suspect, involves repetition not

[20] Lionel Trilling, "Freud and Literature" in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 52.
[21] Catherine Clément, *The Weary Sons of Freud* (London: Verso Books, 2015),102.

merely as a thematic phenomenon but as a factor of interpretation itself."[22] Here, interpretation is repetition with a difference, where readings of the uncanny proliferate like spores. The critic could not interpret poetry in the same fashion, for it is difficult to recount a poem to begin with, and Freud has no analyses of poetry to repeat.

Poetry seems to turn up in Freud's work to prove a point, to suggest that his ideas are incontestable because they are old as time. He does not read poetry so much as he instrumentalizes it or cites it as an example of the explorers who charted the territory of the unconscious before him. According to Adam Phillips, psychoanalysis as a discipline (which includes more figures than Freud—Jung, Lacan, Green, Laplanche, Bion, Winnicott, and so on) privileges poetry because it is an art that affirms the belief in the meaning of words. The idea behind psychoanalysis is that the patient gets rid of psychic distress by turning his symptoms into words, with the help of the listening, interpreting analyst. Freud name-checks Schiller and Shakespeare and credits the poets as his forefathers because, as Phillips argues, the poet is the figure who can "restore his confidence in words."[23] Phillips even suggests that the moments when Freud turns to poetry are the moments when his faith in the power of words to carry meaning is most shaky. Consider the ending of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, for instance, when Freud steps back, bemused by his own insight, and "take[s] comfort…in the words of the poet."[24] For analysis to work, words must be meaningful in all their stuttered articulation and incantatory repetition. But as we have discussed, there is that navel, that knot-scar, the limit to interpretation that threatens to nullify the whole analytic enterprise. If there is

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[22] Sam Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 218.
[23] Phillips, *Promises, Promises* 15.
[24] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 63.

a limit to the possibility of interpretation, then it is possible that all such interpretations could be invalidated. Hence, as Phillips finds, "in psychoanalysis, there is always the risk that the wish for meaning will be usurped by the will to meaning."[25] It is for that reason that we can read Freud's desire as he reads his patient's desire—he wishes for the meaning of words. This is not a lofty dream. Poetry does beckon us to figure it out, or rather, we are enthralled to poetry, since I want to resist anthropomorphizing the poem as some object-temptress. In any case, the poem can spark some unconscious work, some feeling that the encounter with the poem provokes an urge to decode the communication and to restore meaning to the elusive words (I will discuss this spark below). As Phillips offers, "what we refer to as the unconscious is any communication, any message to which we cannot remain indifferent."[26] Still, how are we to know if this feeling comes when we hit on some ineluctable truth or when the ego is satisfied with itself? It is in the space between the "wish for meaning" and the "will to meaning" that the analyst-critic of literature gets himself into trouble for imposing his reading (Irma and Dora being salient examples). Phillips raises an important question: in this mutual appreciation society between the poet and analyst, is the patient's role to merely provide material, or does she herself make something? What is her *ars poetica*?

Is it problematic to apply a curative practice, historically designed to help disenfranchised women in particular speak their truth, to aesthetics? And how might it temper the issue to add complementary listening practices to the long established psychoanalytic reading practices? "All the psychoanalyst hears is a novel," remarks Catherine Clément in her lambast against what she characterizes as the self-indulgent,

[25] Phillips, 15.
[26] Phillips, 27.

tone-deaf analyst, *The Weary Sons of Freud*.[27] Clément traces the path the patient's words follow to the analyst's ear and eventually memory and then hand, as he writes and records his imperfect, embellished recollection. As she points out, "the patient who in the laboratory of the psychoanalytic cure, secretes poetic jewels, as anyone can, at some turning-point in life, is not there to produce literature. But the patient is busy keeping roads open so that the conscious element in his history can be connected to the unconscious that has been blocking it at painful spots, and doesn't give a damn about making it sound pretty."[28] Analysis is not an aesthetic exercise—it is a therapeutic process. The analyst, Clément decides, would do well to remember this. The analyst's task is to listen to "the jumble served up to him, lines of force, repetitions, words persistently asking to be let in as if they were hammering at the door."[29] But if he wishes to *write* about this jumble, to construct a case study, then he must turn the patient's material into a narrative. Seldom do these narratives, as Clément wryly observes, have an avant-garde style or resemble the modernist works that are so indebted to psychoanalysis. In fact, she claims that the psychoanalytic case study, more often than not, resembles a bourgeois nineteenth century novel. Because the analyst-writer (for whom Clément holds as much respect as one might for, say, a model-actor) listens to rather than records the patient's discourse, he must take it upon himself to weave a thread through the recollected fragments and stuttered articulations so that the patient's discourse becomes comprehensible to a third party, the reader. As a case history like "Dora" makes plain, such organization makes the story his and not hers. The analyst fills in blanks: dates and

[27] Clément, 38.
[28] Clément, 37.
[29] Clément, 37.

times, chronology and causality, background information that the patient may not have even mentioned. And so, "nothing is left incomplete," Clément concludes, "all the loose ends are tied up. The opposite, in fact, of what he really heard, of what really happened. In short, realism, with all the myths that implies."[30]

The reason why modernist literature is so alluring for psychoanalytic reading is because it so blatantly refuses chronology and causality, because even if the novel agrees to a date, a time, and a place, it will stretch six hundred pages over it (or a more modest two hundred, in the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*; I do not wish to imply that bigger is better). What Clément derides as the "old style" of the case history has very little to with the unconscious and is in fact quite consciously wrought. Characters are introduced in full, the pacing is deliberate, connections are made explicit and ends are tied up. "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures," in other words, as Valéry would never write.[31] Though Clément describes this conscious strong-arming as an issue of style, I understand it more as a problem of genre and form. The patient on the couch who speaks in a stream of consciousness, with speech filled with pauses, repetitions, garbled words, stuttering, and sighs, does not usually begin with what time the Marquise left the house. The analyst, however, "hears a novel." As I will explore thoughout this work, spinning a narrative is a way of claiming mastery over unwieldy language. Though Clément is perhaps right to take offense at the manner in which the analyst renders the patient's polysemy into a tightly crafted narrative, the problem is not that the nineteenth century novel is an outdated style, but rather that the genre itself does some sort of violence to the patient's experience, and that form appropriates the patient's speech. Feminist readings of

[30] Clément, 40.
[31] Reference to Andre Breton, "Manifeste du surréalisme," cited in Clément, 40.

psychoanalytic case histories have long critiqued Freud on this point, but have so far not involved genre in their contention.

I would venture that defense itself is a gendered term, charged by a long tropic history of knights and damsels. Poetry has long fashioned itself as a genre in need of defending, and for what it's worth, poetry is sometimes stereotyped as a flowery, effeminate interest. Both poetry and psychoanalysis have in their history moments where the woman is asked to give something up: the *carpé diem* poems that urge their mistresses to make the most of time, and the analyst who urges his patient to make the most of the hour by trading in her hysterical misery for ordinary unhappiness. Analysis might help, but it also smoothes out her bodily critique of patriarchy – her resistance – to make her acceptable to polite society. As Phillips has it, Freud developed his science by "talking with admired men about disturbed women."[32] And indeed, his big discovery was that if he wanted to help women who were convulsing, or clamming up, or speaking in tongues, or speaking English, he could try listening to them. Everything that follows in the history of psychoanalysis stems from the importance of this first revelation: language that seems too bizarre to signify may actually be replete with meaning. The problem is when the patient's unruly, bodily language is treated with a "collection of picklocks."[33]

The Listening Cure

Shoshana Felman's essay, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," which appeared in the volume of Yale French Studies she edited on the subject of literature and

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[32] Adam Phillips, *Becoming Freud: The Making of a Psychoanalyst* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 108.
[33] Sigmund Freud, Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, October 14, 1900, in *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 426-7.

psychoanalysis, is one of the foundational texts of the field. She makes two key points in her essay: first, that the critical debate around a text repeats the drama of the text itself, thereby acting out in the reading what the text performs; and second, because the text's blind-spot is the space in which the critic reads, the unconscious will evade any attempt to nail it down through interpretation. In her masterful reading of Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," she draws lines between the motifs of screws and masts and letters and then stands back to conclude that the dots she has connected have not drawn a legible shape or a picture. The story, she repeats, won't tell, or as James's narrator adds, "not in any literal, vulgar way."[34] The "vulgar" is both the explicitly sexual as well as the generally nonsymbolic, that "strives…to eliminate from language its inherent silence."[35] For Felman, the psychoanalytic reading is both the reading that most risks vulgarity and also the reading that can best approach this silence.

Felman's reading has been hugely influential for psychoanalytic literary criticism, offering a method for reading the text that still heeds its warning that it "won't tell." But while this reading practice is useful for approaching narrative, does it help us read poetry? It is no revelation to remark that a poem "won't tell"—it's more or less the point of poetry. As I have discussed, making such claims about what characterizes poetry is tendentious at best. But I will argue in this project that what makes poetry different from prose is how it economizes language to complicate enunciation and address, so that questions like "what is the poem trying to tell us" cannot arrive at concrete answers. Readers of the lyric assume that the poem won't tell, whereas readers of prose have

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[34] Henry James, "The Turn of the Screw," quoted in Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 106.
[35] Felman, 107.

certain expectations as to how information will be presented to them. It is for this reason that Jonathan Culler, as I will address in a moment, takes issue with how contemporary pedagogical approaches to the lyric so often treat poetry like prose, with its rote questions concerning who is speaking and to whom. A student (or a critic) may have a good reading whether the ghosts of "The Turn of the Screw" were actually ghosts, or if the governess smothered Miles to death, but it would seem besides the point to apply the same sort of detective work to find the motive, for example, as to why the ancient mariner shot the albatross. If narrative is predicated on one incident happening after another, then it makes sense to determine (or guess) whether the ghosts were real or if the governess killed Miles. But poetry is not driven by forward motion.[36] If James's tale has become emblematic of the twists and turns of prose, looping the reader into its game, a poem like Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" shows that telling is a compulsion that leaves the listener wiser, but not perhaps with more knowledge. In "The Turn of the Screw," the opposite is true: the reader has plenty of knowledge, but is not left the wiser (this is precisely Felman's argument). Prose tells you what you need to know—what time the marquise went out, where the governess saw the ghost—but leaves out its secret. Poetry tells a secret without giving contextual information. As a ballad like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" makes clear, even poems that provide a narrative do not tend to make resolution their goal. Coleridge is particularly useful in demonstrating how narrative can be a compulsion more than a craft. In both James's

[36] I realize that I am leaving my argument vulnerable to the fair point that prose, too, is no less generically complicated as poetry. While the history of the novel is rife with examples of texts with meandering plots and nonlinear narration, usually some plot can be traced, and plots move forward. As I wager in my chapter on Dickinson, poetry is driven by a downwards motion that bears back on itself.

story and Coleridge's poem, a man has something to tell an audience, but in the poem, no one has happily gathered round the fire to hear it. The mariner accosts and captivates the sailor with what he has to tell. In both texts, the question of whether the events are supernatural or ordinary, to use Coleridge's terms, hangs over the reader, but whereas the layers of narrative framing escalate the story's fundamental undecidablity, the poem lays bare its obscurity. When I argue that it is the point of poetry not to tell, I suggest that unlike narrative, poetry does not promise to tell and then break its word. Even when the speaker of the poem recounts a voyage to an arrested listener, there is neither frame nor pretext. Felman's revelation in her essay, therefore, that psychoanalytic reading helps us appreciate that the story won't tell does not tell us something we don't already know about poetry.

In Felman's essay, poetry is used either as an epigraph or to close out a section. Because she presents it without comment, poetry serves to tacitly metaphorize her point, to say it otherwise and more lyrically. She quotes Mallarmé, mainly, that patron saint of the untranslatable: "Le sens trop précis rature // Ta vague littérature."[37] She employs the poem to affirm her argument that if meaning is too precise, or too direct, it cuts through the vagueness which, from this quote of a poem, at least, seems to be constitutive of literature. Her use of poetry is highly curated, as she goes so far to even cut down (*raturer*?) some of Mallarmé's poetry with ellipses to suit her effect. Although she writes about the text and literature as such, she does not make any concessions to genre. Even in her essay, "On Reading Poetry," she does not read any poetry. She discusses Edgar Allan Poe in terms of the temptation to make a biographical diagnosis of the text and

[37] Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Felman, 148.

argues that the critical disagreement over whether or not Poe wrote good poems is symptomatic of poetry itself. Rather than "analyz[ing] poetry as a symptom of a poet," she proposes "to analyze a particular poet as a symptom of poetry itself."[38] What is poetry itself? While it may be unfair to hold an essay from 1980 to certain contemporary standards of lyric reading, it is significant that she does not offer a working definition of poetry as a genre that differs from prose. By treating it metonymically, as the part that not only represents but also distills the whole of literature (and Poe as ultimate reduction of poetry), she ontologizes poetry into some pure discourse of the unconscious. Admittedly, she is interested in what compels us to read a poet like Poe (or a novelist like James) and to obsessively debate and write about him. "Poetry," she concludes, "is precisely the effect of a deadly struggle between consciousness and the unconscious; it has to do with resistance and with what can be neither resisted nor escaped. Poe is a symptom of poetry to the extent that poetry is both what most resists a psychoanalytic interpretation and what most depends on psychoanalytic effects."[39] Her apophatic definition of poetry as that which resists does not help us getting closer to what poetry is. In keeping with her reading of James, she finds that the literary text resists critical attempts to master it by producing a reading effect (here, a *poetic* effect). The superlatives in her estimation suggest that poetry, more than any other form of text, is more aligned with the unconscious in this "deadly struggle," and, dramatics aside, is most telling of the relation between the reader's desire and the text. Yet there is nothing that keeps us from replacing the word "poetry" in this argument with "literature." Since

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[38] Shoshana Felman, "On Reading Poetry" in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 133.
[39] Felman, 154.

Felman is no slouch in close reading poetry, why does she overlook, even erase, generic differences when she is working with psychoanalysis?

Perhaps we should first ask what Felman considers her role to be as the one who interprets. Exploring the condition of mastery in James's text distances her from the role of the master. Once she points out what the text is doing, we see that *the text was waiting for her interpretation the whole time*. Indeed, the power of the psychoanalytic reading is to show that the reading comes not from without, but within. As she attests in her reading of Poe, "the methodological stake is no longer that of the *application* of psychoanalysis to literature, but rather, in their *interimplication in* each other."[40] Against earlier critics like Bonaparte, who, as I have discussed, think it appropriate to use biography to diagnose authors, Felman finds that the literary and the psychoanalytic text interpret and reinterpret each other. It is the inner working of the text, whether Freudian or literary, and not the discernible exterior, that the analyst-critic must tease out. (In other words, in psychoanalytic criticism, the call is always coming from inside the house.) By defending psychoanalytic criticism as implication rather than application – an old charge yet still going strong to this day – Felman makes it seem that the only task of the interpreter is to open the question and to point to what is unknown. What's more, the interpreter is always implicated in the interior relation between the texts, since according to Felman, her role is to act out the moves the text makes. If the interpretation was always there the whole time, then there can be no critical strong-arming, no mastery. She does not need to claim that the text needs her to make its meaning legible, for the interior relation was always there, primary to her involvement. Instead, she generously defends

[40] Felman, 153.

the text's right to plead the fifth, as it were, to not tell. A text that doesn't tell will not argue back.

Nor will the text let the interpreter know if she's gotten in too deep. Felman admits that by seeking to illuminate the text's illegibility, the interpreter risks rendering it legible, therefore nullifying whatever effect made the text compelling to begin with:

> "Here, then, is the crowning aberration which psychoanalysis sometimes unwittingly commits in its mêlées with literature. In seeking to 'explain' and *master* literature, in refusing, that is, to become a *dupe* of literature, in killing within literature that which makes it literature—its reserve of silence, that which, within speech, is incapable of speaking, the literary science of a discourse *ignorant of what it knows*—the psychoanalytic reading, ironically enough, turns out to be a reading which *represses the unconscious*, which represses, paradoxically, the unconscious which it purports to be 'explaining.'"[41]

The interpreter drowns out the text's silence and eliminates it by explaining it. Technically speaking, the unconscious itself cannot be repressed. Psychic material is repressed, and in this case, the material is the text's reserve of silence. If the interpreter "*represses the unconscious,*" then she pushes away that part of the text that won't tell and instead speaks for it. Felman makes an ethical argument here: the role of the critic is to leave the questions open and to abide the text's silence. This way, the critic represses her urge to master and respects what appears here to be the truth of the text—that we only have an urge to explain it because of how it refuses our understanding. The bad psychoanalytic reading would be one that gives a tell-all. And in a way, that is exactly what Felman does, and masterfully so. She identifies where and how the text dupes the reader, connects signifying dots, and shows how criticism mirrors the moves of the text, all the while purporting to leave the question open. But what exactly is left open after reading this essay? If psychoanalytic literary criticism is supposed to have the somewhat

[41] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" 193.

humbling intention of pointing to what we do not know, rather than what we do know, what are we to make of Felman's insistent italics? Italics do both stylistic and rhetorical work. They add emphasis and flair, while making it seem that not only are her conclusions correct, they also seem belatedly *self-evident*. Italics are her tell, the graphic element of her prose that unwittingly reveals her as implicated in explaining away literature's "reserve of silence." With their forward leaning letters and dramatic effect, italics turn her into a storyteller who, with a whisper, beckons you closer. Or, to put it simply, she emphasizes so many words because she wants us to listen.

Poetry has a different "reserve of silence" than prose perhaps does. Consider the graphic elements of many poems. A poem with lines is constantly broken into by a white reserve of silence, and is indeed surrounded by a blank page with nothing to tell. It seems that Felman claims that poetry is the form of literature that most entices us to speak for its silence by inviting us to "*catch the unconscious in the act*," as she writes in her essay on poetry.[42] Silence, however, has not so much to do with the written word as it does with the spoken word. "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" famously orients psychoanalytic criticism around the issue of reading, and what it means to read otherwise. But as I have stressed, psychoanalysis itself began as a science of listening. Felman quotes Lacan in her essay to mark the transition from listening to reading as a practice: "[Freud] spent a lot of time listening, and, while he was listening, there resulted something paradoxical,(…), that is, a *reading*. It was while listening to hysterics that he *read* that there was an unconscious. That is, something he could only construct, and in which he himself was implicated…he noticed that he could not avoid participating in

[42] Felman, 199.

what the hysteric was telling him, and that he felt affected by it."[43] It is Lacan who gives us the formulation that the unconscious is structured like a language, and it is after Lacan that psychoanalytic literary criticism is enabled to treat the textual unconscious and not merely diagnose the biographical. Lacan does not elide the importance of listening in his account of reading, and indeed, turning his attention from listening to reading allows him to demonstrate the co-implication involved in analysis, whether in terms of transference/countertransference, master/slave, or even master/hysteric. I do not wish to be so immodest as to suggest that we redirect the entire psychoanalytic literary tradition in the United States away from reading practices and towards something as vague (and pious) as listening. Instead, I propose that the listening element of psychoanalytic attention has been overlooked because of an overemphasis on narrative as the natural home for the Freudian reading. I will close read poetry in the pages that follow, to be sure, but no reading of poetry is complete without a consideration of sound. Rhythm, rhyme, repetition—all are received by the ear. So too did Freud begin his career by listening to the mangled language of the hysteric. Psychoanalysis may be as much a listening cure as a talking cure. By focusing on poetry, we refocus psychoanalytic attention on listening and allow for a moment for the poem to speak before the critic does. In so doing, I aim to see whether we can temper this century old psychoanalytic bugaboo, that such a critic imposes his reading and implicates even the protesting reader.

Psychoanalysis has long been charged with chauvinistically forcing its interpretive frame and promoting a closed system in which the reading precedes and overpowers the text itself. Felman opens the issue of Yale French Studies with the

[43] Felman, 118.

problematic relation between the psychoanalytic critic and the literary text, tracing how while literature has been considered as "a body of *language* – to be *interpreted* – psychoanalysis is considered as a body of *knowledge*, whose competence is called upon *to interpret*. Psychoanalysis, in other words, occupies the place of a *subject*, literature that of an *object*; the relation of interpretation is structured as a relation of master to slave."[44] Though she strives to make the relation between literature and psychoanalysis mutually informative, I am not convinced that she overthrows the rigid terms of the relation. If the defense against applied theory is that the critic is able to use literature to learn about psychoanalysis – or in a similar vein, to use Freudian techniques to read blindspots in Freud's argument – then we do not get outside the closed loop of subject/object positioning. Someone is always explaining something else, even if the explanation, from Felman on, only shows how limited any explanation can be. Instead of opening the question, it encloses psychoanalysis in a feedback loop of reading Freud to understand literature and reading literature to understand Freud. "No doubt the big game, the other mania, can only consist in filling the gaps in the master's knowledge," Clément writes.[45] Because the act of interpretation participates in the text by acting out the moves of the text itself, and because a Freudian reading so often involves using Freud to figure out aporias in Freud's text, we are left with a sort of self-fulfilling interpretation. The master's tools are the *only* tools that will dismantle the master's house, and then the same tools can be used to build it back up again. Is there any possibility of an outside to this chiasmatic relationship?

[44] Felman, "To Open the Question," 5.
[45] Clément, 102.

In "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," literature has knowledge it will not tell, whereas psychoanalysis enables us to read not the unconscious of the text but our own unconscious desire to master it. The desirous reader becomes the object of interpretation, enthralled to the knowledgeable subject of the text, consumed by it. If, as I have argued, we read poetry not only with the assumption that it won't tell but *because* it won't tell, then this subject and object relationship becomes less demanding. Poetry is a genre very much preoccupied with address: sometimes we readers are directly implicated, other times an absent one is hailed by apostrophe and we serve as the bystander to the event. In other words, the poem can be the object studied as well as the vehicle for enunciation. A poem like "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" has more in common with its arresting subject than its passive listener. Indeed, one of the goals of my project is to demonstrate how poetry troubles the subject/object division by showing first person subjectivity for the fraught project it is. I weave Mill throughout my chapters for this very reason—to show how poetry splits subjectivity by making the object of our address our own psyche.

Beyond the Poetic Principle

As I have argued, psychoanalytic criticism is not much concerned with questions of genre when it comes to reading literature. Whether the critic reads a poem by Poe, a short story by James, or a play by Shakespeare, the approach does not always vary. Contemporary readings of poetry that are more welcoming to psychoanalysis tend to come from fields that have grown out of but often diverge from psychoanalysis: queer theory and affect theory. Considering that lyric theory is currently weathering a genre crisis, it is worthwhile for me to take a moment to outline how I consider the lyric to be a

formally distinct field, and how the rhetorical strategies deployed in poetry are relevant for psychoanalytic interests.

If my opening wager is that poetry and psychoanalysis share certain defense mechanisms, it is perhaps due to their common skepticism towards and often resistance against interpretive mastery. The current debate in lyric studies over how to treat lyric as a genre points to an essential, historical indeterminacy provoked in readers by the poem. Little wonder, then, that the conversation over how to know a poem when you see it causes such tension and prompts such defensiveness. I want to take a moment to consider two recent publications in lyric theory that aim to historicize the use of the term "lyric." While both texts avoid transcendental claims as to what poetry is or does, they follow very different paths and arrive at divergent conclusions. The first is Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric*, which archives the lyric from ancient Greece to today to prove how the genre has built discernable traits that make the poem effective. For Culler, it is not terribly hard to know when to call a poem a poem: poems articulate themselves in a way different from ordinary speech acts, create the effect of an enunciative event or invocation in the present tense, and weave together intertexual references and relations to other poems. In short, poems happen aurally and have a phenomenological effect of a voice addressing someone/thing in the present. Poems have become poems because they have responded to each other in a long historical lyric tradition. Nevertheless, Culler does not find the lyric as a genre to be as intelligible as I risk suggesting. He cites Paul de Man to this effect: "The lyric is not a genre but one name among several to designate

the defensive motion of understanding, the possibility of a future hermeneutics."[46] In other words, readers promote certain characteristics of the lyric genre, especially concerning the subject and address, to fulfill our expectations of what the poem should perform. Even a poem that does not necessarily qualify as lyric can still allow the possibility of the lyric, as de Man argues. The lyric is not so much a concept as it is a promise that permits you to recognize something as a poem. Genre promises that meaning is possible, because even the most difficult poem is at least legible as a poem. To put it in psychoanalytic terms, genre is a defense mechanism that wards off the tension created by an ambiguous or unintelligible text. Culler's real worry, however, is how poems are received by students, not critics, and how New Criticism's emphasis on the poem as an impersonal, self-sufficient object has led to treating the poem in the classroom like a narrative with a speaker and a situation. We have narrativized the poem, he argues, by turning it into a "the speech act of a fictional persona" rather than "fundamentally nonmimetic, non-fictional, a distinctive linguistic event."[47] The student of poetry may as well be reading prose, and, as Culler knows, "it is deadly to try to compete with the narrative on terrain where narrative has obvious advantages."[48] Again, dramatics aside (what is so *deadly* about poetry?) what is at stake with this genre trouble is the risk of flattening out distinctions between kinds of texts that perform differently and create particular effects. Treating poetry like prose would presumably also water

[46] Paul de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," quoted in *Theory of the Lyric*, (Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 2015), 81.
[47] Culler, 7.
[48] Culler, 118.

down the power of narrative, moreover.[49] I take Culler's concern for how students are learning poetry to be indicative of a broader anxiety about the status of the humanities in the neoliberal university that strives to assimilate all learning into quantifiable information.

The second text on the lyric I'd like to consider is *The Lyric Theory Reader*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins. Their thesis is articulated in the first sentence: "We take it for granted that we know what a lyric is."[50] In their anti-defense of "poetry," they chart how a nineteenth century, idealized aspiration of what the lyric *should* be (after Mill, Hegel, the Romantic poets, or Emerson) became, in the twentieth century, the assumptions for what the lyric *is*. It is "lyric reading" practices and the critics who promote them, rather than anything particular about poems, that have constituted the genre. "The history of lyric reading," they argue, "is the history of thinking about poetry as more and more abstract and ineffable."[51] This is a particular problem if, as I will explore in my chapter on Dickinson, the material and historical conditions of what has come to be read as a "poem" are overlooked in favor of an ontologizing of the poetic object. Their issue with Culler and other critics of his school is that these critics view genre as a set of norms that comes into being from the lyric's relation to itself, and do not acknowledge how they themselves have constructed the norms. Jackson and Prins' questioning of what makes a poem lyric is an important one,

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[49] This may be the moment for me to point out that I do not take the genre of prose to be synonymous with "prosaic," and that I hope I have been careful enough not to suggest that poetry should be privileged over prose as the most appropriate genre for psychoanalytic reading. That there should be something like a natural home for the psyche in literature is exactly what I want to reject in this project.

[50] *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014),1.

[51] Jackson and Prins, 2.

though it is yet unclear to me if the question moves the discipline forward or brings it to a standstill. It should be noted that they do not attempt to define the lyric, and instead track the ways in which we have defined it for the past century. Treating the lyric as a paper trail of theory rather than a reception and absorption of influences allows us to examine more carefully the effect poetry has on the critics who would try to understand it. The strength of Jackson and Prins' argument is that it allows us to push back on—let's call a spade a spade—heterosexist norms of inheritance and influence by putting pressure on how what we have come to know as lyric poetry is more a product of criticism than of something ineffable in poetry itself. Most compellingly, they remark that if we have not been able to define what poetry is, and yet somehow still consider lyric poetry to be the most poetic form of poetry, then perhaps "we have not really wanted a concise definition of lyric. Perhaps the lyric has become so difficult to define because we need it to be blurry around the edges."[52]

Do we *want* it to be difficult to define poetry, and if so, why? What does it do for we readers of poetry to think of the object of our desire as blurry and open-ended? A good moment to turn to psychoanalytic literary criticism is when the reader's desire needs a reading of its own.

Interestingly enough, both texts turn away from hermeneutics as the focus of lyric studies, Culler explicitly and Jackson and Prins implicitly. While Culler wants to hand back the history of the lyric to the poets who built it, Jackson and Prins argue that there is no such history without the critics who wrote it. Either way, it seems that neither camp believes that the most interesting work to be done in lyric studies is to provide new

[52] Jackson and Prins, 1.

interpretations for poems. As Culler explains (and, I might point out, dips in to Jackson/Prins logic here), it is only recently that teachers of poetry have asked the students to interpret the poem rather than memorizing it or running a scansion; he takes this to be concomitant with the narrativization of the lyric. He writes that while the hermeneutical approach to the lyric adopts the "interpretive language" of any given theoretical interest, "poetics works in the opposite direction, asking what are the conventions that enable this work to have the sorts of meanings and effects it does for readers. It does not attempt to find a meaning but to understand the techniques that make meaning possible, techniques that belong to the generic tradition."[53] Jackson and Prins, meanwhile, are skeptical of an attention to poetics that would enforce a norm of what poetry is and has been. But what we can glean from this critical turn away from interpretation as the end result of reading is that there is a need in this moment to defend the poem (or the object we have come to think of as a poem), either by saving its legacy or by complicating its generic status. I am sympathetic to Culler's plea for a focus on poetics over hermeneutics, for it does seem that in looking at a poem, it should be primary to understand how it produces meaning before moving on to determining what it means. However, I propose that psychoanalysis, which he lists as a hermeneutic that translates the text into its own "interpretive language," can serve equally well as a poetics. Psychoanalysis as a poetics would offer a way to understand how rhetorical strategies and (what we assume to be) generic conventions have an effect on readers, how we are susceptible to them, and how they make us want to understand poetry.

[53] Culler, 6.

Psychoanalysis teaches us that the urge to narrativize is the urge to master. That's why psychoanalytic readings of literature focus on narrative and, after Felman, create narratives about narrative. It is also why Jackson and Prins have constructed their own narrative about poetry, and have historicized what they take to be the construction of the genre. Their *Lyric Theory Reader* is highly editorialized, let it be noted. And yet, it is essential to step back and ask not only how this narrative has come to be, as Jackson and Prins have done so influentially, but also why we need these narratives to begin with. Why do we need the lyric to be a capacious genre if not to spend centuries defining and defending it? As de Man proposes, "generic terms such as 'lyric'…are always terms of resistance and nostalgia."[54] We need generic terms to have something to resist against as well as something to look back at with melancholy. In the chapters that follow, I will examine aspects of lyric poetry that provoke our urge to get close to the poem (and sometimes the poet) in order to master it with our understanding. For the purposes of my argument, I will propose a working definition of what a poem is and does. A poem is a literary work that economizes language (meaning that it does more than use words to provide information) in such a way to produce a dynamic of stress, suspense, and pleasure.[55] I use the word "economy" with its psychoanalytic use in mind to suggest that the formal attributes of a given poem effect a circulation of libidinal energy. I view the poem as a dynamic object with varying forces that produce conflict. In the chapters that follow, I will elaborate on how poetry provokes a tension between affect and idea in the

[54] de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric" 262.
[55] de Man proposes that the difference between poetic writing and critical writing is in the "economy of its articulation." See, *Allegories of Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 17.

reader and results in a balance, or more likely unbalance, of satisfaction and craving, investment and disappointment.

My dissertation takes its title from two famous works, Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Poetic Principle." In his essay, Poe decries the epic form of the long poem as being oxymoronic—what makes a poem a poem is its unity of effect, which a long poem cannot maintain. The brevity of a poem, Poe argues, is what allows for excitement – "the truest poetic elevation in the thrill" – a key element in poetry's unique appreciation for beauty.[56] The poetic principle aims for the elevation of the soul via beauty, and the poem reaches this aim by elevating excitement. "But all excitements are," Poe points out, "through a psychal necessity, transient."[57] The "psychal necessity" for the transience of excitement is precisely the subject of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. While Poe makes the aesthetic argument that excitement stops being exciting for an extended period of time, Freud claims that excitement is threatening to the psyche, which actively protects itself from shock. The transience of excitement marks that the psyche is doing its job in preventing trauma by assimilating stimulus. A good poem, for Poe, can break through the protective barriers of consciousness and strike where it may have a more lasting effect, in the unconscious. Because the excitement is transient, it is unexpected and comes as a shock. As I have discussed, defense can be preemptive, a way for the ego to prepare to assimilate shock when it rears up. If shock is a fundamental attribute of lyric poetry, then so too must be the compulsion to defend.

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[56] Poe, "The Poetic Principle," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 82.
[57] Poe, 71.

To readers of Poe's poetry, it will come as no shock that the pleasure he finds afforded by poetry is not necessarily a pleasant one. In her comparative essay on Poe and Wordsworth, Barbara Johnson identifies "the nature of pleasure" of each poet's work to be found at "the edge of trauma" or the "beyond of pleasure, which for Freud was associated with two highly problematic and highly interesting notions: the repetition compulsion and the death instinct."[58] Indeed, Poe's pleasure lies in the mastery of the melancholy feeling of loss via repetition of writing. As Poe claims, poetry moves us "not…through excess of pleasure, but through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem…we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses."[59] Poetry sheds light not only on something larger than the reader's own consciousness, but also on the very limits of that consciousness. A glimpse of the indeterminate flashes on the page and leaves the reader to mourn its loss when it is extinguished. Here, Poe anticipates the central concept behind psychoanalytic readings of literature (for better or for worse): psychoanalytic reading gives us a glimpse of what eludes us, and prevents us from feeling assured that we have mastered all the text has to offer. And as I have begun to argue, lyric poetry's historically unbalanced equilibrium between stress and defense makes this genre particularly compelling for psychoanalytic reading.

The Seduction of Analogy

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[58] Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 90.
[59] Poe, "The Poetic Principle," 77.

In this work, I offer a psychoanalytic approach to reading poetry that draws attention to the rhetorical and formal elements of the poem as unconscious operations. I pair key psychoanalytic concepts with canonical poets who implement these concepts, *avant la lettre*, as rhetorical strategies: Emily Dickinson and the death drive, Charles Baudelaire and repression, and Rainer Maria Rilke and narcissism. Throughout my dissertation, I examine how these poets deal with the economy of tension and pleasure a poem produces as well as the stress that results from the poem's excess of meaning. To trace a lyric lineage between these rather disparate poets, I first put them all in conversation with the text that is most influential in American lyric studies, John Stewart Mill's "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties."[60] "Eloquence," he decides, "is *heard*, poetry is *over*heard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude."[61] Although Mill himself noted "the peculiarity" of poetry, his statement is itself peculiar. In discussing his axiom, critics have tended to assume the intelligibility of these "moments of solitude" and have focused on its ramifications for modes of address, voice, and performativity. The great orator wants to be heard, whereas the poet speaks in soliloquy, he maintains, an idea that certainly puts the lyric speaker, addressee, and audience in peculiar positions. But what does it mean for feeling to confess "itself to itself?" To put it plainly, what is the "it?" Mill's aperçu has enjoyed a particularly long critical afterlife, I argue, because it itself is so uncanny. If

[60] For what it's worth, Freud was an avid reader of Mill and, when he was younger, translated some of his work.
[61] John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 345.

what has characterized our modern understanding of the lyric is this peculiar unconsciousness, then there is something uncanny about the lyric itself. Mill thereby provides the model for a psychoanalytic poetics that attends to the unconscious rhetorical strategies of a poem. As the title of my dissertation suggests, a psychoanalytic approach to the lyric must go beyond theories that promote the poem as a transcendent object and instead consider it as a dynamic between stress and pleasure.

My second chapter, "Dickinson's Mastery," asks what it means when we single out Emily Dickinson as a notoriously "difficult" poet. I link her allegedly inscrutable poems to her formal resistance towards conclusion. Her poems, so often anecdotal and sequential, refuse to hit the ground and finish themselves off. This tendency to refuse closure marks what I call the lyric death drive, a formal technique that flirts with narrative sequencing before disappointing the reader's hope for a satisfying end. It is this lyric death drive, I contend, that incites the critical desire to master her poems, whether by constructing a particular temporality for them, as Sharon Cameron does, or arguing for the primacy of their materiality, as does Jackson. I find that her poems themselves are suggestive of a strategy of letting go, marked by the nonteleological death drive that reaches down and down without extinguishing itself.

In my third chapter, "*Le retour de la refoulée´*," I revisit Charles Baudelaire's oft repeated quotation that his goal was to create a cliché. I read his prose poetry as a hyperbolization of Poe's proposal that the most poetical topic is the death of a beautiful woman (a beloved cliché of lyric theory in its own right). That is, Baudelaire takes this recommendation to its most extreme conclusion by making visible the obscured violence necessary to produce such sweet melancholy. He does so, however, with a heavy hand of

irony, an irony that serves both to repress the knowledge of violence and to produce a wild, excessive reaction to it. His ironic deployment of clichés reinvigorates dead tropes and allows them to return in a disfigured form.

My fourth chapter, "The Mirror and The Shadow: Rilke's Poetics of Narcissism," looks behind the critical affection for Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet frequently taken to be expressive of our most intimate experience. Ironically, he is also notorious for his extreme narcissism and inability to connect—a trait he avowed was tied up with his poetic vocation. I ask what this narcissism would mean for a formal reading of his poems. Each poem in his collection of *Dinggedichte*, *New Poems*, marks the difficulty of encountering an object without projecting the poet's self onto the object. I argue for what I read as a form of lyric narcissism, which entails a poetic self-estrangement that results in a compensatory over-enthrallment of the self. Rather than reading narcissism in Rilke's poetry as a feature of the expressive lyric self, my argument reconfigures narcissism as a psychic inability to relate to objects and an aesthetic challenge to represent them.

Although these poets differ in their language and historical moment, I have chosen them with two essential commonalities in mind. Firstly, each poet has a persona built around their biographies that is tempting to treat in place of their work itself. My work challenges certain conventionally held narratives about each poet – Dickinson's difficulty, Baudelaire's perversity, Rilke's intimacy – in order to examine how each anticipates and undermines a stable and comprehensive reading of their work. These are resistant texts. The siren call of biography to which psychoanalytic reading is particularly susceptible (especially when poets are involved) makes the boundaries

between readerly desire and the poem particularly unstable. Secondly, each chapter explores the uncertain territory between gender and genre. As I have discussed, setting up poetry as something in need of defending feminizes the genre, making it seem vulnerable to attack. Dickinson, for instance, is frequently appropriated for a variety of critical agendas (including Jackson's), only to be taken up and defended again by a new generation who wants to get closer to the "real" her, to know what she really wanted. The critical response to Baudelaire, on a different note, too frequently leaves his misogyny as a given, and "problematic" at best. In Rilke's case, a queer form of self-love collapses the boundary between subject and object, inside and outside, and speaker and reader. In fact, I find that all three fit in with a certain vein of queer theory, which, after Leo Bersani, Tim Dean, and Lee Edelman, promotes an anti-futural approach to the text. As I will explore, if poetry is a form of self-reflexive confession, then there may be a way of thinking about lyric forms of address that is not reliant on subject/object relations and that does not look forward or address itself to the reader to come.

I aim to be careful in my comparisons, however, and seek to avoid what Freud called "the seduction of analogy."[62] I do not treat poetry as pure products of the unconscious, à la the Surrealists, nor do I wish to suggest that analytic work creates something like a poem. While I do close read poetry throughout this work, I am also interested in affect insofar as I explore how poetry provokes us and what it provokes in us. Affect theory, however, tends to endorse a more sanguinely multiple understanding of the subject, rather than an (ostensibly outdated) split-subject, and so my work is still squarely (in each sense of the word) psychoanalytic. In this dissertation, close reading

[62] Freud, "Constructions in Analysis" 268.

serves the purpose of outlining how certain rhetorical devices, including versification, meter, figuration, and address, have a psychoanalytic function by inciting resistance even as they draw us closer, rather than providing "constructions." It is my hope that a comparative approach will show this tendency to be exemplary of the lyric as a genre rather than a mere vision through my preferred hermeneutic lens. On that note, I conclude with Freud's early words from *Studies in Hysteria*: "my guiding purpose is to illustrate from various angles a highly complicated thought-object, such as has never before been depicted, and so, although this method is not without its faults, I hope I may take the liberty of continuing to introduce comparisons over the following pages."[63]

[63] Freud, *Studies in Hysteria* 292.

CHAPTER TWO: DICKINSON'S MASTERY

Did you ever read one of her Poems
backward, because the plunge from the front
overturned you? I sometimes (often have,
many times) have – A something overtakes
the Mind.
- Emily Dickinson

What does it feel like to overhear one's self? An overheard statement is not intended to be heard by anyone outside of the conversation—the address has been intercepted. Likely, the speaker hasn't consented to an audience and isn't aware anyone is listening. Overhearing one's own self, then, is self-identical and dissociated all at once: there is an uncanny feeling that this listening in to one's ownmost thoughts creates a remove from one's self. Mill's assumption is that writing without an audience is particular to the poet. What is peculiar here, however, is the doubling required for poetry to operate. For feeling to confess "itself to itself," the poet must be her own audience, must have her words echo in her mind as if they came from without. Although she is *unconscious* of a listener, she is seemingly conscious of her own listening, as she must hear her reflexive confession to write the poem. Sitting in solitude, the poet overhears herself confessing to herself—a rather uncanny process of composition. "Poetry is *over*heard," Mills writes, leaving the question open whether it is the poet or the reader who is listening, or if there is even a difference between the them. For the reader, too, overhears herself when she reads. When reading a poem, we tend to decide beforehand to consider it a poem, and so often another voice takes over, an intuitive voice that intones rhythm and rhyme in a way we would not otherwise speak. We read to ourselves, and overhear ourselves reading.

That said, Mill's distinction between poetry and eloquence is perhaps itself *overly* heard, as it is referenced, discussed, contested, and reaffirmed so repeatedly as to become a shibboleth for lyric theorists.[64] To give a picture of his relevance today, in the recently published *The Lyric Theory Reader*, he is indexed twenty-two times (the same number as Aristotle), and critics building off his ideas include Northrop Frye, Jonathan Culler, Helen Vendler, and Marjorie Perloff. In addition, editors Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins consistently touch back on Mill and those he has directly influenced in their introduction to the volume and to each section. Mill's legacy intertwines the image of the poet with lyric theory in general and shapes what we think the lyric is, who makes the lyric, and how it is made. In Jackson's own work, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, she takes Mill's definition of poetry to be emblematic of how the lyric has come to cover all genres of poetry without distinction, although critics are seemingly unconscious of its generic hegemony. To conduct her examination of how lyric criticism built the genre it assumed to study, she turns to Emily Dickinson, who declined publication in her lifetime and has been, in a way, overheard ever since. The connection between Dickinson and Mill's conception of a poet seems appropriate, Jackson writes, because so often for literary critics, "her old-maidenly strangeness, her nunlike privacy worked (and still works) to make her poetry seem to readers like the voice that speaks to no one and therefore to all of us."[65] This conflated reading of biography through lyric theory, she argues, takes the poet's solitude literally as it "stands in for the solitude of the

[64] I will take up the "overly heard" in my chapter on Baudelaire.
[65] Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 128.

individual reader—a self-address so absolute that every self can identify it as his own."[66] Perhaps the trouble with Mill's definition is that it isn't clear whether it is to be taken literally or figuratively. "Eloquence is *heard*," is simple enough, but "poetry is *over*heard," and what it overhears is itself confessing itself to itself. This doubling of the self that poetry requires creates what Jackson calls a "radically internalized solitude," a psychic interior that is not only unconscious of a listener, but also unconscious of the critic to come that can literalize this solitude into a poetics.[67] In Diana Fuss' *The Sense of an Interior*, a study of the living spaces of four minds and a consideration of "the risks and pleasure of living deep inside one's self," she takes Mill at his word and claims that Dickinson owes her "claim to poetic authority" from how she "[transforms] herself entirely into voice…enacting the most influential notion of lyric poetry of her time."[68] The voice in the poems, it follows, belongs not to the speaker, but to the poet herself. With this split between the voice in the head and the speaker on the page, we can see how literally Mill's observation has been taken. Fuss even goes so far as to note that Dickinson enjoyed sitting in her bedroom and listening in on the street below, crafting an actual lyric of the overheard.[69] Between the woman who once lived in Amherst and the thematic attention in her poems to death and grief, a certain slippage often occurs in reading Dickinson, where biographical detail combined with a Gothic conception of a melancholy heroine locked away in a room add up to a mythic figuration of the poet. Mill's axiom allows a tight fit between reading biography and reading poetry, where the

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[66] Jackson, 128.
[67] Jackson, 130.
[68] Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 21 and 48-9.
[69] Fuss, 57.

Emily Dickinson we think we know confesses herself to the speaker of the poem, who is also Emily Dickinson.

In her poetry, Dickinson consistently troubles the boundary between the literal and the figurative. In "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted," the process of reflexive confession, or self-encounter, is revealed not to be the most tranquil of activities. These moments of solitude, occurring in the space between one's self and one's self, can become moments of stillness, apprehension, disquiet. Here, she depicts an emotion recollected in anxiety:

> One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –
> One need not be a House –
> The Brain has Corridors – surpassing
> Material Place –
>
> Far safer, of a midnight meeting
> External Ghost
> Than its interior confronting –
> That cooler Host –
>
> Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
> The Stones a'chase –
> Than unarmed, one's a'self encounter –
> In lonesome Place –
>
> Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
> Should startle most –
> Assassin hid in our Apartment
> Be Horror's least –
>
> The Body – borrows a Revolver –
> He bolts the Door –
> O'erlooking a superior spectre –
> Or More – [70] (407)

[70] Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 188. All poems discussed in this chapter are taken from the Franklin edition.

This poem is exemplary of how Dickinson deals with anxiety both thematically and structurally. Psychological haunting, she argues, is more of a real threat than any ghost or murderer. To prove her point, she enacts this haunting within the frame of the poem. Dickinson frequently wrote in hymn meter (alternating lines of iambic pentameter and trimeter), which she nearly follows here, with notable exceptions. The first line bounces along to iambic pentameter but, almost imperceptibly, exceeds itself past the final stressed syllable—an upbeat hangs on as the remainder. Indeed, the peculiarity of the first stanza hinges on how it does not draw attention to how peculiar it is. "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—," begins the poem, and the reader understands that the speaker is being metaphorical. The speaker shifts to discussing the physical when she brings up "The Brain" only to return to metaphor when she says it "has Corridors." By asserting that the brain itself has corners as dark as a haunted house, she undercuts the materiality of the brain as a figuration of a psychic apparatus and, as she asserts that it is far scarier than any "material place," makes external, non-psychic life seem vaguer than the metaphoric brain.

Another innocuous oddity of the poem is how the next two stanzas go on without a subject. "Far safer" begins both stanzas, and each continues with a prepositional phrase that compares an internal threat with an external one, but though a new thought is taken up with each "Far safer," the sentence is grammatically incomplete until stanza four's "Ourself behind ourself." It is even less clear whom the speaker addresses in this poem. The opening stanza addresses an impersonal "one," and provides a warning that becomes a threat and finally a promise, as the poem ends with the body (anyone's and therefore everyone's body) overlooking the danger that comes from within. In stanza three, the

speaker warns of, but does not exactly caution against, an encounter with "one's a'self," perhaps because such an encounter is inevitable. And indeed, she begins the next stanza, "Ourself behind ourself, concealed," shifting from an impersonal third person to a first person plural, implicating everyone in this spookily split subjectivity. By the time the poem reaches its final stanza, the speaker no longer warns against danger, but narrates it in the present tense, as if the speaker's warnings had incantatory power and willed the split subjectivity to enact itself within the poem. The body can and does protect itself from danger that comes from without, but what comes from within is imperceptible, and so the body overlooks the "superior spectre" that cannot be harmed with a borrowed revolver. It is noteworthy that the body "borrows a Revolver," rather than simply having one on hand, emphasizing how the body displaces its fears and takes up the useless appendage of a weapon as it locks itself in from the inside. The true terror of the poem is not external threat, but some internal tendency that pulls us towards our own destruction. "Or More –", the poem concludes with a final remainder, the lingering "or" rhyme echoing on in the corridors of the brain (and line).

In this poem, Dickinson plays with a Gothic tradition of externalizing an interior descent into unbound madness by situating the psyche in a haunted house. Instead of the house containing and embodying the fraught psyches of its inhabitants, as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the psyche itself is the house – "The Brain has Corridors – surpassing//Material Place" – as it houses its own split self. "Nature is a Haunted House –" Dickinson writes in a letter, "but Art –

a House that tries to be haunted."[71] Art has a maker who tries to effect a haunting, while the natural world is strange enough on its own and cannot be contained. Far safer, in other words, to read or write about some Gothic horror than to deal with what lived experience provides. She cuts out the middleman, so to speak, in realizing that the true horror of the "External threat" (the undead sister or the ghostly apparition at the window) is how it is also an "interior confronting." The internal "superior spectre" that she all but guarantees becomes an external one when the psyche is made manifest. In other words, when the interior becomes the exterior – "one's a'self encounter" – the uncanny has occurred. Recall Freud's definition: "That is uncanny which should have remained a secret or hidden and has come forth."[72] The uncanny functions as a sort of surplus or excess in the Gothic, just as the poem itself formally produces its own remainder. As Susan Bernstein writes, the relation between the Gothic and the uncanny is constitutive of the genre itself, as the Gothic "signals the effort to contain the uncanny or, we might say more generally, to contain what cannot be contained."[73] It is the uncanny coming forth and exceeding its containment that collapses the boundary between exterior and interior. Bernstein finds that this uncanny movement occurs not only thematically but in the writing itself, for the Gothic is a self-aware genre with a stock set of tropes that can be picked up in order to "unravel the interior logic" of the genre.[74] By summarily dismissing the threat of the haunted house, Dickinson pushes the boundary of the Gothic even

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[71] Emily Dickinson, *Letters*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1958), 236.
[72] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London, The Hogarth Press, 1955), 224.
[73] Susan Bernstein, *Housing Problems: Writing and Architecture in Goethe, Walpole, Freud, and Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 60.
[74] Bernstein, 49.

further by making no effort "to contain what cannot be contained." She also moves the emphasis of the uncanny from a question of architectural dwelling (*un-heimlich*) to intellectual dwelling (un-canny). By the end of the poem, it is clear that bolting the door is beside the point, for it is not the house that will contain the "superior spectre." The body locks the door from the inside, trapping itself in with the assassin who is still less of a threat than a full psychic break. And yet, if the body overlooks the "superior spectre," it is because it is on the lookout for the assassin, who most likely does not exist in any form but a displaced fear of our unknown selves. To get this fear to stop treading around our brains, we literalize it: we listen for sounds and look over our shoulders when alone in our apartment, we start to fear a hidden assassin. But this confrontation with the externalized interior, or displaced psychic content, is not the full-body onslaught against which a revolver might protect. By her logic, "O'erlooking a superior spectre" precedes overhearing ourselves, when we confront "Ourself behind ourself, concealed." This confrontation startles us, but not because of its visual appearance—the other, spooky self is *behind* us, *concealed* from us. We cannot help overlooking it because it is nowhere to be seen, only to be overheard in the echo chamber of the psyche.

Dickinson does not say that we should not fear the ghost, the graveyard, and the assassin, but she does hint that what should really trouble us cannot be seen and will not appear out of the blue. The poem is not about fear itself, but anxiety. Unbound, without origin, and unmoored from dichotomies of presence and absence or past and present, anxiety is easily identifiable but a challenge to describe. Sigmund Freud grappled with the concept throughout his career and came to think that anxiety, unlike fear, did not take an object and causes repression. Even in some of his earliest writings on anxiety (1893-

1895), he noted that its intensity comes from its inability to convert unbound energy into a physical representation, the way repression operates with symptoms. Instead, anxiety may "attach itself to any suitable representation at any time."[75] We have seen how Dickinson resists representing the threat of anxiety by opposing such literary representations of horror as the ghost, the graveyard, and the assassin with the doubled self, the split psyche, and the "superior spectre"—all unrepresentable, psychic threats. In fact, her poem ends on an unbound note: "Or More—." As Samuel Weber explains, anxiety is "the conflictual, contradictory process by which the ego seems to represent the unrepresentable" as it "seeks to consolidate its identity by projecting the trauma as an event it can then confront."[76] It may be far safer to meet the assassin than to encounter one's self, but it is *safest* to displace one's anxiety by representing it as an external threat/assassin. That way, the assassin seems like a realistic danger. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926), Freud distinguishes between realistic anxiety, which is a response to imminent danger, and neurotic anxiety, which is an instinctual response to something that has not yet occurred. The danger itself is a reminder of a past trauma that, because of repression, cannot be completely recalled but can be felt. Thus, anxiety is "on the one had an expectation of trauma, and on the other a repetition of it in a mitigated form."[77] Anxiety marks the ego's attempt to repeat the feeling of helplessness internalized

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[75] Sigmund Freud, "On the Grounds for Detaching a Particular Syndrome from Neurasthenia under the Description 'Anxiety Neurosis'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume III (1893-1899): Early Psycho-Analytic Publications*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 93.
[76] Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 92.
[77] Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XX (1925-1926)*, ed. James Strachey and trans. Alix Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 103.

after trauma in order to master it. Arising out of a past experience of helplessness, anxiety always waits to signal the return of an internalized danger as it is provoked by an external danger, giving anxiety both a peculiar temporality and spatiality. "Anxiety *has no proper place*," writes Samuel Weber, and Dickinson agrees.[78] One need not be a chamber, a house, or be in any material place at all to be haunted—a simple "lonesome Place," which may be any place, will do. The poem itself is a discussion of the difference between supposedly "real danger," which is the threat of an "external object," and "neurotic danger, which threatens…from an instinctual demand."[79] The instinctual, the internal, concludes the speaker, is the graver threat, because no revolver can protect against it, and locking the door only locks us in.

The way Dickinson captures the mood of anxiety as she theorizes it is a testament to a peculiar quality of anxiety itself: "it *repeats* the anxiety it *describes*."[80] While her poem deals with anxiety thematically, it does not prepare the reader for it, or serve as a salve for a reader who suffers from it. Instead, it seems to reproduce anxiety, re-present it. Dickinson's critics have long noted the anxious effect of her poems and the unsettling feeling that lingers after reading them. "We seem always to be at the beginning of understanding what she is saying," Susan Stewart has recently written, perhaps because Dickinson's endings are seldom conclusive.[81] Stewart observes how frequently Dickinson scholars "seem driven by a desire" to understand her work (and to understand *her*, the parenthetical so often implied). It's difficult to explain why her poetry strikes us as difficult, or why so often her poems are described as riddles. As Freud notes,

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[78] Weber, 96.
[79] Freud, 103.
[80] Weber, 98.
[81] Susan Stewart, "On ED's 754/764." *New Literary History* 45.2 (2014), 266.

anxiety's "unpleasurable character seems to have a note of its own—something not very obvious, whose presence is difficult to prove yet which is in all likelihood there."[82] Many of Dickinson's earliest critics in the first half of the twentieth century presented her particular, peculiar difficulty as self-evident, but struggled to find a way to articulate what it was about her poems that unsettled them so. As R.P. Blackmur quipped about reading Dickinson, "One exaggerates, but it sometimes seems as if in her work a cat came at us speaking English."[83] Puzzled scholars continue to comment on the unique sort of riddle a Dickinson poem poses. For example, Christanne Miller finds that

> The fascination of reading Dickinson's poetry is one and the same with the frustration of reading it…The power of her words lies at least partly in their (and her) ability to give more than a reader can entirely understand but not enough to satisfy the desire to know. Regardless of how many times you read her best poems, and how many times you persuade others that you know what they "mean," you feel the tickle of unsolved mystery in the poem; you do not convince yourself that you have gotten to the bottom of it; the poem, like the poet herself, is never quite your own.[84]

I quote Miller in full because her remarks are exemplary of the critical approach to Dickinson as a poet who tempts our intellectual desire only to frustrate it, who resists our attempts to know *her* in a way we perhaps do not feel an urge to know (or own) other poets. The question is, how many poems "satisfy the desire to know?" Which poets are ever quite our own? How many poems do we read, reread, and then decide we know what they mean? What, in other words, is particular to Dickinson's poetry that highlights the ability of poetry (or literature, or even art) to elide accessible meaning? Perhaps for some, it is Dickinson's infamy as a supposed recluse that has added to the oddity of her

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[82] Freud, 60-61.
[83] Quoted in Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 13.
[84] Christanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 19.

poems, or her disinclination to publish that gives us the impression that this is a poet never quite our own. And yet, what would it take for us to feel like a poet belonged to us? Despite the sheer abundance of paper – letters, manuscripts, fascicles – that might help a reader or scholar get closer to understanding her intentions, her work is still surrounded by an "aura of indecipherability."[85] Or perhaps what frustrates us is the sheer number of poems she produced, more than any could hope to master, and so thematically focused on death, dying, pain, grief, and immortality. "It sometimes seems as if the same poem of pain or loss keeps writing itself over and over," observes Sharon Cameron, evaluating the argument of earlier, less sympathetic critics who found Dickinson's work to be without development.[86] The mechanical, unconscious repetition of material – strange feelings in the brain, experiences with death that may or may not be metaphorical – suggests an urge to turn these experiences over and over until they are mastered. But we cannot attribute this compulsion to the poet, but only to those who may, like Miller, reads and rereads Dickinson's poetry with frustrated fascination.

Where does the urge to understand her poetry end and the urge to know the poet herself begin? Consider the opening scenario of Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery*: "Suppose you are sorting through the effects of a woman who has just died and you find in her bedroom a locked wooden box…What remains, you decide, must be published."[87] The imaginative exercise she builds is to imagine how we would read Dickinson if we did not assume what she wrote was poetry. Jackson interrupts the critical compulsion to puzzle

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[85] I borrow the phrase from Anthony Vidler, who attributes Freud's fascination with "The Sandman" to this particular quality of Hoffman's stories. In *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1992), 27.
[86] Cameron, 14.
[87] Jackson, 1.

over how to read the poems by instead proposing that lyric reading practices that disappoint our desire to "know" Dickinson's poems speak more to how we have come to name the lyric as a genre then they tell us about what she herself left behind. By drawing critical attention to the fact that the scrap of paper that has been abstracted into a lyric poem was once, in fact, a historically contextualized address, Jackson troubles the lyricization of Dickinson's leftovers. And yet, her use of the second person still betrays a certain indulgence for the Dickinson enthusiast: the fantasy of knowing her, of touching her things, of mastery over what she left behind. Jackson's intention is to decouple what we recognize as a Dickinson poem from the lyric reading practice that decontextualizes address, and to that end, the opening line of her book is a contextualized address that hails the reader of Dickinson who fetishizes her unknowability. The critical assumption is always—and indeed, the strength of Jackson's book rests on it—that Dickinson is unique among poets in the unknowability of her poems. Paradoxically, her attention to the historically situated Emily Dickinson and her material remains preserves the uncanniness of the poems we have created in her name.

The "tickle of unsolved mystery" that her poems provoke is an uncanny reading effect, where lingering uncertainty provides not pleasure, but discomfort. As Anthony Vidler points out, the etymology of the English word "uncanny" suggests "literally 'beyond ken'—beyond knowledge—from 'canny,' meaning possessing knowledge or skill."[88] The uncanniness of Dickinson's poetry lies in how there is always something beyond our knowledge or our critical capacity that cannot be harnessed, that exceeds the poem. There is a reluctance in her poems to arrive, as I will discuss, at a satisfying

[88] Vidler, 23.

conclusion, even as they seem to have a momentum towards it. Anne-Lise François attributes "the developmental impasse that critics almost invariably remark in Dickinson's poetry" to Dickinson's shrugging off of the demands of "heroic plot" and temporal linearity, ironically granting her the belated "heroic weight" of being "an early voice for modernism's ability to do without coherent structures of meaning."[89] But then, why do we not observe the same "developmental impasse" in the critical literature on canonical modernist poets? What is particular about Dickinson's rejection of coherence? Perhaps if the reader does not get to the bottom of the poem, as Miller notes, then the poem itself must not touch the bottom. There is a relentless downward drive in her poetry that drops off before completion, leaving the experience indefinitely unfinished. Instead of offering a snippet of strange experience, the Dickinson poem rejects narrative progression that would imply a completed experience or ordeal and embraces a regressive movement that undoes its own sequential logic.

"Or More – " could serve as an ending to many of her poems, leaving the reader with the presentment of some specter overlooked. In this chapter, I read Dickinson's poetics of anxiety as a way of leaving a remainder by refusing closure. The uncannily silent drive that internally moves her poems towards non-closure is an interpretive stumbling block, as the uncanny feeling it leaves in its wake compels a need for mastery to compensate for the loss of understanding. Although a resistance to closure may seem like a refusal of death's last word, reading Dickinson in terms of the death drive suggests that her poems are bound to an end they will never reach. Reading Dickinson with Freud reminds us that the role of the interpreter is always precarious, and that the material being

[89] Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 172.

interpreted always maintains an element of obscurity that cannot be mastered. I therefore examine the urge for critical mastery behind Dickinson's fraught publication history and the critical turn towards manuscripts as a reading practice, and consider how binding works literally in terms of the materiality of her manuscripts and figuratively as indicative of an urge for interpretive mastery over the afterlife of her poems. Because there has been so much written on what her poems are "about," and more recently how we read them, what remains to be determined is what is behind our desire to know, to master. It is my contention that this compelling effect comes from a formal force with the economy of words Dickinson chose (or chose not to choose, after Cameron), rather than from a culture of reading practices.

For those familiar with the critical literature on Dickinson, it will seem commonplace to argue that her poems lack resolution even if they maintain a thematic focus. To name but a few critics who have engaged with the issue: Charles Anderson on her use of metaphor and riddle; Paula Bennett on Dickinson's ambivalence towards power; R.P. Blackmur on the "disintegration of effect" following her first lines; David Porter on her lack of a coherent poetics; Forest Pyle on her "radical aesthetic" that eradicates context after the first line; Gary Lee Stonum's account of her swerve before the sublime; Robert Weisbuch on what he calls her "scenelessness."[90] In short, there is a vast critical literature that offers a variety of approaches to Dickinson's difficulty. In this chapter, I do not intend to merely add one more to the list by proposing a psychoanalytic approach; rather, I account for this repetitive critical insistence on her difficulty via a

[90] There are many critics who address Dickinson's difficulty. I have named a few that I consider to be seminal and representative of their era of criticism. As my chapter progresses, I will discuss in greater depth the critics with whom my work more directly engages, Sharon Cameron and Virginia Jackson.

formal reading of her poetics of anxiety. Mastery, moreover, is a multivalent concept, bringing to mind for Dickinson scholarship the American slave trade, 19th century religious revival, Massachusetts Puritanism, or even sadomasochism. In terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, mastery is an impossible position; even as repetition compulsion strives for mastery, the act of reintroducing traumatic loss keeps the subject enthralled to loss. So it is not by writing "the same poem of pain or loss" over and over that Dickinson negotiates the terms of mastery, but by integrating this process of infinitely deferred achievement into the structure of her poems. I will discuss mastery as a formal issue and thereby argue that Dickinson's repeated writing on death and the after-death signals a lyric mastery without a teleological drive towards career immortality. Hers is a peculiar poetics of letting go.

"down, and down—"

The strange reading effect Dickinson's poems produce comes in part from their severance from context. From her poems to her letters to her prose fragments, Dickinson's writing has an epigrammatic or aphoristic feel, as if any line or two could speak for itself without surrounding context. In 1892, Mabel Loomis Todd had the idea of creating an "Emily Dickinson Yearbook" comprised of lines from her poems, "many of which," she notes, "are perfect comets of thought," for "ED abounds in epigrams."[91] It is significant that these epigrams do not merely appear in the final couplets of her poems, like words engraved on a tombstone, but can be found in any line. Todd describes these epigrams as "perfect comets" rather than perfect diamonds or perfect circles, suggesting a

[91] Todd, quoted in Cameron 31.

momentary shock of light rather than an enduring flawlessness. A comet is always in motion and cannot be harnessed, and, like Nietzsche's lightening flashes, more action than agent. Todd intuits something paradoxical about Dickinson's writing in noting that her epigrams manage to be both definitive and elusive, illuminating yet fleeting. Typically, an epigram offers a defining thought that may be moral or didactic, or may be evocative of wisdom or emotion that endures through time. Their perfection, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has pointed out, is surprising, for it is through epigrammatic closure that the reader realizes the pattern that was at work throughout the poem.[92] According to Smith, the epigrammatic poem is one that enjoys "maximal closure," as every element of the poem is directed towards its end; it is, in other words, a "pre-eminently teleological poem and in a sense a suicidal one, for all of its energy would be directed towards its own termination."[93] The epigram is not merely the last word after death. It is always already at work within the poem, driving it towards its own closure. The epigrammatist is a master of control and restraint, coolly collecting his emotions and saving them for a more tranquil later. But if Dickinson's writing so abounds in epigrams that any line can easily be extracted and taken as evocatively self-sufficient, then she is an epigrammatist who either does not write last words or who writes *only* last words. There is, however, a sense in her poetry that it drives towards something definitive, and that each poem strives towards closure before breaking off, often with a precipitous dash.

Although many Dickinson poems begin declaratively ("Hope is the thing with feathers," "A coffin is a small Domain," etc.), it is difficult to define exactly what each

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[92] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 206.
[93] Herrnstein Smith, 197.

poem builds to after the opening assertion, and even more difficult to say where they conclude. Her poems are not linear narratives of experience so much as they are descriptions of things that happened—originary "I did this/I did that" poems (if Frank O'Hara fell through the floors of his mind instead of walking down 5th Avenue). Many critics have remarked on the apparent lack of context in her poems. Forest Pyle has responded to this argument by characterizing her first lines as an event-making force that empties the poem of a need for context.[94] Borrowing from Giorgio Agamben's conception of the event, Pyle finds that her opening lines have "the ability…to *declare* the occurrence it indicates and thus to generate the effect of the event."[95] The event forces a crisis in language's ability to stabilize representation or to offer context. And indeed, Dickinson's poems follow a temporal progression in so far as a series of moments occur, but what ends up being represented by the time the poem concludes is nothing more than the event itself. That is, the event need not serve as a metaphor for something other than itself, or to put it plainly, need not be a riddle with a meaning waiting to be solved.[96] Dickinson does not ask, "Why is hope a thing with feathers?" and set out to prove why, in a manner of speaking, hope may be understood as such. After all, riddles usually ask why something is *like* something else, and Dickinson does not make claims of

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[94] Here is Charles Anderson, for example: "Not one in ten [poems] fulfills the brilliant promise of the opening words." In Charles Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1966), 70. See also Robert Weisbuch on Dickinson's "scenelessness."

[95] Forest Pyle, *Art's Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 109.

[96] In 2012, poet Paul Legault published *The Emily Dickinson Reader: An English-to-English Translation of Emily Dickinson's Complete Poems*. The "translations" are actually pithy paraphrases of Dickinson's poems, distilled into one-liners. If anyone should approach her poems like riddles, here is the answer key.

equivalence in her declarations or deal very much in simile (though it is significant when she does, as I will show).

This may prove unsatisfying, for some. As Stewart attests, even the most insightful reader must resort to basic, introductory questions when dealing with a Dickinson poem: "Who is speaking? Who is listening? What are the parts of the poem? To what do the images refer? What is the significance of the poem's opening lines? What is the significance of its closure?"[97] In other words, it is a challenge to reveal what the poem is "about." For Blackmur and other mid-century critics, Dickinson's resistance to closure prevents her from arriving at a unity of psychological effect and therefore precludes the production of a "good poem" (though one would think that encountering a cat speaking English would be enough of an accomplishment). His assessment does bring a key component of Dickinson's lyric to light: "the movement of the parts is downwards and towards a disintegration of the effect wanted."[98] Dickinson's poems become less comprehensible as the poem wears on, as if there were some force in the poem that resists itself, that undoes the effect it establishes. Instead of moving upward towards a synthesis that integrates the poem's tensions and unifies the experience and the context, the poem moves downwards and leaves the tensions unresolved. Without giving in to the intentional fallacy, it is impossible to determine the "effect wanted" of a given poem, but following Blackmur's expectation, it may well be: This poem will explain why hope is a thing with feathers.

A poem such as "I felt a Funeral in my Brain," for example, offers the experience of feeling a funeral in one's brain, but does not make a claim that this particular

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[97] Stewart, 253.
[98] Blackmur, quoted in Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 32.

experience represents something else. To borrow I.A. Richard's terms, the tenor (pain, loss, estrangement) comes across, but it is unclear where the vehicle (the funeral and burial) drives. The poem leaves unresolved the tension between the literal experience of a burial and the metaphorical question of what is being buried. Dickinson, it must be said, is explicit about what is and is not death. If you stand up, you are not dead. But if your face contorts and your eyes glaze over, then that is death.[99] What, then, are we to make of this funeral that occurs without a death?

> I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
> And Mourners to and fro
> Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
> That Sense was breaking through—
>
> And when they all were seated,
> A Service, like a Drum—
> Kept beating—beating—till I thought
> My Mind was going numb—
>
> And then I heard them lift a Box
> And creak across my Soul
> With those same Boots of Lead, again,
> Then Space—began to toll,
>
> As all the Heavens were a Bell,
> And Being, but an Ear,
> And I, and Silence, some strange Race
> Wrecked, solitary, here—
>
> And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
> And I dropped down, and down—
> And hit a World, at every plunge,
> And Finished knowing—then— (340)

It "seemed / That Sense was breaking through—" but the poem does not make sense of itself by the end – in fact, it finishes "knowing." The poem seems to depict a flaring up

[99] Poems 355 ("It was not Death for I stood up") and 339 ("I like a look of Agony," which precedes "I felt a Funeral in my Brain"), respectively.

of some physical or psychic injury (or both) and the ensuing struggle between repressing the memory, as Cameron argues, or succumbing to it. Whatever pain is experienced in the poem, it "lacks an etiology," as the poem itself does not explain what is being repressed or account for the slippage between unconsciousness and death.[100] Structurally, the poem is unique in that in manages to be both paratactic and sequential. Comprised of one long paratactic sentence that does not conclude, the poem concludes with "then—", a conjunction that indicates a continuation but instead vertiginously drops off. Dickinson's use of the coordinating conjunction "and" drives the sequence of events forward without implying a clear connection or coherence, even though "when" in the second stanza and "then" in the third and fifth stanzas appear to indicate that one event follows another. Each stanza ends with a line that indicates some loss of consciousness (sense nearly breaks through, her mind nearly goes numb), some break before the next stanza picks up. In that break, the reader is left to fill in the cohesion in the white space of the disconnected stanzas. The parataxis is more psychological than grammatical, resulting in a psychic jump cut that jolts the speaker into the next stanza before consciousness is completely lost. As Smith elaborates, a paratactic poem does not imply its own concluding point or resolve itself in a logical or otherwise expected conclusion. "Paratactic structure," she writes, "can be 'wound up' in a number of ways—the point is that it does not wind itself up."[101] Something must be added to conclude the paratactic poem—or in this case, something subtracted. The loss of consciousness hinted at the end of each stanza is finally achieved in the final stanza, but the loss is not described. Smith points out that sequential poems offer a conclusion insofar as the last event of the

[100] Cameron, 97.
[101] Herrnstein Smith, 108.

narrative is relayed and "given stability with respect to the *other* structural principles by which the poem was generated."[102] Poems that narrate a search, pilgrimage, or journey, she continues, will conclude when the process concludes with an arrival or discovery.[103] And indeed, Dickinson's poem ends when the speaker "Finished knowing—then—". While the downward motion of the poem, reflected in the speaker's own drop through consciousness in the final stanza, does effect a successive feel, the speaker never hits the floor, and neither does the poem.

Something, nevertheless, drives the poem towards its inconclusive finish. The hymn meter that alternates iambic tetrameter with trimeter pulls the poem along. The one metrical exception occurs in line 5, when the missing syllable reflects the loss of the sense that almost broke through, or when the treading mourners took a seat and one syllable was left standing and out of the game. Dickinson also employs tense in an unusual way—and not merely because the funeral and burial seem to come before any death in the poem. While the first two stanzas are largely composed in the continuous past, the tense shifts to the simple past in the third stanza, as the speaker moves from observing her pain to immediately participating in it. This is a peculiar past tense, where a sequence of events is narrated as having happened, and yet if the speaker "Finished knowing," from where does she report the experience? Falling off the precipice of "then—", the poem also has an air of the present tense, as if the poem stops at the exact moment the speaker loses consciousness. Smith calls this temporal effect "simultaneous composition," where "the poem is generated in accordance with the passage of time

[102] Herrnstein Smith, 124.
[103] Herrnstein Smith, 125.

during which it is presumably being composed."[104] In Dickinson's poem, the diegetic experience of the speaker is in sync with the utterance of the poem itself, allowing the speaker to feign ignorance about how and when the poem will end. The poem ends because "knowing" finishes, and without that cognitive ability, there is no more experience to recount.[105] This effect of simultaneous composition suggests that the poem is more of an interior monologue than an "overheard utterance," so it does not necessarily have an addressee or audience. Nor does it necessarily have a point: "Not every sequence of thought is a 'train'," writes Smith, "and not every train of thought reaches its destination."[106] In Dickinson's poem, the speaker loses her train of thought indefinitely, but we still do not know what exactly it is she is thinking about.

The repetitions early on ("treading—treading", "beating—beating") imply an enduring and insistent pain, but where this pain is located is not determined.[107] Cameron argues that the poem recounts a past experience of repressed pain too dangerous to be thought through and yet nonetheless imposing itself. Repression is often a yoking of the past and present, where the past feeling or occurrence manifests itself in the present in the form of a symptom. But repression itself is a process that wards off pain and does not cause it. Pain, in this poem, is so palpable, so insistent that it drowns out the questions of whose funeral it is and what the funeral might metaphorize. Particular knowledge, therefore, is not what is at stake. As François argues, "the Dickinsonian subject thus

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[104] Herrnstein Smith, 127.
[105] Smith cites Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" as another poem of simultaneous composition that ends at a moment of undecidable experience: "Do I wake or sleep?"
[106] Herrnstein Smith, 141.
[107] Here especially does Dickinson evoke Edgar Allan Poe and his poem "The Raven" of 1845, although her phantom threat is immediately situated in the mind, while his first taps and raps at his chamber door.

often seems to offer uncannily prescient glosses on the most tragic elaborations of modernity as a crisis in receivable and transmittable experience."[108] It is uncanny that experience, which should be most immediate and proper to the subject, could be estranged in this way, could occur as if to someone else. This uncanniness lingers into the third stanza, even after the striking shift when (or perhaps where) the speaker stops describing the funeral feeling and is overwhelmed by an imposing and external force: "Then Space—began to toll, // As all the Heavens were a bell, / And Being, but an Ear." Space, normally thought of as silent, begins to engulf her in sound, such that being itself becomes a passive receiver. As Miller elucidates, in this stanza "we enter a realm of paradoxically heard space rather than time, where the experience of alienation is so profound it seems biological: 'Being' ceases to be human and becomes instead metonymic, an 'Ear,' a category of listening, or perhaps solitude: 'I' becomes radically indistinguishable from solitude."[109] The fourth stanza finds the speaker in the sort of solitude where, after Mill's definition, poetry can occur. With no audience but her own being, the speaker is all ears to overhear herself. "Solitary" she may be, but she is not exactly alone, as her psyche has been split throughout the poem to overhear the treading mourners and beating drum in, strangely, both her brain *and* her mind. In fact, the primary movement of the poem is through different representations of the speaker's consciousness, from the "Brain" in the first stanza, followed by "mind," "Soul," "Being," and "Reason" in each successive stanza. If the poem is about how pain estranges the self from itself, then the location of the pain is perhaps not indeterminate, but variable: it may

[108] François, 176.
[109] Cristanne Miller, *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 41.

be physical, intellectual, spiritual, ontological, or rational, respectively. Alternatively, pain may reveal that the distinctions we hold dear between mind and body, mind and brain, body and soul, and so on, are unstable constructions. When pain makes "one's a'self encounter," the uncanny split is not necessarily between neat bifurcations. In either case, the pain Dickinson deals with is versatile enough to be both a metaphysical and a material affliction.

The final "then—" suggests that what comes after the speaker "Finished knowing" is open ended, and can be interpreted both psychologically and epistemologically. Grammatically, the "then—" can either function as a conjunctive adverb, meaning that the speaker finishes knowing at that very moment and that more is perhaps to come afterwards, or, more curiously, it can function as the direct object of "knowing." In this case, the speaker stops having a sense of what comes next, or of temporality all together. To further complicate matters, in fascicle 16, there is a variant to "finished:" "Got through."[110] "Got through" is even more idiomatically undecidable than "finished," for it may imply either that "knowing" is worked through and over, or conversely, that it is finally achieved. Either way, what the "then—" does *not* suggest is that now that knowing is finished, nothing more can be said, and the poem may come to an end. It is unusual for Dickinson to capitalize a verb, since she prefers to follow a German convention of capitalization. If "knowing" would be the word more likely to be capitalized, her atypical choice emphasizes finishing and termination rather than knowledge. For that matter, her poem does not truly reach the end, even as it reaches towards it. Recall the strange fact that the poem begins with a funeral and burial before it

[110] In Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 142.

depicts a death or loss. What if "then—" directs the reader back to the beginning of the poem, so that the funeral takes place after knowing is finished? How else could it plunge more than once? Furthermore, the only rhyme for "then—" in the poem is with "again" in stanza three, the pivot point where the poem shifts from the funeral to the loss of consciousness. The poem, then, has neither beginning nor end, and instead eternally returns, again and again, to a loss without origin.[111]

The poem itself has "dropped down, and down" but does not hit the ground. Precluding the possibility of knowledge by not showing what "World" lies underneath the "Plank of Reason", the poem ends more unconsciously than consciously. "What we choose not to know," Cameron muses, "what we submerge, like the buried root of a plant that sucks all water and life toward its source, pulls us down with a vengeance toward it."[112] There is a downward force in the poem that drags it to the end that never seems to come. In a way, the final stanza problematizes the whole poem, as each stanza moves further away from a legible metaphor and deeper into the recesses of unknowing. Knowing, then, is finished for the speaker as much as for the person puzzling over the poem's meaning. Just as the funeral conceit begins to cohere, space begins to toll, and the poem seemingly overhears itself and undoes its own interpretation. As Cameron points out, severing the experience described in the poem from a decipherable context

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[111] To contrast, Agamben ontologizes the end of the poem by marking it as the moment of confluence of sound and sense, where prosodic and syntactic demands finally coincide. Verse is, he argues, "in every case, a unit that finds its *principium individuationis* only at the end, that defines itself only at the point at which it ends." In Dickinson's case, however, the "end of the poem" is a process that works throughout the poem and never achieves itself, only to be more conspicuously absent in the last line. From *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 111.

[112] Cameron, *Lyric Time* 98.

allows it to enjoy a certain autonomy from interpretation: "If [the poem] could be made palpable and objectified, it might be known and hence mastered."[113] By resisting the mastery of others, the poem in a sense masters itself, locks itself up, and swallows the key.

Click Like a Box

We have seen from "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain" that the speaker does not narrate a story with a beginning, middle, and end so much as she describes a certain experience that is severed from context. The poem begins with "I felt," and indeed, the poem feels as if pain speaks right through the speaker, rather than the speaker dictating and making connections between a sequence of events.[114] This descriptive effect contributes to the uncanny use of metaphor in the poem, and leaves the reader with a nagging uncertainty as to whether the poem is meant to be taken literally or figuratively—and what those distinctions even mean. Freud's understanding of symptom formation helps us understand that pain may be experienced figuratively and literally all at once. In Freud's early writing, particularly his writings on hysteric patients, overcoming neurosis is marked by the patient's ability to connect and articulate the

[113] Cameron, 98.
[114] As John Stuart Mill puts it, "Many of the greatest poems are in the form of fictitious narrative, and in almost all good serious fictions there is true poetry. But there is a radical distinction between the interest felt in a story as such, and the interest excited by poetry; for one is derived by incident, the other from the representation of feeling." In Dickinson's poem, the feeling that is represented is more physical than emotional, but the distinction still stands. In "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," 65.

stories behind the symptom.[115] Whereas before analysis the body spoke for the patient through physical or linguistic symptoms, after a successful analysis the patient is able to speak for the body. Cameron quotes Stephen Marcus's essay on the Dora case study to this effect: "At the end—at the successful end—one has come into possession of one's own story. It is a final act of self-appropriation, the appropriation by oneself of one's own history."[116] Coming to the end of a successful analysis is likened to coming to the end of a story, where the result is not merely a greater self-knowledge, but self-appropriation, a mastery over the self, the unruly body, the past. When we speak of reaching closure, we mean that an ordeal has been worked through and that we've made sense of the story. This is not only the narrative of analysis, but also the narrative of the application of psychoanalytic theory to literary criticism – the end goal for both projects is a coherent story. A psychoanalytic literary interpretation shows how the text masters itself, how it reaches closure. But as Cameron contends, this standard of interpretation does not apply to the lyric because poems are resistant to "cognitive enclosure," and we must find a new way of understanding narrative in order to read poetry.[117]

A poem can tell a story without being a story. Even if a poem has a story to tell, it is not driven by an urge for storytelling and the emphasis is still usually on a certain economy of language instead of the trajectory of narrative. Lyric poetry in particular is a genre often characterized by utterance in the first person in a moment in time, requiring no past to contextualize it or a future to make sense of its present. A poem does not

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[115] When Cameron discusses how poems tell stories, she makes an immediate connection to Freud, pointing to the connection between language, intelligibility, and health, and symptoms (bodily speech), fragmentation, and sickness.
[116] Stephen Marcus, quoted in Cameron, 61.
[117] Cameron, 61.

necessarily represent a self-identical speaker or a completed experience. We read poems line by line, and the temporal experience of reading is arrested momentarily by each line break. While prose charges forward, ever accumulating pages in its wake, the poem bears back as it moves on, a kind of regressive progression where momentum is built by interruption.[118] Lyric meaning, therefore, is not necessarily generated at the moment of completion or by temporal contiguity at all. The uncanniness of the lyric occurs when sense breaks through amidst unfamiliarity: in the missing context, the uncertain speaker, even, as Cameron points out, in the poem's typographic isolation against a mute white page.[119] Dickinson's poems are of particular interest because they trouble what it means to tell a story by weaving a sequence of events with frayed ends sticking out. And yet, her poems have a certain downward tendency, resisting conclusion even as they inch closer to it.

This peculiar movement that works from within Dickinson's poetry to resist closure is more in line with the Freudian concept of the death drive than any rhetorical or poetic device. The death drive is the instinct that strives for the reduction of tension, and to that end, drives the organism towards an earlier, inorganic state. Masked by the libido, the death drive operates silently and unobtrusively, only manifesting itself through repetition compulsion and the "instinct for mastery" that both recreates and rehabilitates a

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[118] "Verse, *versus*: there is a pattern that turns around and comes back," writes Franco Moretti. Prose, however, is "forward-looking…the text has an orientation, it leans forwards, its meaning 'depends on what lies ahead (the end of a sentence; the next event in the plot)', as Michal Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea have put it." While I would argue with his assumption that verse is symmetrical and therefore permanent while prose is asymmetrical and therefore impermanent – Dickinson is a perfect counter example – his description of the movement peculiar to poetry is useful here. From *Distant Reading* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 162.

[119] Cameron, 71.

previous state of precarious passivity.[120] Even a seemingly pleasurable repetition marks the thwarting of satisfaction. Lee Edelman defines the drive as a movement towards realization that simultaneously seeks to undo itself, leaving a haunting remainder in its wake. It is this remainder, this excess that marks the impossibility of the drive reaching satisfaction. "Such a goal," Edelman writes, "such an end, could never be 'it'; achieved, it could never satisfy. For the drive as such can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds."[121] This pulsion that bears back on itself leaves a sense of dissatisfaction in its wake. We have already detected this haunting remainder in Dickinson's poetry, which insists on describing a sort of intransitive experience. If we have difficulty determining what her poems are "about," it is perhaps because this drive "holds the place of what the meaning misses," as Edelman argues, marking the absence of meaning even as it suggests its presence.[122] It is thanks to this invisible drive that the reader feels that she has come close to satisfaction only to just miss it.

Laplanche and Pontalis note that the death drive may be conceived as "a reaffirmation of what Freud had always held as the very essence of the unconscious in its indestructible and unrealistic aspect."[123] It is "unrealistic" because it asks us to hold a paradoxical view of pleasure and unpleasure, for the death drive is the internalization of

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[120] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London, The Hogarth Press, 1955), 15.
[121] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 22.
[122] Edelman, 10.
[123] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 102.

struggle, of "conflict itself."[124] As Laplanche notes, the tendency towards the reduction of tension and the tendency to maintain a constantly low level of tension are not, as Freud holds, commensurate.[125] There is something irreducible about the death drive, as it seeks both stasis and nothingness. If the tendency toward zero is primary to but simultaneous with the desire for peace, more often associated with the pleasure principle, then the pleasure principle must have a hand in the dealings of the death drive. Indeed, Freud concludes by noting that the pleasure principle and the death instinct are not diametrically opposed to each other, for "the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts" and shares the relief when tension is reduced.[126] As it turns out, the death drive is the drive itself. But this realization, he bemoans, raises more problems than it answers. To alleviate his tension, he ends his text with the balm of poetry: "*Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken….Die Schrift sagt, es ist keine Sünde zu hinken*."[127] While poetry was often his recourse to prove the eternal quality to his thinking, here it does not serve as evidence for the prior existence of his ideas. James Strachey explains that Freud had previously quoted these lines of the *Maqâmât* of al-Hariri in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess in 1895, presumably with his entire Project on his mind. When the way forward seemed undetermined, poetry allowed Freud not to rise above his difficulties, but to get low and limp towards them.

I have so far described a certain poetics of the death drive, of an aim that draws itself towards its close without resolving itself. We must remember that the death drive

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[124] Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 122.
[125] Laplanche, 113.
[126] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 62.
[127] "What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping….The book tell us it is no sin to limp." Freud, 63.

does not operate in isolation, and so cannot be identified running through a poem like a given conceit or trope. *Jenseits der Lustprinzip*, the original German title for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, stresses that the death drive is not separate from the pleasure principle, but on the other side of it, inseparable from it. "More than any particular *type* of instinct," Laplanche and Pontalis argue, "it is rather that factor which determines the actual *principle* of all instinct."[128] It is crucial, moreover, to read the death drive as an ateleological drive. In fact, the death drive has an asymptotic relation to death, nearing ever closer but never reaching its end. Just as repetition does not reproduce the first term being repeated, the death drive, an unconscious and therefore timeless operation, does not arrive at its destination. If the death drive actually brought the organism to death, it would have a forward tendency, towards the ultimate achievement of life. But instead, it manifests itself through repetition, through a backwards motion that nonetheless never quite touches back on base, never quite recaptures the original. The narrative that the death drive represents, therefore, is one without a true beginning and end. If the death drive can help us understand the inner working of poems, it is through the dual and dueling tendencies of poems both to offer a linear sequence that starts and stops and to disrupt that sequence. While lyric poems use rhyme schemes and metrical patterns to organize, structure, or otherwise master their tensions, their temporal interruptions and metrical irregularities disrupt the stasis of the poem. Incomplete phrases, forced rhymes, skipped beats, extra syllables – all contribute to the fact that tension can be reduced but cannot be eliminated short of death. The poem moves "down, and down—", as Dickinson put it, but we cannot see the bottom.

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[128] Laplanche and Pontalis, 102.

To say that Dickinson is thematically interested in the death drive is obvious, if anachronistic. Her poetry betrays an awareness of an internal force that drags one toward inertia, towards a nothing without end. She works with the death drive, like she works with the uncanny, both thematically and formally in her poems. As Smith notes, "stability is an ultimate state—that is, a final one."[129] Writing poems that explicitly resist closure is a form of self-mastery that does not disallow interpretation, but instead remains radically open for interpretation. This open possibility does not necessarily generate a positive feeling in the reader; the uncanny feeling lingers that something is left over, that something hasn't clicked. Smith considers William Carlos Williams' contention that a poem should not, as W.B. Yeats recommends, "click like a box," observing that modern poetry exhibits a "tendency toward anti-closure."[130] Unlike earlier forms of poetry that would sum themselves up in couplets or codas, the modernist poem resists reaching its own conclusion, or in other words, "even when the poem is firmly closed, it is not usually slammed shut."[131] A Dickinson poem can always spring back open even after a strong reading because there is something in the box – and formally, her poems do often take the shape of long boxes, like coffins – that cannot be contained.

We have also seen how Dickinson troubles the distinction between the literal and the figurative, and so to that end, let us consider what happens when the speaker of one of Dickinson's poems goes for a death drive:

> Because I could not stop for Death –
> He kindly stopped for me –
> The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
> And Immortality.

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[129] Herrnstein Smith, 35.
[130] Herrnstein Smith, 237.
[131] Herrnstein Smith, 237.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity – (479)

Compared to some of her more perplexing verse, this poem is more easily grasped. Because of its seemingly clear narrative, it has been anthologized widely and is likely to be the high school student's introduction to Dickinson. Death catches the speaker unawares, and at first, she has an ironic appreciation for his politesse.[132] But as they ride on, the night grows colder, the rhyme scheme loses steam, and before long, the meaning of death dawns on her. The children, grain, and setting sun the carriage passes in the third stanza are common representations of stages of life, the twilight of which leaves the speaker alone with the possibility of her own death. As Helen Vendler spells out, "[t]he point of the poem is to describe the moment when the concept of personal 'Immortality'

[132] Compare with Poem 392: "We talked as girls do – / Fond, and late – / We speculated fair, on every subject, but the Grave – / Of ours, none affair – "

was shocked into disappearing from the speaker's consciousness," leaving her with "Eternity" instead.[133] "Immortality" ends the first stanza, while "Eternity" ends the last. Dickinson does not use the words interchangeably, and their positions in the poem are telling. Eternity is the condition of being without time, while immortality is the condition of being without death. With its suggestion of vanquishing death, immortality has the ring of either a biblical promise of a heaven that waits after life ends, or Grecian glory after a heroic goal. But instead, the speaker finds that the only timelessness there is still an earthly one—she repeats "Ground" twice to stress the point.[134] Here and elsewhere, the skeptical Dickinson treats the belief in or hope for immortality as a naiveté only believed by one who does not take the threat of death seriously.[135] Immortality is granted the only full stop in the poem, and the long sentence that follows portrays the speaker's disabuse of the concept. By the final stanza, she has realized not that she had reached the destination of heaven, but that she had been galloping all along "toward Eternity –", and with one final dash, the poem keeps reaching toward it. The drive towards death does not begin at some arbitrary moment of injury—we are always in the carriage. When the speaker qualifies, "Or rather – He passed Us – ", we see that the sun is still ahead, time is still going forward, while the speaker begins to be divorced from it. Indeed, they pause at what can only be her burial plot, but the poem pauses as well, and does not decide whether or not the speaker is in the ground or in the carriage, dead or moving towards

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[133] Helen Vendler, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 226.
[134] Eternity does, of course, have Christian implications. Eternity is another term for kingdom of God, a timeless realm.
[135] Here she may also subtly mock the Spiritualist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, which held that the immortal afterlife would be exactly life the earthly one, down to every last mortal possession.

death. Here we have another house that does not contain all. Some meaning exceeds it. Like "I Felt a Funeral in my Brain," the poem brings its speaker to the brink of—something, eternity, whatever that may be. These downward experiences follow the logic of the death drive: inexhaustible, internal, relentless.

Misery, Mystery, Mastery

The drive in Dickinson's poems that resists closure can only operate within the confines of the poem itself, or otherwise they would conclude before they even began. To that end, every now and then, her poems do come to a full, punctuated stop:

> My life closed twice before its close;
> It yet remains to see
> If Immortality unveil
> A third event to me,
>
> So huge, so hopeless to conceive
> As these that twice befell.
> Parting is all we know of heaven,
> And all we need of hell. (1773)

Squarely refusing any optimistic account of immortality, Dickinson claims that the only afterlife of which we can be certain is our life after our loved ones have died. "Immortality," instead, is the life that stretches on unbearably without the loved one. Here is late style, if there ever was one—this poem is one of Dickinson's last, but one of many that take up the idea of hopelessness in relation to immortality. The two closings of life are deaths that "befell" others, and yet they also belong to the speaker – "my life closed twice before its close" though the third close will also be afforded "to me." The semicolon is a fitting punctuation for the end of the first line, for it contains both a period and a comma, a stop and a continuation that closes one complete thought even as the

sentence continues. Even if the speaker lives on, survives, part of her life ends with each closing of another's life. We need not wait for death to get a taste of hell, for we feel it each time a tie is severed with a loved one. This argument echoes an earlier poem, "I cannot live with you":

> And were You – saved –
> And I – condemned to be
> Where you were not
> That self – were Hell to me – (706)

As Vendler argues, what Immortality has to "unveil" is not heaven but apocalypse, from the Greek *apokaluptein*, or uncovering.[136] Immortality does not reveal any mystery but an ultimate loss. Dickinson is uninterested in the Christian covenant that we will all be reunited in the afterlife because it is "hopeless to conceive" of an afterlife that simply resembles the same life left behind.[137] Death may be the limit of experience and knowledge, but it is pointless to imagine it as being a continuation of life on an astral plane.

Dickinson's poems are replete with mentions of eternity and immortality. A search through the online *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* shows that while the two words can be synonymous (as they sometimes are in Dickinson's poems), there is a certain shade of difference between them.[138] Immortality's first definition is "eternity," and all ensuing

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[136] Vendler, 520.

[137] Even worse than being in Hell, for Dickinson as for Sartre, is finding the afterlife to be as crowded as mortal life. As she writes in the third Master letter, ""I used to think when I died – I could see you – so I died as fast as I could – but the 'Corporation' are going too – so Eternity/Heaven wont be sequestered" *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Amherst: Amherst University Press, 2002), 34.

[138] The *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* provides comprehensive definitions of every word used in her poetry. The website uses several resources and provides both the definitions as

definitions relate to a sense of perpetual paradise and triumph over death; eternity encompasses these meanings but has as its first definition, "duration or continuance without beginning or end."[139] In this narrow definition, immortality is yoked to time whereas eternity is atemporal. The naïve speaker of "Because I could not stop for Death" assumes that immortality is the end game, that after death comes eternal life and that her ride will go on indefinitely. But instead, she is left with an eternity that does not allow for a sense of time, or for a sense of victory. The *Lexicon* also provides a significant connotation for immortality, as found in Dickinson's poems: fame, or figuratively, "publication; getting their name in print."[140] Two of her poems, both written in the productive year of 1863, are frequently cited as examples of her interest in immortal glory over earthly fame and fortune: Poem 788, "Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man – " and poem 536,

> Some – Work for Immortality –
> The Chiefer part, for Time –
> He – Compensates – immediately –
> The former – Checks – on Fame –
>
> Slow Gold – but Everlasting –
> The Bullion of Today –
> Contrasted with the Currency
> Of Immortality –
>
> A Beggar – Here and There –
> Is gifted to discern
> Beyond the Broker's insight –
> One's – Money – One's – the Mine –

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used in Dickinson's poetry and as provided in Noah Webster's 1844 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, a treasured item in the Dickinson household.
[139] Cynthia Hallen. "Immortality" and "Eternity." *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*. Brigham Young University, 2007-2014. Web. 16 May 2014.
[140] Hallen, "Immortality."

One reading of this poem would suggest that being compensated for writing poetry (i.e. publication) is a poor reward compared to what the afterlife offers, which, according to Christanne Miller, is what "Dickinson herself prefers."[141] Miller reads this poem as an indication of Dickinson's attitude towards her fame to come, not "Money," but "the Mine," a personal source of wealth that, one supposes, is also immortal. This interpretation is in line with Miller's understanding of Dickinson's poetic immortality; she quotes Shira Wolosky's assessment that Dickinson's "deadline was not publication but immortality" in noting that, "[w]ith over eleven hundred poems copied into sets and booklets, she knew she had preserved a body of work that would last."[142] Never mind how we know that "she knew"—such a reading does not take Dickinson's religious skepticism seriously enough, and indeed, as Cameron points out, the poem is syntactically strange enough to disprove any reading of the poem as self-consistent. "It is not, for instance, clear whether 'Slow Gold—but Everlasting—'…refers to the compensations of 'Time' or those of 'Immortality. By association with the previous line the tenor of the metaphor would be 'Immortality,' not 'Time,' but in light of the following it would be 'Time' rather than 'Immortality.'"[143] Moreover, the pun on "the Mine" does not suggest that one sort of work is proper to Emily Dickinson herself, the poet and person. As I have argued, few of her poems end on a note that illuminates the

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[141] Miller, *Reading in Time*, 189.
[142] Miller, 188. I would add that Miller is frequently bold enough to suggest that she knows what Emily Dickinson knew, or even at times, what she would have done. In the hypothetical situation that she did publish, Miller confides, "I feel equally certain that Dickinson would have continued to write these poems out…since the poem did not live for her in any single performance of manifestation of its written form." (117).
[143] Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing*, 26.

lines that came before. Instead, they work from the inside to undo whatever interpretation seems the most ready at hand.

This inability to determine a stable reading of the poem points to the controversy over how we are to interpret Dickinson's disinclination to publish. Dickinson published ten poems in her lifetime, and wrote around eighteen hundred, many of which she sent to friends and family. After her death, her sister Lavinia discovered hundreds of her poems locked in a box, some bound together in fascicles, some left loose. She enlisted the help of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, writer and frequent correspondent of Dickinson, and Mabel Louis Todd, (perhaps unfortunately remembered as) Dickinson's brother's mistress. In 1890 and 1891, Higginson and Todd published two volumes of *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, and Todd published the third, along with a collection of letters, on her own in 1894 and 1896, respectively. Together, they made extensive edits to Dickinson's poems: they normalized her punctuation, tinkered with word choice to make rhymes fit, and added titles that they deemed to reflect the poem's meaning. Dickinson's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, inherited her papers and edited new volumes of poetry that restored original word choice and rhyme scheme, and omitted the tacked-on titles. A single edition of Dickinson's complete poems was not available until Harvard scholar Thomas H. Johnson published all seventeen hundred and seventy five, with variants, in chronological order—Dickinson remastered. "The purpose of this edition," he claimed "is to establish an accurate text of the poems."[144] For the love of "accuracy," Ralph W. Franklin published *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* in 1981, "restored as closely as possible to their original order…much as she left them for Lavinia and the

[144] Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), lxi.

world," as well as a variorum edition of Dickinson's poems in 1998.[145] Franklin taps into "the Mine" in both senses of the word: he suggests that after her death, Emily Dickinson personally bequeathed her poems to her sister and to the general public, and by publishing them as she left them, we are fulfilling her wish. In short, editors of Dickinson's poems have increasingly longed for a return to an original state and have sought to reduce the tensions caused by unwelcome interference by deferring to her own mastery.

As recent generations of Dickinson editors have chipped away at the early editorial changes to return to Dickinson's original manuscripts, Dickinson's publication history has consistently raised the question of intent. Citing the primacy of the manuscripts and fascicles is a way of moving closer to what Dickinson originally intended, even though she did not *intend* to publish.[146] Critics who acknowledge her reluctance to provide "poetic closure" have also taken up this question of intent, linking the poet as a woman who once had a material existence with the materials she left behind. Consider Susan Howe's remarks in a 1990 interview:

> …one of Dickinson's abilities is to escape everything. If you think you can explain a poem, she quickly shows you there is a way out of that interpretation. I think I have the best intentions when it comes to reading *The Manuscript Books*, but I often wake up in the night and think, No, I am wrong. She would not agree. She would be angry with me. It's something to do with her way of not publishing, of copying her work into packages she sewed together herself, with what she left out (numbers, titles), with what she left in (variant word listings, various marks). I think she may have chosen to enter the space of silence, a space

[145] Emily Dickinson, *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), ix.

[146] The irony is, Dickinson's intention not to publish has opened her work up to proliferating scrutiny as the manuscripts, letters, and fascicles she left behind have become a playground for the digital humanities. Editorial imperialism has been on the decline, but scholarly work has been greatly facilitated by online archives. Her writing, as she intended it, is now only a click away.

> where power is no longer an issue, gender is no longer an issue, voice is no longer an issue, where the idea of a printed book appears as a trap.[147]

A scholar may read with the "best intentions" as long as the poet's original intention is kept in mind, lest she wakes in the middle of the night to see a disappointed ghost frowning over her draft. Poststructuralist thought has done much work to disentangle authorship from authority, and so it is unusual, to say the least, to hear such a confession: "She would not agree. She would be angry with me." But there seems to be something particular with Dickinson that concerns the relation of intentionality and materiality alongside the thematic resistance to immortality in her poems that brings authorship back into play. In *The Birth-mark*, Howe argues that since the 1950's, Dickinson has been more or less "manhandled" by her editors, the "gentlemen of the old school" who altered her original phrasing and prosody, paid no heed to her curatorial choices, and ignored her intention to opt out of the literary market place.[148] According to Howe, Franklin and his ilk brought Dickinson into the literary mainstream only to set her apart, thus making her an anomaly without predecessor, peer, or inheritor: "Dickinson is in the canon. But she is treated as an isolated case, not as part of an ongoing influence."[149] Howe identifies Anne Hutchinson as Dickinson's progenitor, and reads her resistance to publication to be a "covenant of grace" in its own right. Dickinson's own "antinomian vision" was to write without heed of recognition, either in her lifetime or after it.[150] Instead of espousing a "covenant of works," where her poetry would be judged in her lifetime with an aim for

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[147] *Talisman* magazine, no. 4 (Spring 1990). Printed in *The Birth-mark*, *Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 170.
[148] Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark,* 170.
[149] Howe, 168.
[150] Howe, 1.

literary immortality, she lived a "covenant of grace" that allowed her to write freely and with confidence.

Howe proposes a renewed attention to what she calls "visual intentionality" that reveals how the graphic elements of Dickinson's manuscripts (size, spacing, crossed out or added words) convey how she intended for each poem to be read. For Howe, the critic must have the right intentions when searching for intention in Dickinson's work. Indeed, intentionality has become a keyword in Dickinson scholarship. If merely getting a Dickinson poem into print is an act of interpretation, we can see why this poet in particular is, as Stewart has it, always "overinterpreted" even as she is "underinterpreted."[151] As Domhnall Mitchell observes in his study of Dickinson's manuscripts, *Measures of Possibility*,

> Are the physical appearances of Dickinson's drafts related to economies of scale, or were they meant to influence the meaning of the poem? For many critics, the endless appeal of Dickinson's work lies precisely in its ability to provoke such questions while refusing to provide definite answers to them. But again and again, one runs up against the problem of intention in Dickinson's works; again and again, intention in Dickinson is irrevocably bound up with issues of manuscript status and appearance, as well as genre.[152]

Mitchell pinpoints the relationship between materiality, intentionality, and meaning as he opens up a new question for contemporary scholarship, Dickinson's generic status, a question that Jackson takes up in *Dickinson's Misery*. As Jackson contends, Dickinson's poetry has been received since 1890 as exemplary of lyric poetry as a genre, and this exemplary status has been concomitant with the acceptance of the lyric as a strange synecdoche for poetry itself, where the sub-generic part stands for the genre as a whole.

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[151] Stewart, 253,

[152] Domhnall Mitchell, *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 17.

With her refrain of "But is it *lyric*? How do we know?" Jackson focuses on reading habits rather than close readings of Dickinson's poems themselves to illustrate how, in the hands of editors and critics, scribbles on scraps of paper (and dried flowers and dead crickets) are shaped into lyric poems. Jackson charts a century of changing modes of "lyric reading" to demonstrate the performative role of interpretation in producing the genre of the lyric even as it takes the lyric as a given. It follows, then, that the rather pious efforts to rescue Dickinson from her publishers and to restore her true intentions by attending to her manuscripts end up further constraining her work by reproducing the constraints of the lyric genre. Those of Dickinson's writings that are not easily recognizable as poems or easily rendered into poems, Jackson argues, "have been left to suffer under the weight of variorum editions or have been transformed into weightless, digitized images of fading manuscripts made possible by invisible hands."[153] Even if Jackson's book ultimately illuminates the construction of Dickinson's status as a lyric poet more than it helps us understand her poems, her work provides an important intervention in the conversation about materiality and intentionality by asking how the material "leftovers" of a poet provide evidence for the intentions of the person who once was, or in other words, "How does writing come to be read *as* a person?"[154] This is a fair question, considering how Dickinson's poems so often thwart the basic questions of lyric close reading. What interests Jackson is not determining who Emily Dickinson really was, or her intentions for her manuscripts, but how we read what she left behind. But *how* we read her "poems" evades the question of *what* exactly it is that her poems do, and

[153] Jackson, 13.
[154] Jackson, 138.

therefore *why* we are compelled to read them, or any scrap of writing she left behind, poem or not.

Jackson's work is not so much a reception history as it is an interception history that shows how critics claiming to consider Dickinson's intentionality in fact run away with her work towards the goal of their own theoretical concerns. For instance, she credits Cameron for problematizing how we read Dickinson's poetry as individual lyrics versus lyrics that must be read in connection with one another. But instead of choosing one hermeneutic or another, Cameron argues, Dickinson constructed fascicles that allowed her not to choose whether to push the poems as individual lyrics or as lyric in sequence. If in *Lyric Time* Cameron interprets Dickinson's poems as singular entities that encapsulate the temporality of the lyric, in *Choosing Not Choosing* she emphasizes the porous space in and between the poems and proposes that the fascicles "trouble the idea of limit or frame" while the variants "indicate both the desire for limit and the difficulty in enforcing it."[155] These two frames may be superimposable; acknowledging that her earlier reading intensifies the critical reputation of Dickinson's poems as "enigmatic, isolated, culturally incomprehensible phenomena," she moves towards a reading that holds Dickinson as writer of intentionally open-ended poems that are not so much incomprehensible as they are indeterminate.[156] The difference, one supposes, is intent: in the first example, we have the Lady in White squirreled away in the attic writing inscrutable, hermetic poems, while in the second we have a poet using her prowess to create poems with limitless hermeneutic potential. Dickinson's poems are bounded both materially (in the fascicles) and formally (in her use of quatrains, hymn

[155] Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing* 5-6.
[156] Cameron, 5.

meter, and alternate rhyme, as well as her variants). But what thought she had in mind, and what choices she made when binding her poems into fascicles, remains lost.

For Cameron, however, "the question of intention, at least at one level, is not undecidable—because we know that Dickinson intended something. After all, she copied the poems into the fascicles. The question then is, in doing so, what did she intend?"[157] Because the fascicles have a material existence, they must have a maker, and that maker must have had an intention in choosing one poem over another to put in a sequence. In other words, Cameron sidesteps the intentional fallacy by promoting material reality. She is not alone in this view: Jerome McGann, in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*, re-renders Franklin's versions of Dickinson's poems to offer what he calls a "typographical translation" that highlights, as Howe recommends, the "visibility" of her language.[158] "It does no good to argue, as some might," he warns, after providing one of his improved "translations," that Dickinson's "odd lineations are unintentional…certain textual moments reveal such a dramatic use of page space as to put the question of intentionality beyond consideration."[159] McGann argues that Dickinson's approach to poetry was visual more than anything: she sculpted the blank space around her poems and manipulated her margins. All this, he argues, is perfectly visible in the manuscripts, which is where we go to find what Dickinson *really meant*. Here again, we have the critic's intervention to save intention. But as John Shoptaw points out in his article "Listening to Dickinson" (a title which must be read both ways), if we are to think of intentionality in Dickinson, no recourse to materiality, perceptibility, or personhood is

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[157] Cameron, 18.
[158] Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 27.
[159] McGann, 28.

necessary—we only need to *listen* to her. Shoptaw argues that Dickinson's metrical and rhythmic choices reflect a poet with a masterful command of her prosody, and that by reading lineation, we are able to get a closer look at what choices she may have made in the process of writing, choices that are more easily determined and rely less on speculation as to intent. While variants are illuminating, each instance of a variant could easily be a revision, and in any case, as he points out, Dickinson made fair copies without variants and frequently sent her poems to friends and families without variants. In other words, she "neither found it impossible to choose nor did she refuse to do so. She chose."[160] By focusing on Dickinson's poems as finished products that nonetheless reflect a process of composition, Shoptaw convincingly argues that one need not wade through a mess of variants, scraps of paper, and marginalia to determine intentionality. Instead of straining to "overhear" from remnants of the past, all one needs to do is listen.

Like Cameron, however, Shoptaw does appreciate the need to promote the radical open-endedness of Dickinson's verse, and considers her to present "a constantly changing horizon of actual and latent rhythmic possibilities."[161] Shoptaw considers it to be characteristic of Dickinson to complete the rhythm of a line or stanza even as she syntactically extends it, leaving it therefore incomplete. He calls this effect "disclosure" – emphasizing both the opening up and the unburdening of a secret – and considers it to be an intentional device.[162] We have seen this in "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted," as the first line rolls off the tongue but still feels as if something is left over; that something is the metrical revelation of an imperfect measure. Miller, too, considers

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[160] John Shoptaw, "Listening to Dickinson" in *Representations,* Vol. 86 No. 1 (Spring 2004), 29.
[161] Shoptaw, 29.
[162] Shoptaw, 35.

Dickinson to practice a poetics of openness and fluidity, "a poetic of process, thinking, revision, engaged in reflection or enquiry rather than in pronouncement, conclusions, or iconic texts."[163] These complementary senses of closure and open-endedness is therefore both structural and thematic, and can prove to be a hurdle in reading. Consider Cameron's language of binding and closure when she describes Dickinson's metrics: "How does one interpret the fact that Dickinson chooses to write in quatrains and hymn meter—in a structure that goes as far as possible toward bounding and containment—rather than to write in a looser form, as, say Whitman does? Why is Dickinson writing in a form that bounds, contains borders and excludes?"[164] Dickinson is far from the first poet to take up formal constraints that inspire innovation or to follow rules only to create a striking effect when she breaks them, and the same can also be said for poets who write in free verse. And yet, there is something uncanny about her use of form, as she takes up the hymn form only to trouble its metrics and rhymes. Thematically, boundaries play an important role in Dickinson's poetry, particularly those boundaries between death and life, consciousness and unconsciousness, desire and renunciation, and even figurative and literal language; indeed, many of her poems are situated in the liminal space of such boundaries. Cameron considers Dickinson's use of form to be a way of "exploiting a form so as to point to the 'identity' or convergence of boundedness and *un*boundedness."[165] There has been so far an interesting play on binding and boundary,

[163] Miller, *Reading in Time,* 117.
[164] Cameron, 28.
[165] Cameron, 28.

where the materiality of the text meets the intentionality of the author.[166] After all, binding has a certain sense of futurity. If you are bound to do something, you are either likely to do it or obliged to do it. Dickinson copied her poems out onto sheets of paper and then, as Cameron narrates, "stabbed them and bound them with string."[167] How immanently physical this sounds, how easy it is to picture the pen knife, the decisive stab, the coarse string between her fingers as she bound the leaves of paper. It sounds as if she was preparing a gift—either for the future reader, or, in true Dickinsonian fashion, for "Nobody." Binding, therefore, creates a future, where intentionality is legible through material remains.

As Jackson contends, Cameron implies that Dickinson wrote "in view of a hermeneutic future," and yet "to foresee that hermeneutic future is also to suppose that [her] writing was always oriented toward it."[168] Though Jackson's primary issue with this "hermeneutic future" concerns the genre of the lyric, she also brings up an important point about intention and teleology. In binding her poems, was Dickinson binding her readers to read in a certain way? Are we readers (and we is certainly a binding pronoun) bound to interpret Dickinson according to how the poems have been presented to us by her editorial interlocutors? It seems that the act of binding serves to provide hermeneutic possibility by connecting poems, but it also forecloses the free flow of ideas and interpretations and conflict of differing senses breaking through. Binding creates unities, but it also creates boundaries. In psychoanalytic terms, "binding" is the operation of

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[166] "Dickinson Unbound" is a subsection of Jackson's first chapter, "Dickinson Undone," to underline the point. Presumably, the reference is to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama that was not intended to be produced for the stage.
[167] Cameron, 7.
[168] Jackson, 44-5.

restricting excitement and promoting equilibrium by making connections and cohesion in the face of trauma or unpleasure. The concept of binding had been with Freud as early as the "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1895), where he read bound energy as a sign of a well connected and integrated system of cathexis, what he would eventually term the ego. The ego has a binding function that manages the economy of psychic energy. But it was not until *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that he realized that when trauma transgresses the ego's boundaries, the pleasure principle is tasked with "mastering or binding excitations," so that binding becomes necessary in the most unbound moments.[169] Binding is therefore both the task of the ego and the action behind repetition compulsion, for it ties up threatening stimuli before it can upset the ego. For Peter Brooks, repetition creates meaning by linking the present to the past and by ensuring a future; it works as a "binding" of "textual energy" that links one moment to another.[170] Brooks reads binding as a function of the text's death drive, which he reads literally as a movement towards death that strings together repetitions and associations and coheres only when the text comes to an end. In this case, binding and creating unities is a way of tying down, of binding the text to an interpretation and making the interpretation a binding contract. Indeed, if death is the final standpoint from which to look back, then meaning becomes, in the end, final—this is the viewpoint of hindsight, a kind of belated knowledge. François reads Brooks' focus on "forward-looking movement" to explain how plot moves with the subject's desire for self-actualization and recognition, and to contrast it with Dickinsonian subject who leaves experience uncounted and evades finality.

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[169] Freud, 34.
[170] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

It is worth returning to Jackson's beginning: "Suppose you are sorting through the effects of a woman who has just died and you find in her bedroom a locked wooden box…What remains, you decide, must be published."[171] When we read Dickinson, we are reading leftovers, remainders. They have not been explicitly passed down, but they have survived her. Again, the logic of the death drive allows us to read these curious remainders, sprung from a "locked wooden box," as missives that survive without a recipient or a projected endpoint. The death drive is always "what remains." Since so many of these remainders are personal letters and notes, what we readers and critics have access to is the undead Dickinson, one that bears traces of the person who once lived but that goes beyond her life. And indeed, now that her manuscripts have all been digitized, they enjoy a more permanent quality online. If her "deadline" (in both senses of the word) was not "publication but immortality," as Wolosky claimed, then we must think of immortality in light of the death drive. As Edelman explains, the immortality of the death drive entails "a persistent negation that offers assurance of nothing at all: neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of a future. Instead, it insists both on and as the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order's truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance."[172] The death drive survives biological life not to carry on some memory of a subject, but to refuse any meaning as such. While her material remains (poems, or "poems") make it somewhat counterintuitive to read Dickinson as exemplary of Edelman's screed against reproductive futurity, reading her work without looking for her intention for futurity allows us to face the impossible question of what her poems

[171] Jackson, 1.
[172] Edelman, 48.

"mean." The difficulty in Dickinson is not that her poems are so much more complicated than others, but that there is a formal force within them that refuses meaning. The critical urge to describe Dickinson as difficult is a defense against "what remains," the uncertain feeling that inevitably lingers after reading one of her poems.

In Dickinson, no futurity is required to make sense of a line, for there is no vantage point from which to look back and read the poem from the light at the end of the tunnel. Even if her poems are literally bound (either in fascicles by the poet herself, or in edited editions), they are psychically unbound, for they are absent of any tendency towards resolution. Of course, binding implies both being bound together and bound down. As we have seen, Dickinson's poems are thematically connected to one another even as the individual poem works formally to undo such thematic cohesion. As Freud summarizes, "The aim of [Eros] is to establish even greater unities and to preserve them thus – in short, to bind together; the aim of the [death instinct] is on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things."[173] Both forces are at work in Dickinson's poetry, and as I have discussed, these forces are both in conflict with another and one and the same. Dickinson's mastery lies in how she embraces this conflict, refuses resolution, and writes towards an ateleological future.[174]

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[173] Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXII* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1964), 148.

[174] No discussion of Dickinson's mastery is complete without mention of her most striking use of the term. She wrote three letters to an unidentified "Master" during in her most prolific period as a poet. In the letters, she repeatedly begs her "Master" to come to her, and yet she makes the possibility of their union sound more like a meeting in heaven than an earthly meeting. "Each Sabbath on the sea," she writes, "till we meet on the shore – will the/and whether the hills will look as blue as the sailors say – ." These hopeful meetings take on a deathly tone, and indeed the letters seem to be courting not so much a lover as Death himself. "What would you do with me if I came 'in white,'" she

I float—just like a Butterfly, / I sting—just like a Bee—

"One exaggerates, but sometimes it seems as if in her work a cat came at us speaking English." Blackmur's anxious tittering over Dickinson is strange enough that it is worth repeating. To be sure, he's being catty himself, but if he disparages her, he is also enthralled by her. What causes Blackmur's anxiety is that the cat is speaking a language he can understand. What is strange about Dickinson, then, is not that we don't understand her—it's that somehow we *do* understand her, in spite of her refusal of coherence and conclusion. And yet, that may be what resonates most with us, what Vendler calls "Dickinson's conviction of the permanent instability of truth," which she offers us both formally and thematically:[175]

> This World is not conclusion.
> A Species stands beyond –
> Invisible, as Music –
> But positive, as Sound –
> It beckons, and it baffles –
> Philosophy, don't know –
> And though a Riddle, at the last –
> Sagacity, must go –
> To guess it, puzzles scholars –
> To gain it, Men have borne
> Contempt of Generations
> And Crucifixion, shown –
> Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
> Blushes, if any see –
> Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
> And asks a Vane, the way –
> Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
> Strong Hallelujahs roll –
> Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

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asks, "Have you the little chest – to put the alive – in?" The speaker's every desire is bound together with death, but the afterlife affords no promise: "Heaven will disappoint me." *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 16, 43, and 29, respectively.

[175] Vendler, 176.

That nibbles at the soul – (373)

If full stops are infrequent in Dickinson's poems, ending the first line with a period is even more rare. Semantically, the poem could be separated into four stanzas, but instead we have a poem that continues on after its first firm pronouncement. The speaker makes the certain claim that "This World is not conclusion." But the pursuit of the "Or More—" will not come to a conclusion. There is something beyond this world, but no wisdom can wrestle it down. Higginson and Todd titled this poem "Immortality" in their 1896 edition, and as Vendler highlights, only printed the first twelve lines, giving the poem a more optimistic take on the need for meaning. For instance, the Crucifixion is the ending to one narrative that guarantees immortality to all who believe in it. But the poem continues, faith blushes at its own inconstancy, and in the end there is only a gnawing anxiety over one's lack of faith. Even if readers were left without the full version of the poem, something is amiss from the first line, the decisiveness of which obscures its strange wording. The speaker does not assert that this world does not conclude, but that "This World is not conclusion." According to the poem, conclusion, like immortality, seems to be the province of philosophers and preachers, men who scrutinize evidence and consult weathervanes. (But even madmen, we know from *Hamlet*, know which way the wind blows). Conclusion is alluring – "It beckons" – and infuriating – "and it baffles" – and the combination of the two is enough to urge us on to solve riddles and sate our curiosity. But there is no question that causes more anxiety than the question of the afterlife. As I have shown, Dickinson considered this question, but her conclusion is not the philosopher's teleological conclusion, but the poem's "possibility":

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –

More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors – (466)

The poet dwells in both sense of the word: she inhabits possibility, with its proliferating entrances in and vistas out, and she dwells *on* it, or makes it her business to consider what may be rather than deciding what is. At times, the radical openness of her poetics seems a sanguine prospect. But, then, "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul – ." Dwelling in possibility, after all, is precisely how anxiety arrests us in suffering, and the poem ends on a note of deferred anxiety. Narcotics are ineffective because they can only dull the tooth's pain, but the tooth is not what suffers. The literal drug cannot treat the metaphoric tooth to ease metaphysical agony. Nothing can sate the urge to know, mainly because what we urge to know is without conclusion. Rather than attempt to draw a conclusion and fail, Dickinson refuses conclusion altogether, or in other words, her poems are not conclusions.

As Vendler writes, "If all inquiry fails, then failure—continual, consistent, and inevitable—is the ultimate Truth. And Truth slides almost insensibly—in Dickinson's ear—into the awful 'Tooth.'"[176] And here we come face to face with the awful truth of her poetry, which "beckons, and it baffles" while "[t]o guess it, puzzles scholars." What makes Dickinson's poems unsettling is that even if we can interpret them as offering such wisdom, they always undo that interpretation. Her poems have a nibbling tooth of their own, still part of the body but bent on its slow destruction. Anxiety of this sort cannot be stilled with "Narcotics," let alone be understood or mastered. The ego under anxiety, Weber explains, "seeks to master the indifferent alterity of the trauma by temporalizing and temporizing it through the construction of a narrative, with beginning, middle, and

[176] Vendler, 176.

end."[177] Recall that closure is effected when one is able to piece a narrative together by binding together the troubling details of the past, like Brooks' heroic protagonist who self-fashions from his collected experience. Closure is a form of self-mastery marked by the ability to articulate one's own narrative instead of the body speaking out hysterically—when one stops overhearing one's self, in other words. As I have shown, Dickinson's poetry rejects closure, preferring to linger on "indifferent alterity." Even if, as Cameron notes, "the same poem of pain or loss keeps writing itself over and over," mechanically repeating pain or loss does not lead to mastery of it. Mastery may be the intention that propels repetition compulsion, but true mastery would be letting go of the pain or loss rather than reenacting it again and again. Repetition compulsion proliferates pain, and, as anxiety proves, repeating a traumatic reaction to prepare for a real danger still dredges up the old feeling of loss.

To that end, let us consider one more "poem of pain or loss," a poem that directly precedes "This world is not conclusion."

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
> The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
> The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
> And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?
>
> The Feet, mechanical, go round –
> A Wooden way
> Of ground, or Air, or Aught –
> Regardless grown,
> A Quartz contentment, like a Stone –
>
> This is the Hour of Lead –
> Remembered, if outlived,
> As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
> First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go – (372)

[177] Weber, 94.

"Formal feeling" is a tidy way of describing the effect of Dickinson's poems, where the prosody works through the feeling or affect being described. Curiously, no words are capitalized in the first line—one would expect perhaps "pain" or "feeling" to be emphasized. Again, it feels as if the experience described is assured, formulaic in how it promises that "formal feeling" is to come after "great pain" in general, not one pain in particular. The first stanza contains two pentameter couplets and a clear allusion to Christ's suffering, even if the "stiff Heart" is too pained to complete her sentences. Like "One need not be a Chamber to be Haunted," the poem has a speaker, but the speaker is not the subject of the poem; that is, she is not describing an experience that is necessarily proper to her. The nerves, the heart, and the feet all have things to do in this poem, and as we have seen with the body that borrows the revolver, isolating each body part serves to show how pain overpowers our sense of wholeness and estranges us from ourselves. As pain takes over, the movements of the feet becomes thoughtless, "mechanical," without notice where they walk. Here, the poem's lineation becomes "Regardless grown," or what Shoptaw calls "converse lineation," a rearrangement of regular lines to produce a more shocking rhythm and rhyme.[178] This disruption of prosody allows Dickinson to produce internal rhyme between "Ground" and "round," betraying unities in her poem even as it moves destructively downward. The poem regulates itself metrically as it fixes itself into an unmoving "Hour of Lead"—lead being a heavy metal that is toxic enough to the nervous system to cause a funeral in the brain. And like "I felt a Funeral in my Brain," it becomes increasingly unclear if the loss in the poem refers to a loss of consciousness or a loss of life. The difference between remembering and recollecting

[178] Shoptaw, 44.

offers a hint. If the "Hour of Lead" is outlived, then it will be "Remembered," or brought back to mind. To remember is bodily, as it suggests putting broken limbs back together. Recollection, however, is a narrativizing act that pieces together past experiences and is more abstract than remembrance—unless we take it literally. "Freezing persons" do not "recollect the Snow" by thinking about a lovely winter day. The snow re-collects on their bodies as it buries them. Outliving the "Hour of Lead" is *as* difficult as fighting off freezing to death. Dickinson ends the poem with a simile, unusual for a poet who is so consistently metaphoric. The "formal feeling" she describes is like the feel of the cold, but ultimately not the same. Again, she evades conclusion by tapering off into uncertainty, by letting go.

The beauty of the last measure, as Shoptaw explains, is how it "surprises us by not slowing down or congealing but by quickening and fluttering the metrical pulse. Even if outlived, Dickinson tells us, only formality survives."[179] Letting go is a characteristically Dickinsonian way of forgoing conclusion, but it is still a formal decision. The beginning of the line staggers on with pauses in each stage in the sequence – "First – Chill – then Stupor – " but then picks up speed and bounces along in the moment we would expect to sink into its own heaviness – "then the letting go –." These words appear in another poem: "Renunciation – is a piercing Virtue – / The letting go / A presence – for an Expectation / Not now – ." As Vendler explains, "'*The* letting go' creates an overarching untensed Idea that can be chosen over and over again."[180] I would push the point further and argue that in Dickinson's poetry, "the letting go" is not one moment of decision, nor is it a choice made again and again. It is a mode of being that is

[179] Shoptaw, 45.
[180] Vendler, 782.

reached involuntarily and unconsciously. Letting go, renunciation – this is how Dickinson approaches mastery. And yet, as François argues, the sort of "affirmative passivity" characteristic of a Dickinsonian subject is not a heroic ethos of asceticism but a way to "set aside the fantasy of the all-responsible subject."[181] The temporal experiences in her poems do not complete themselves, nor do her speakers report back with the knowledge of experience. Her thematic repetition was not a compulsion, but rather a part of the "formal feeling" of her prosody. Instead of writing poems that repeat the themes of pain and loss again and again to master them, instead of "slowing down or congealing" into conclusion, she shows her mastery by "quickening and fluttering." As Marianne Moore once wrote in a review of Dickinson's letters, "A certain buoyance that creates an effect of inconsequent bravado—a sense of drama with which we might not be quite at home—was for her a part of that expansion of breath necessary to existence."[182] We aren't "quite at home" reading Dickinson, and perhaps because we cannot master Dickinson, we critics assume we knew what she wanted, that we are carrying out her wishes; we look to crickets and crossed out lines for clues. But we too can let go and get swept away in the buoyancy in her poems and the bounce of her iambs. In the end, the best articulation of Dickinson's mastery can be found on the flap of an envelope scrap, perhaps jotted down, perhaps thoughtfully composed, who knows:

In this short Life
that only lasts an hour

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[181] François, 267.

[182] Richard Poirier connects Moore's approval of Dickinson's "conciseness" with another equally athletic wordsmith, Muhammad Ali. "He is a master of concision," Moore praised. Given how many bees appear in Dickinson's lyric, we can fancy a rewrite of Ali's most famous line: "I float – just like a Butterfly / I sting – just like a Bee / Your Hands – can't hit / What eyes – can't See – ." Moore in Poirier, *Trying It Out in America: Literary and Other Performances* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 7.

merely
How much – how
little – is
within our
power[183]

[183] Emily Dickinson, *The Gorgeous Nothings*, transcribed by Jen Bervin and Marta Werner (New York: Christine Burgin and New Directions, 2013), 62.

CHAPTER THREE: LE RETOUR DE LA REFOULÉE

Nous nous étions bien promis que toutes nos pensées nous seraient communes à l'un et à l'autre, et que nos deux âmes désormais n'en feraient plus qu'une—un rêve qui n'a rien d'original, après tout, si ce n'est que, rêvé par tous les hommes, il n'a été realize par aucun.
- Charles Baudelaire

I enjoy a misogynist so long as they have a wicked sense of humor and know, on some level, that they're pigs.
- Heidi Julavits

"The peculiarity of poetry," writes Mill, "appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener." This may well be how poetry *appears to us*, but what makes it peculiar is that the effect is a ruse. While the reader may delight in the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings the poem provides, if she flips to the back of the collected works, there is likely to be an essay by the poet that elucidates how that spontaneous overflow pooled onto the page. The hyperbolic "utter unconsciousness" from which the poet composes is often a calculated move to make his poetry more effective. As Edgar Allan Poe confessed, "Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought."[184] Mill appears to be sincere in his description of poetry, but the statement is unconsciously ironic—"utter unconsciousness" is what the poet feigns. How are we to reconcile this lyric effect of

[184] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" in *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1374.

overheard whispers with the direct explanations poets sometimes issue to clarify how to understand not only their work, but also lyric poetry in general?

Consider the case of Charles Baudelaire, who, as Walter Benjamin famously put it, "was anxious to be understood."[185] After the obscenity trial of *Les Fleurs du mal* – a "malentendu," as he put it – his poetry took a more ironic approach towards letting the public overhear him. If feeling confesses itself to itself in Baudelaire's work, it is because whatever feeling is intended to be conveyed swerves around the reader and loops back on itself, leaving a gap in the reader's understanding. In other words, if feeling literally confesses itself to itself, the reader may miss something in his eavesdropping. Baudelaire advances the implications of Mill's reflexive theory of poetry by taking him so literally as to be hyperbolic. Although he never pretended to be unconscious of his listeners and indeed explicitly addressed his audience, he did so with such irony that even if he hailed the reader as a fellow hypocrite, the reader would still be left in an uneasy brotherhood. His poetry is indeed *over*heard because it cannot be heard directly, without irony. When anything is overheard, there is always the risk that something hasn't been heard correctly, that the message is imperfectly received. The overheard is imprecise information: gossip, hearsay, and, evidently, poetry. But then, what poetry has to convey is rarely straightforward, as it is with eloquent or persuasive speech. Signs point to other signs, language signifies more language, feeling confesses itself to itself (though the reader may strain to overhear the confession).

"J'ai une petite confession à vous faire," wrote Baudelaire in the dedication to his collection of prose poems, *Le Spleen de Paris*. Though he addressed his friend Arsène

[185] Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 155.

Houssaye, he allowed the larger public, ("tous les hommes," if you will), to overhear his conversation. Whereas in *Les Fleurs du mal*, he dedicated his poetry to the "hypocrite lecteur" who took after the poet himself, *Le Spleen de Paris* is dedicated to a fellow poet, and is allegedly inspired by not only another poet's work, but by all who dream of "le miracle d'une prose poétique."[186] In spite of this deliberate appeal to poetic coterie, his move from poetry to prose would ostensibly make his work easier to understand. Writing in prose allowed Baudelaire to write in an idiom more familiar to his public and even to indulge in their clichés. (The cliché is, in fact, what is *over*heard.) Rather than following the lyric convention of the first person apostrophic address, he could enjoy a third person narrator who is apathetic of audience, or he could feign to be addressing Hoyssaye alone. He even went so far as to instruct his "ideal reader" to stop reading at his leisure and to read his poems in no particular order: "Enlevez une vertèbre, et les deux morceaux de cette tortueuse fantasie se rejoindront sans peine. Hachez-la en nombreux fragments, et vous verrez que chacun peut exister à part."[187] Remove a vertebra, hack it into pieces—do any violence you wish, dear reader, to my poems, and they will withstand it.

The only violence Baudelaire does not condone for his poetry is injustice. He laments that the 1857 trial of *Les Fleurs du mal* was a "malentendu," although, as Elissa Marder has argued, the prosecutor Ernest Pinard's very case against the poet was to charge him with addressing his obscene poems to an inappropriately wide audience. "Baudelaire's real 'crime'…" Marder finds, "is that he violates that law of the genre of poetry by writing poems that appeal to be read by readers of any rank, age, social class

[186] Charles Baudelaire, "À Arsène Houssaye" in *Le Spleen de Paris, Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 104.
[187] Baudelaire, 103.

and, as he insinuates darkly, gender."[188] Instead of aiming for a lofty readership, Pinard (correctly!) accuses Baudelaire of appealing to the lay public and our basest desires. The criminal act was not only a moral offense but also an aesthetic one, Marder implies, for by focusing on obscenity, Pinard reduces "the book's poetic form to its prosaic content [and] enlists Baudelaire's own poetic voice against him and returns it to him in the prosaic form of a guilty verdict in a court of justice."[189] His turn to the prosaic, therefore, was a direct response to the trial. Instead of writing lyric poetry, he made a generic turn in both senses of the word, emphasizing the prosaic quality of prose. But as Marder points out, "the very elements in *The Flowers of Evil* that rendered his poetry criminal to the court in the nineteenth century are the very same elements that have guaranteed its extended afterlife into the twenty-first century."[190] Baudelaire may have delighted in the fact that not only have we canonized his poems, but we have also created beloved clichés about his work. After all, one of Baudelaire's goals was "créer un poncif."[191] In Baudelaire's poetry, clichés are insidious, because their innocuously empty signification hides a darker irony that gets across without notice.

Mill's statement, too, has become a cliché of lyric theory. What if we took him literally? Baudelaire may have let his readers overhear him, for instance, but who is it that Baudelaire overhears? Poe is the obvious reply. "Savez-vous pourquoi j'ai si patiemment traduit Poe?" he wrote in a letter. "Parce qu'il me ressemblait. La première fois que j'ai ouvert un livre de lui, j'ai vu, avec épouvante et ravissement, non seulement

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[188] Elissa Marder, "From Poetic Justice to Criminal *Jouissance*: Poetry by Other Means in Baudelaire" *Yale French Studies*, No. 125-126, (2014), 72.
[189] Marder, 72.
[190] Marder, 70.
[191] "Créer un poncif, 'est le genie. Je dois créer un poncif." From *Fusées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 79.

des sujets rêvés par moi, mais des PHRASES pensées par moi, et écrites par lui vingt ans auparavant."[192] Reading Poe, Baudelaire overheard his own thoughts, in his own head, but in Poe's voice. In other words, Poe confessed himself to Baudelaire. Baudelaire was heavily indebted to Poe's work, needless to say, and his poetic project is in many ways a continuation of Poe's. Perhaps Poe was an uncanny scribe to Baudelaire's thoughts, or his telepathic twin. The recipe for coining a cliché was, after all, well documented in Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," where he explained in great detail how he labored to write "The Raven" by "keeping originality *always* in view."[193] In both Poe and Baudelaire, italics may as well be a wink. Poe's irony is that his essay can be read both sardonically and seriously. He may well have plotted out his poem in the manner he described, but he also knows that all clichés start off as flashes of originality. When he methodically comes to the conclusion that in order to make his work "*universally* appreciable," he must arrive at the most poetical province for the poem (Beauty) and the most appropriate tone (sadness), and finally, the most poetical topic:

> "Now, never losing sight of the object of *supremeness*, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself—'Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?' Death—was the obvious reply. 'And when,' I said, 'is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here, is also obvious—'When it most closely aligns itself to *Beauty*; the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover."[194]

What is ironic about this conclusion is not that Poe says one thing and means another. He means what he says (and has plenty of poems and prose to prove it), and yet he also

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[192] Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, vol. 2. Ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975-6), 386.
[193] Poe, 1373.
[194] Poe, 1378-9.

knows well that hyperboles render statements banal.[195] "The Raven" has indeed become "*universally* appreciable." Poe's prosaic philosophy of poetic composition offers a fair explanation for why the dead, beautiful woman is the *most* exhausted trope in literature. In Baudelaire's work, the dead, beautiful woman comes in many forms, especially the beautiful woman who holds promise as one day being dead.[196] Taking Poe literally may be the *most* ironic way to read him.

As I have mentioned, the irony behind Baudelaire's clichés is that something sinister is repressed by their banality. But the repressed, in this case, returns (with a vengeance, as the cliché goes). As Barbara Johnson begins in her essay, "Disfiguring Poetic Language," "Baudelaire's prose poems can often be read as ironic reflections on the nature of poetic language as such. Yet their way of repeating and transforming traditional *topoi* is sometimes unaccountably violent."[197] It is this violence that is repressed by the ironically deployed cliché, only to resurface in moments when the exhausted trope reanimates itself. In his generic turn towards the generic, Baudelaire lays bare the violence repressed by the masses, placated by ennui. If the violence appears quotidian, it is because such banality masks the work of repression and greets violence with a shrug rather than a shudder. As Georges Blin notes, in *Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire's diction is deliberately flat, and "il noie plutôt les éléments du récit dans une

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[195] Stories and poems on the subject of the beautiful dead woman include "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Raven," "Ligeia," "Berenice," "Morella," "Ulalume," "Lenore," and "Annabel Lee," to name but a few.

[196] The pleasure in a poem such as "Une Charogne," for example, comes in the anticipation of not exactly the *death* of the beautiful woman, but rather the fruits of her death—her decomposition. As I will discuss, Baudelaire pushes Poe's preoccupations to their fullest extent, rendering the controlled pleasure prescribed by "The Philosophy of Composition" into an unwieldy, overflowing surplus.

[197] Barbara Johnson, "Disfiguring Poetic Language" in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 100.

pâte grise et claire, d'une banalité complete et d'une ardeur vivace."[198] Indeed, a key tension in his lyric poems lies between the despair of ennui and the pleasure of sin—the greater, the sweeter. After the trial over *Les Fleurs du mal* and the severe disappointment he experienced after being so badly misunderstood, his poems turned more savage, unsparing in their indictment of the cowardice of the public. He goads the public to have the courage to take pleasure in the deviant desire that drives them deep down, namely, misogynistic violence.

In this chapter, I will examine how irony operates with cliché to repress, but not erase, misogynistic impulses. Clichés become clichés by repetition. After a saying has been so worn out by overuse that that no one thinks about the literal meaning of the words employed – there's more than one way to skin a cat, for instance, or, "pour faire une omelette il faut casser des oeufs" – it becomes a cliché. When Baudelaire repeats the cliché, he allows whatever violence the cliché smoothes over to rear up, so that the placating effect of the cliché and the hidden, disturbing element behind it operate, uncannily, at the same time. If Poe recommends the death of the beautiful woman as the most poetical topic, then Baudelaire takes Poe's hyperbole at face value and lays bare the repressed violence necessary to realize the cliché. In his essay, "De l'essence du rire," Baudelaire writes of the "vertige d'hyperbole," characteristic of absolute comedy, which Paul de Man takes up as being indicative of irony's hyperbolic effect: "Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness. Sanity can exist only because we are willing to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation, just as social language dissimulates the inherent violence between the actual relationships

[198] Georges Blin*, Le Sadisme de Baudelaire* (Paris: Librarie José Cortie, 1948),162.

between human beings."[199] As I will explore, Baudelaire's ironic deployment of the cliché allows the opposing registers of mundanity and violence to rear up, creating a duplicitously doubling effect.

I focus on misogynistic violence because, as Johnson makes clear, there is something specifically gendered about the relation between figuration and violence. Misogynistic violence is widespread in Baudelaire's work, and it is difficult to recuperate for, say, a contemporary feminist reader (for whom the reading of lyric poetry might present difficulties, considering how many dead women one encounters in the tradition). Misogyny is not simply an undercurrent—it is a motif. Benjamin writes that Baudelaire "appears to have suffered the compulsion to return to each of his motifs at least once. One can compare this with the compulsion that continually draws the criminal to the scene of the crime. The allegories are the sites upon which Baudelaire atoned for his destructive impulse. Perhaps this explains the correspondence which exists between so many of his prose pieces and the poems of the *Fleurs du mal*."[200] Benjamin set the cliché (if I may be so bold) that Baudelaire's work is a testament to the shock of bourgeois experience, a trauma that still compels one back into the crowd again and again. But Benjamin has less to say that helps us account for misogyny as a specific form of violence rather than a generic symptom of the time. In *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*, Debarati Sanyal argues against reading Baudelaire's work as a collection of trauma and shock and instead suggests that violence is the more powerful motif to trace. "For whereas trauma designates an internal

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[199] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, second edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 215-16.
[200] Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" in *New German Critique*, No. 34 (Winter, 1985), 41.

dislocation of which the psyche is victim," Sanyal writes, "violence is an operation that involves agents and recipients, executioners as well as victims."[201] Although a focus on trauma hardly disallows a consideration of perpetrators, as Sanyal intimates, shifting the conversation from the aftershocks of trauma to the moment of violence shines a light on the ambiguous network of implications involved in an act of violence, from the perpetrator to the spectator (in this case, the reader). Sanyal's argument takes a dangerously narrow view of trauma studies by contending that its sole interests are the limits of knowledge and representation, but it is useful for my argument to consider the deployment of violence within Baudelaire's prose poems as being both a tropological (as Johnson has argued before Sanyal) and an affective tool.

As I will argue, the affective response the misogynistic poem provokes is a peculiar one. "Shock" does not quite cover it. Though Benjamin named shock as the psychic experience of modernity par excellence, shock is also employed in far more banal ways. To claim to be shocked is often to register mere moral compunction, not total bouleversement.[202] Baudelaire avowedly wished to shock with his collection of prose poems: "ce sont de horreurs et des monstruosités," he wrote in a letter, "qui feraient avorter vos lectrices enceintes."[203] This is perhaps not the sort of shock Benjamin was interested in, to put it mildly. Not only are the horrors and monstrosities of his prose poems specifically gendered, they also threaten physical, if not hyperbolic, violence on his female readers. (Then again, Baudelaire did give his own sort of trigger warning for

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[201] Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 21.
[202] And more often than not, disengenously so. One thinks of Captain Renault's remark in *Casablanca*, "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on here!"
[203] Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 465.

his poetry: "Ce livre n'est pas pour mes femmes, mes filles ou mes soeurs.") It is difficult to determine whether the pleasure we derive from such gruesome scenes is a moralistic soothing of the superego that needs to believe that the violence is satirical, or the spontaneous overflow of repressed hatred. Repression, though, is one of the greatest clichés of psychoanalysis; arguing that a poem has repressed content is an even greater one. When we feel pleasure from a poem that is "unaccountably violent," as Johnson phrases it, what knowledge do we have to suppress? And yet, as Freud points out in his discussion of tendentious jokes, "we do not know what we are laughing at."[204] In this chapter, I consider how irony and repression share certain formal characteristics. Both speak in one register while smuggling through something dangerous in another. I am less interested, however, in determining what these poems repress than I am in unpacking the affective response they generate. Where does an ironic approach to misogyny leave us? Or to put it in more exigent terms, what happens when misogynistic violence becomes a cliché?

The Burial Plot

I begin with a poem that literalizes Poe's requirement for the most poetical topic. "Laquelle est la vraie?" is the thirty-eighth poem of *Le Spleen de Paris*. Though we are instructed not to read the poems in any particular order, once could say that this poem is the first to kick off a series of poems about women who are, to borrow a phrase from "Un cheval de race," "bien laide" and "délicieuse pourtant."

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[204] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VIII (1905): Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960), 121.

"Laquelle est la vraie?"

> J'ai connu une certaine Bénédicta, qui remplissait l'atmosphère d'idéal, et dont les yeux répandaient le désir de la grandeur, de la beauté, de la gloire et de tout ce qui fait croire à l'immortalité.
>
> Mais cette fille miraculeuse était trop belle pour vivre longtemps; aussi est-elle morte quelques jours après que j'eus fait sa connaissance, et c'est moi-même qui l'ai enterrée, un jour que le printemps agitait son encensoir jusque dans les cimetières. C'est moi qui l'ai enterrée, bien close dans une bière d'un bois parfumé et incorruptible comme les coffres de l'Inde.
>
> Et comme mes yeux restaient fichés sur le lieu où était enfoui mon trésor, je vis subitement une petite personne qui ressemblait singulièrement à la défunte, et qui, piétinant sur la terre fraîche avec une violence hystérique et bizarre, disait en éclatant de rire: "C'est moi, la vraie Bénédicta! C'est moi, une fameuse canaille! Et pour la punition de ta folie et de ton aveuglement, tu m'aimeras telle que je suis!"
>
> Mais moi, furieux, j'ai répondu: "Non! non! non!" Et pour mieux accentuer mon refus, j'ai frappé si violemment la terre du pied que ma jambe s'est enfoncée jusqu'au genou dans la sépulture récente, et que, comme un loup pris au piège, je reste attaché, pour toujours peut-être, à la fosse de l'idéal.[205]

Bénédicta is so lovely that she is not long for this world. While the first paragraph swoons into an ironically Romantic (or Romantically ironic) description of her beauteous perfection, the poem's quick pacing prevents the narrator from indulging too deeply.[206] The narrator rushes through his doting description and informs the reader that only a few days after making his acquaintance, she died. In other words, she is dead and buried by the end of the second sentence. The action of this poem transpires swiftly, with each paragraph devoted to a single purpose. The first person narration is authoritative in the first two paragraphs, but his authority is undermined by an unanticipated character who interrupts and wrests control over his eulogizing narration. Because this is a Baudelaire poem, the reader expects some kind of shock, but what is perhaps more shocking than the

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[205] Baudelaire, "Laquelle est la vraie?" 198-9.

[206] I choose to call the units of these prose poems paragraphs and not stanzas because they are not organized by line breaks. Although paragraphs are the standard unit of prose, and I read these works as decidedly poetic, the etymological roots "of para-graphein" allow for such an application.

appearance of the second Bénédicta – the serene beginning is too inoffensive to last – is the narrator's reaction to her. The temporal tone of the poem moves abruptly from "il était une fois" to *in medias res*, and concludes with the present tense, the narrator remaining tormented in his own trap.

The ideal Bénédicta, the miraculous Bénédicta, dies within days of meeting the narrator. As far as the text is concerned, she only exists insofar as by the time he is able to idealize her, she is ready to die. Her beauty, the narrator laments, destines her for an early death, satisfying Poe's recommendation for the most melancholy trope of all: "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." The poem necessitates Bénédicta's precipitous death because there is no other need for her beauty than to have it extinguished. Moreover, she neither speaks nor acts until after she is buried, as if she were already dead and gone in the beginning of the poem. She only "lives" for as long as it takes for the narrator to exalt in her ideal being. But the narrator is as much a literary conceit as she is—her beauty would hardly matter if there were no one to grieve for it. Poe, after all, continues, "equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover." "Beyond doubt," "unquestionably"—these superlatives belie the irony behind Poe's philosophy, an irony that Baudelaire, beyond doubt, carried over into his poems. While these statements may ring uncannily true, there is no way to put one's finger on why; in other words, it cannot be proved that the most poetic topic is the death of a beautiful woman without the poet's assertion that it is unquestionably so. As Elisabeth Bronfen observes, "What emerges from Poe's repeated insistence on the superlative *most* (as a moment of supreme suggestiveness) in conjunction with expressions of determination – 'universal',

'obvious', 'unquestionable', and 'equally beyond doubt'—is precisely a poetics of such a death-induced doubt."[207] Considering that Poe himself argues that an "excess" of meaning by way of an overuse of theme turns poetry into flat prose, Bronfen notes that his own poetic formulation is rather heavy-handed itself. As with Dickinson, lyric excess provokes an uncomfortable response to the overdetermination of meaning. Baudelaire's particular use of irony infuses the reader with hesitation and undercuts any interpretation by implying that the opposite may also be true (the answer to the title may be "Les deux sont les vraies"). As de Man writes, this particular duality is the work of irony: "These two codes are radically incompatible with each other. They interrupt, they disrupt, each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about how a text should be."[208] The two Bénédictas are a figuration of this duality, and as I will discuss, the poem is written in two codes that are ironically incommensurate with each other to the extent that they permanently interrupt and arrest both the narrator and the possibility of the reader's interpretation. Although irony also suffuses Poe's philosophy, the irony in "Laquelle est la vraie?" is that the narrator takes Poe literally. If it is unquestionable that the most poetic topic is the death of a beautiful woman, and if the bereaved lover is just the man to speak to that topic, then the narrator's task is clear: he needs to find a lover and he needs to mourn her, and something has to happen in between those two steps.

It also falls on the narrator, it seems, to bury her—twice does the narrator assert "c'est moi qui l'ai enterrée." But like Madeline of "The Fall of the House of Usher,"

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[207] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61.
[208] Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony" in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 169.

Bénédicta does not stay buried. In fact, Bénédicta may have been about as "dead" as Madeline was when her brother entombed her. The narrator informs us that she died, but the explanation for the "petite personne qui ressemblait singulièrement à la défunte" could well be that the narrator decided that her perfection should be preserved in immortality, and she, wishing to disabuse him of his illusions, exhumed herself. A premature burial is certainly enough to turn even the loveliest girl nasty. The repetition of his avowal that it was he who buried her suggests something is also buried underneath his devotion. To "bury" someone, to put them six feet under, is a figurative way of suggesting murder, and the repetition of the phrase heightens the figuration. If the poem operates by the standard of the most poetic of subjects, then the narrator as good as kills Bénédicta because he needs a dead beautiful woman for the poem to reach its most poetical potential. As Johnson notes, "The work of poetry may well be the work of mourning, or of murder—the mourning and murder necessitated by language's hovering on the threshold between life and death, between pleasure and its beyond, between restorative and abusive repetition."[209] For Poe's prescription to work, the transition between life and death must be seamless, imperceptible, so that the pleasure of mourning a dead woman covers its beyond, its other side, murder.

My point here is not to dig up a plot point (it was *the narrator* who killed her!), but rather to highlight the unconscious literary motivations of the poem. As Poe argues, "only with the *dénoument* constantly in view [can we] give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation."[210] With Bénédicta dead to begin with, it is uncertain in which direction the poem will go, but it does not move towards a conclusion; indeed, the

[209] Johnson, 97.
[210] Poe, 1373.

poem ends with the narrator stuck indefinitely with one leg in the grave. She is, moreover, a perfected character from the start, with nothing for her to do but to be immortalized by the narrator. Once her praises have been sung, her qualities idealized, there isn't much mileage to get out of the beautiful girl until she can be mourned. If the dénouement is announced at the beginning, then rather than following a causal path, the poem is free to be reckless. "Laquelle est la vraie?" follows what I will call the "burial plot" (after "marriage plot"), where, once perfection is reached, the only aim after perfection is death – and the aim of death is to return from death. To ensure that her perfection endures, the perfect woman must die, but since her death is not dealt with in the content in the poem, it is repressed. And the repressed always comes back, albeit in a disguised or distorted form. Such is the burial plot. As much as it signifies a series of events, a plot, after all, also signifies a secret plan or conspiracy as well as a hole in the ground for burial.

In his study of plots, Peter Brooks outlines how each definition of the word suggests "boundedness, demarcation, the drawing of lines to mark off and order."[211] Recall that Bénédicta is not only buried by the narrator, but she is also "bien close dans une bière d'un bois parfumé et incorruptible comme les coffres de l'Inde." The past participle of clôturer, "close," suggests both enclosed and finished or terminated. It is precisely the narrator's wish to box her up in order to create order, to keep whatever is excessive about her bound up in a plot. As I will discuss, the first-person narrative of this poem is heavily stylized, as if the narrator were desperately trying to keep control of the plot and to contain what threatened its derailment. If something is "close," it is

[211] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard, 1984), 12.

foreclosed, finished off, just as Bénédicta is finished off and buried. The fast pace of the first two paragraphs moves the poem along, plot-point by plot-point, but when she exhumes herself out of the plot, he loses the aim of his narration. For Brooks, plot is not only an "organizing structure" but is also "goal-oriented and forward-moving."[212] But the goal of the most effective lyric poem has been achieved by the second sentence. There is nowhere that remains for the poem to go, and so it undoes itself. While a poem, even if it offers a narrative, is not beholden to the same rules as prose, it is telling how Baudelaire thwarts the expectations of narrative to create a startling situation that perpetuates itself indefinitely. It is his use of irony that allows this poem to have its vertiginously proliferating effect. As de Man argues, irony prevents us from knowing whether a text is ironic, or in other words, irony perpetuates itself by putting understanding to a stop. "Pursued to the end," he writes, "an ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents."[213] Irony disrupts the poem by installing a permanent parabasis, after Friedrich Schlegel, that renders any attempt at narrative organization incoherent. Baudelaire allows a traditional narrative to unfold only to have something strange and unsettling burst through the middle. Shutting Bénédicta up in a coffin is like closing the lid on a *diable en boîte*: it is only a matter of time before she springs up laughing.

Plot, then, only functions in this poem to upend itself. Bénédicta is buried and boxed up so that she can break out. Whether she is buried alive or killed by the narrator is irrelevant—what is significant is that some part of the narrative is buried along with her. "Mon trésor," he calls her when she is in the earth, for she is both literally and figuratively his buried treasure. The narrator describes her beauty as that which makes

[212] Brooks, 12.
[213] de Man, "The Concept of Irony" 166.

one "croire à l'immortalité." Since any ideal that lives long enough will surely be corrupted, enclosing her in a sepulture is a fitting testament to and preservation of immortality. Even the coffin in which he shuts her up is "incorruptible comme les coffres de l'Inde" and made of exotically perfumed wood, presumably to mask the scent of decay. Beautiful Bénédicta dies, fittingly, in fragrant springtime, although there is also a whiff of Baudelaire's other poems wafting through the cemetery. For the first two paragraphs are replete with Baudelairean tropes: the ideal, supreme beauty, fine scents, exoticized locales, and of course, a deliciously dead girl. When the "real" Bénédicta interrupts the placid scene, she stamps the earth as if to shake off the clichés in which she was buried.

Beautiful though she may be, her looks are not described other than that she "ressemblait singulièrement à la défunte." The "dead" Bénédicta was noted for her ability to spread beauty, and so we might imagine that the "real" Bénédicta had an inverse effect. We never know how it is she actually looked, real or otherwise. Other than her singular resemblance, we only know that she moves "avec une violence hystérique et bizarre." Rather than being described as an undead Bénédicta, she is very much alive, hysterically, bizarrely so. These movements do give something away about her (literary) character: hysteria marks the presence of repressed psychic unrest that manifests itself with wild bodily symptoms and bizarre linguistic disturbances. Baudelaire himself was interested in the literary potential of hysteria.[214] Reviewing his friend Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, he wrote:

[214] Baudelaire was well aware of the charge of the term. Well before Charcot's heyday, hysteria had already become a near cliché, with both a medical significance (it entered the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* in 1818) and a cultural one, applied loosely to a

> L'hysterie! Pourquoi ce mystère physiologique ne ferait-il pas le fond et le tuf d'une oeuvre littéraire, ce mystère que l'Académie de médicine n'a pas encore résolu, et qui, s'exprimant dans les femmes par la sensation d'une boule ascendante et asphyxiante (je ne parle que du symptôme principal), se traduit chez les hommes nerveux par toutes les impuissances et aussi par l'aptitude à tous les excès?[215]

The rhetorical question, of course, indicates not only that Flaubert's work has explored the mystery that the Académie de médecine cannot solve, but also that Baudelaire will take on the mystery himself. Hysteria presents itself as a mystery because it is a malady of repression. Hysterics may indeed suffer from reminiscences, but reminiscences felt through the convulsing body, the origin of which remains a mystery. Mystery is at the heart of this poem: uncertainty compels the narrator to ask which is the true Bénédicta and the reader to ask how far we can trust the tale to begin with. Perhaps there was once an ideal Bénédicta who, a few days after meeting a poetic young man, started showing symptoms of a certain female malady. Bénédicta's unruly, hysteric body would need to be shut up, literally and figuratively, so that the memory of her ideality could live on. If this is indeed the "real" Bénédicta, then it is for this hysteria that she needed to be boxed up, enclosed in an incorruptible coffin to preserve the narrator's "blindness."[216]

She does, however, get to speak: "C'est moi, la vraie Bénédicta! C'est moi, une fameuse canaille! Et pour la punition de ta folie et de ton aveuglement, tu m'aimeras telle

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variety of feminine ailments from aphasia to promiscuity, and attributed to such daemonic aetiologies as literacy. For more on hysteria in France, pre-Salpetrière, see Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-century France* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[215] Charles Baudelaire, "*Madame Bovary* par Gustav Flaubert" in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76), 83.

[216] Since I deal with Paul de Man in this section, it seems impossible not to mention the connotation "blindness" has in literary theory. The narrator would certainly be the kind of naïve reader de Man describes, but as de Man qualifies, the charge of blindness is not a value judgment. Bénédicta is clearly on the scene to put a referendum on the narrator's blindness.

que je suis!" And yet, though it is the narrator who gets to tell her tale, all he has to say in response is a petulant "Non! non! non!" The "true" Bénédicta's arrival interrupts the narrative, and her words, for a moment, take the narrator's words away. Her language, vulgar and direct, is not like his, stylized and dreamy. His punishment is not only to love her as she truly is: he must also suffer through a loss of speech and bodily control. Perhaps her womb has wandered over his way, for by the end of the poem it is the narrator who displays more of the classic traits of hysteria. The narrator responds to the "true" Bénédicta's threat with a movement as violent as hers: he stamps his foot until his leg goes through the fresh earth and into the grave. We may not know which is the "true" Bénédicta, but it is in fact the *narrator's* truth we question; it is he who has some hysterical story that he must convulsively tell. For men, Baudelaire tells us, hysteria implies "toutes les impuissances et aussi par l'aptitude à tous les excès." Excess is what the narrator tried to box up and bury, which suggests that his hysteria is not the product of the exhumation, but rather the force behind the burial/repression. The boxing up of Bénédicta is also suggestive of the form of the prose poem. Instead of rhymed lines that echo one another and run fluidly into stanzas, unrhymed prose is packed into paragraphs. In this poem, as with others in the collection, each paragraph serves a purpose and presents one action at a time: introducing Bénédicta, informing the reader of her death, the arrival of the "true" Bénédicta, and the narrator's refusal. It begins as any story might – I once knew a certain girl – and each paragraph builds off the last, beginning with "mais" and "et" and "mais" again. Of course, this poem is no anecdote ("the most *bizarre* thing happened after I buried my girlfriend"). The boxes, or paragraphs, of the

prose poems, do not remain shut. All of the ways the poem means more than it says, all the ways it exceeds itself, undermines the story it tries to tell.

But the story the hysterical narrator tells is perhaps not what the poem itself has to say. Part of the poem's irony is the highly literary tone in which the story is told, a tone which does not shift even after the "real" Bénédicta appears. Her dialogue, which interrupts the refined flow of the narration, is met with his immature "Non! non! non!" But the prose does not skip a beat: "Et pour mieux accentuer mon refus, j'ai frappé si violemment la terre du pied que ma jambe s'est enfoncée jusqu'au genou dans la sepulture récente…" A comic cause and effect, but a stylized one. His hysteric response is to reject the reality of what she has to say and to let his body act out instead. When his repressed material faces him in flesh and blood, his only recourse is to bury himself deeper. Trapped as he is from the leg down, the narrator has certainly found himself in a powerless position. Yet it is from this position, with one foot in the grave of the ideal, we must imagine him telling his tale in such elegant prose. Time indeed moves in peculiar ways in this poem. The mournful narration of the first two paragraphs belies Bénédicta's abrupt yet inevitable death, and we are informed that their meeting and her death have happened only in the past few days. This is indicative of the ironic double register in which the poem operates. The poem turns at the parabasic moment when the narrator "subitement" sees the "true" Bénédicta, one of the two moments written in the literary passé simple (the first being when he met her). Bénédicta, real or otherwise, is largely described in the imparfait, suggesting an ongoing condition evocative of either her immortality or her general undead-ness. The narrator, meanwhile, acts mostly in the passé composé, whereas she has only one act in the passé compose—her death, which

may in fact be more the narrator's action than her own. He concludes with a present tense that indefinitely projects the final action of the poem into the future. And yet, for such a literary poem, only two moments in the poem are written in the literary tense: meeting Bénédicta (in the passé antérieur) and meeting the "true" Bénédicta (in the passé simple). It is worth examining this elevated, first person narrative to better understand the artifice of the poem. Try as the narrator might to control the narrative, as the political cliché goes, by tamping down on the nasty parts he would prefer not to acknowledge, this nastiness exceeds him and presses upon him until it is present in his own words and actions. Although he tells the tale of the beautiful dead girl, he represses something from his narrative and conceals something from himself and his audience. But like any repressed material, the "true" Bénédicta violently reveals herself.

It is essential to note that we do not know what is repressed in the poem. What there is to know (Bénédicta's sudden death, the appearance of the hysterical double, the narrator's violent response) may be overdetermined, but there is little to know at all. More is missing from the poem than is expressed. Kevin Newmark notes that this missing element is in fact a feature of the Baudelairean prose poem: "Whereas the verse poems seem to refer to what they actually describe, the prose poems describe only in order to refer to something that does not appear inside the frame of their narrative, such as the allegorical principle that determines their mode of signification."[217] This "allegorical principle" suggests that figuration does not give more information about the poem's content, since the reference points to something out of sight. We may guess at the affect behind the narrator's repression, however. Because the "true" Bénédicta's

[217] Kevin Newmark, "For When the Time Comes: Poetry, Prose, Mourning" in *Yale French Studies*, No. 125 and 126 (2014), 208.

resemblance to the dead girl is so repugnant to the narrator, we may suppose that whatever triggered the repression was equally repugnant. Repression is not only a response to trauma—it can also be a reaction against anything that offends one's sensibilities, particularly sexual mores. As Freud explains, repression is a kind of repulsion. And yet, as the poem suggests, there is an ambivalence towards this object that both repels and compels. The narrator protests the exigency of the "true" Bénédicta, but with one foot in the grave and one foot on the ground, he is also stuck in enthrallment to her. If there is no "no" in the unconscious, then perhaps when he meets a product of his unconscious (Bénédicta), his "no" betrays him. This ambivalence is characteristic of the affect of disgust, which, as Aurel Kolnai determines in his study of the affect, entails both a desire for closeness and union and a drive away from the offensive object. Kolnai's work on disgust is of particular interest in our reading of Baudelaire and Poe, and not merely because his lengthy taxonomy of the disgusting applies to so much of their work. Kolnai's cultural and historical prejudices that motivate so many of his choices are reminiscent of both poet's manner of presenting their own prejudices as self evident ("la femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable, and so on). In the poem, we do not know what idea [*Vorstellung*] the narrator repressed, but his affective relation to it is marked by disgust. The foremost object of disgust, according to Kolnai, is putrification and the breaking down of the boundary between life and death. Disgust is not provoked merely by death, but specifically by the traces of death in life, which marks decomposition and decay as a natural part of the process of life. Kolnai writes that decomposition heightens one's awareness of life, and presents itself as "an indecent

surplus of life."[218] Like Bénédicta's *danse macabre* over her own grave, the object of disgust flouts the boundary between life and death and withstands any attempt to contain it. The disgusting, in short, knows no boundaries, and cannot be repressed. It offends by, as Kolnai puts it, pervading the subject with its proximity.[219] Disgust is both an instinctual reaction of repulsion away from such "indecent surplus of life" and a desire to draw nearer to that dark indecency. Freud writes that the instinct that is driven under by repression "proliferates in the dark, as it were, and takes on extreme forms of expression, which when they are translated and presented to the neurotic are not only bound to seem alien to him, but frighten him by giving him the picture of an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct.[220]" Terrifying, and, after Kolnai, disgusting. That the revealed repressed could come from within, and have strengthened and spread unconsciously, indecently (like a mushroom out of its mycelium), is what arrests the narrator over and in the grave.

As Freud writes in his 1915 essay, "The process of repression is not to be regarded an event which takes place *once*, the results of which are permanent, as when some living thing has been killed and from that time onward is dead; repression demands a persistent expenditure of force, and if this were to cease the success of the repression would be jeopardized, so that a fresh act of repression would be necessary."[221] Keep in mind that the narrator twice remarks that it was he who buried Bénédicta. Following one

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[218] Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust*, ed. Barry Smith and Carolun Korsmeyer (Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 2004), 55.
[219] Kolnai, 79.
[220] Sigmund Freud, "Repression" from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 148.
[221] Freud, 150.

reading of the poem, the girl is not dead, and the narrator's burial of her is both literal and figurative—he represses her physical form so he can think of her only as an ideal. Entombed, her perfection can live in his memory while her imperfection, never noted in the poem by the narrator, is "bien close dans une bière d'un bois parfumé et incorruptible comme les coffres de l'Inde." Even the perfume masks the scent of death and allows the narrator to think of her as uncorrupted by the ravages of decomposition.[222] But as Freud points out, repression is not like killing something. If we may extend his simile, it is like trying to kill something that will not die, or burying something that refuses to stay buried. "Repression demands a persistent expenditure of force," Freud writes. In other words, what is buried needs to be buried again and again—"c'est moi qui l'ai enterrée." Repression is a force of repulsion that must match the strength of the idea that tries to push itself out to the surface. For as we see from the poem, in repression's striving to keep the idea down, it only grows more threatening, just as the ironic treatment of melancholy allows the repressed to come back all the more vengefully. While conscious, associative thinking erodes memories and ideas, repression preserves and strengthens them. Bénédicta's burial strengthens her power to shock and repulse by preserving the part of her the narrator wished to deny. His hysterization stems from his refusal to know her "true" self. And hysteria, as Freud has it, is a defense against something one does not want to know: "The patient's ego had been approached by an idea that proved to be incompatible, which provoked on the part of the ego a repelling force of which the

[222] In a way, this poem is the anti-"Une Charogne." Rather than treating death as the beginning of the lively process of putrefaction, the narrator treats death as a preservative of beauty.

purpose was defense against this incompatible idea."[223] Not wanting to know, Freud argues, creates the condition of not knowing, that is, repression.

Even when he is presented with the undead, "true" Bénédicta, the narrator does not – *will* not – recognize her as the "true." Intellectually, he sees the resemblance, but something keeps him from putting one and one together. His reaction against her is to stamp his feet and cry out, "Non! non! non!" As Freud writes, "no is the hallmark of repression."[224] Because the "true" Bénédicta exhumed herself, shook off the dirt of the grave, and demanded recognition, the narrator cannot continue to repress her—but neither can he accept her. This intellectual recognition and affective refusal is typical of what Freud called "Verneinung," or negation. Negation functions to make an intellectual judgment that "may affirm or dispute that a particular image exists in reality."[225] Whether or not a perception exists in reality is precisely the problem of "Laquelle est la vraie?" The narrator cannot determine whether this "petite personne" (the little no one, we might translate) resembles the beautiful dead girl, or if she is in fact the nasty *un*dead girl, or all the worse, something else entirely. The "true" Bénédicta is here to punish him for his madness and blindness, and indeed, he missed her arrival while his "yeux restaient fiches sur le lieu où était enfoui [son] trésor." What is so threatening about the arrival of the "petite personne" is that she finally exists independently and externally to the narrator. Previously in the poem, Bénédicta only existed as a testament to the narrator's

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[223] Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume II (1893-1895): Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 268.
[224] Freud, "On Negation" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), 235.
[225] Freud, 235.

memory of a "fille miraculeuse." The power of the repressed endures even as it demands the psyche to perceive it as an external reality—"tu m'aimeras telle que je suis!" What would it mean to love Bénédicta as she truly is? Is she alive or dead or some sinister blend of the both? A daemonic double of the dead beautiful girl or her unacknowledged true face? A pressing reality or a wild delusion? What endangers the narrator is the intellectual uncertainty aroused by the return of the repressed—it comes from within yet arrives abruptly as an external threat.

The narrator begins the poem by remarking that he once knew "une certaine Bénédicta." He means a *particular* woman, but he also implies a woman of whom he is *certain*. Intellectual uncertainty (the German *Unsicherheit* also suggests un-safety) is characteristic of Freud's essay on the uncanny. Although he takes issue with Jentsch's definition of the uncanny as an attack of intellectual uncertainty, he spends the essay discussing how ambiguity between animate and inanimate, living or dead, original or copy, and real or fantasy arrests us in dread. The narrator's foot in the grave literalizes this feeling of being stuck in anxiety. In spite of his lofty narration of the events, or to move to another register, in spite of the commanding first person narration, the omnipotence of his thoughts in the poem, broken in on by the busted-out Bénédicta, suggests a defense against any intrusion on his version of reality. The irony of the poem makes intellectual certainty impossible. As Paul de Man writes, "For Baudelaire…the movement of the ironic consciousness is anything but reassuring. The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway."[226] Irony ushers in an uncanny crisis of legibility:

[226] de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" 215.

can one trust one's own reading of a situation? This is the question for both the narrator and the reader, for the main point of intellectual uncertainty in the poem, as is often the case in Baudelaire's work, is between the figurative and the literal. As Johnson explains, the work of figuration necessitates forgetting the literal meaning of the word or phrase and thereby "erasing the gap" between the literal and the figurative, "an operation that is carried out through the foreclosure of the existence of the literal meaning."[227] Figuration involves repression, a repression, as we have seen in the poem, from which a new meaning rises up from the forgotten literal meaning. Of course, anything that is "forgotten" is only buried in the unconscious, and so while the literal meaning is subsumed to the figuration, it haunts the figure. "The resuscitated figure could live only upon its own corpse," Johnson writes.[228] Like the dead and the living or the reality and the fantasy (or the nightmare), the figural and the literal are not opposed in a binary structure in Baudelaire's work. "The gap between such polarities," Johnson notes, "remains as irreducible as it is undecidable, for while each pole can cross over to the other, it is not thereby totally erased."[229] In an odd way, Baudelaire's poetry follows a neither-both logic.

While there has long been a tradition in lyric poetry not merely to compare but to render the female body piecemeal into an extended metaphor (the blazon, for instance), Baudelaire shows the tradition for how strange – and violent – it is by keeping his figurative meaning on the surface but burying the literal violence necessary for the figuration deeper down. Stark contradictions and contrasts abound in Baudelaire's

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[227] Johnson, "Disfiguring Poetic Language" 108.
[228] Johnson, 108.
[229] Johnson, 111.

poetry, but rather than using contradiction to heighten difference, in the prose poems, it often serves to suggest that if two objects are figuratively the same, they are just as well the same in actual fact. "Je me figure que c'est vous," remarks *le galant tireur* to his sweetheart, as he neatly decapitates her doppelganger doll. It is important to note that that which most easily elides the distinction between literal and figurative in Baudelaire's work is the woman. As Bersani observes, "If the pleasure which she has given the poet has always been inseparable from the operations of his desiring fantasies, the woman is best remembered when she is continuously being forgotten."[230] I would argue that the woman is most poetical when she is continuously being repressed. There is a world of lived difference between the "femme sauvage" and the "petite maîtresse," for example, but as the narrator points out, there is "literally" no difference, for at his discretion, he can throw her out the window "comme une bouteille vide."[231] Figuratively speaking, both women are empty bottles waiting to be filled with the whims of their men, which erases the social difference between the two women (and, perhaps, the objective difference between them and the empty bottle).[232] On a similar note, in "L'Invitation au voyage," the speaker works to shorten the distance between the literal woman whom he addresses and the figurative exotic locale to which he compares her until he asks whether she could simply step into the figurative and embody the comparison: "Ne serais-tu pas encadrée dans ton analogie, et ne pourrais-tu pas te mirer, pour parler comme les

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[230] Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 41.
[231] Baudelaire, "La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse," 126.
[232] The men of "Portraits de maîtresses" finish their night by "apporter de nouvelles bouteilles, pour tuer le Temps qui a la vie si dure, et accélerer la Vie qui coule si lentement." As they have all dispensed with their women in one way or another and drank up all their wine, all that is left is to get some more.

mystiques, dans ta propre *correspondance*?"[233] Ultimately, the speaker concludes that the woman and the figurative exotic are one and the same, that the metaphor that links the two can drop out all together: "Ces trésors, ces meubles, ce luxe, cet ordre, ces parfums, ces fleurs miraculeuses, c'est toi."[234] It does not go far enough to say that the woman is *like* a treasure, nor does a metaphor suffice. The narrator's desire is for the figural to be realized to such an extent that the literal becomes a figure itself. Their figural difference erased, the woman and the treasures are literally the same.

Uncannily enough, in today's parlance, "literally" has begun to mean its opposite. To wit: "literally" is now used figuratively to express an exaggeratedly metaphoric situation (i.e. "I'm literally starving" in place of "I'm hungry"). "Literally" is used in this fashion to heighten the figurative potential of language, but it is always understood in both registers. It is not taken to be an inauthentic statement, because "literally" is now never intended to suggest taking the figure at face value (that is, no one is concerned for the person who is "literally" starving). Instead, it designates hyperbole. To take something literally means to take a figure at face value for literal meaning. It is with these dual registers of meaning that Baudelaire, a good hundred and fifty years ahead of time, wrote poetry that allowed the literal to overlap with the figurative. The literal no longer operates as thematic in Baudelaire's poetry (as in, there are real treasures and luxury, and there is the woman, and the poet uses metaphor to turn one from the other). Instead, the literal becomes another figure.

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[233] Baudelaire, "L'Invitation au voyage," 145.
[234] Interestingly enough, this form of comparison is the opposite of Rilkean narcissistic object relations, where everything in the poem is the speaker's ego, as opposed to all elements of comparison belonging to the object of address. Baudelaire, 145.

As I have already argued, the narrator of "Laquelle est la vraie?" takes Poe literally by creating the right conditions for the most poetical topic of all. He does not imagine the lovely melancholy of a dead lover ("If Bénédicta should be dead!)—he takes her death as the given fact to create the poem. And so, he "literally" buries Bénédicta under the earth. According to Freud, for some, "the most uncanny thing of all" is being buried alive by mistake, or in the original German, "*scheintot begraben zu werden*," being buried when seemingly dead.[235] The most uncanny thing of all, the most poetical topic in the world—the logic of both statements is the logic of "literally," and the poem takes both literally.[236] The literal and the figurative always slide against one another in Baudelaire's poetry, and in this poem, the "literal" death of the literary construct, the beautiful woman, gives rise to the figurative afterlife of the repressed. Bénédicta herself is "literally" the return of the repressed: she is both a figure of repression and a literalization of it. Seemingly dead, she unearths herself to torment and disgust the narrator with her truth that he had been determined to repress. The true, however, is the repressed material of the poem, leaving the title of the poem to serve as a lingering question. The uncertainty of the true closes another poem of *Le Spleen de Paris*, "Les Fenêtres": "Es-tu sûr que cette légende soit la vraie?" Each poem in the collection is generically overdetermined, but "Laquelle est la vraie?" takes up this overdetermination as the subject of the poem. "Laquelle est la vraie?" is the only prose poem to have a question mark in the title. The question appears to be the narrator's, but that is perhaps to

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[235] Freud, "The Uncanny" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London, The Hogarth Press, 1955), 243.

[236] For a closer examination of how Poe's many stories on premature burial are uncanny predecessors of Freud's conception of the uncanny, see Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 142-171.

grant him more awareness than he displays by the end. He is, after all, stuck "pour toujours peut-être" with one foot in a grave he dug himself. But the title is equally one that the poet poses to the reader: not merely which one is the true Bénédicta, but also where might we situate the "true" in this poem? Neither is the "true" Bénédicta because the woman only exists as an ironic figure of repression. The first is the poet's ideal who only lives long enough to make the poem poetical, and the second is the dredged up version of the repressed "true" woman—as Tamara Bassim puts it, "la femme-reflet ou la femme-rejet."[237] As I have discussed, irony creates a sudden, destabilizing and doubling effect; Baudelaire himself characterizes irony as "[une] *force de se dédoubler* rapidement."[238] Having two Bénédictas to contend with literalizes the doubling power of irony by giving us two split selves that aren't in conversation with each other. Still, the virgin/whore dichotomy is another worn, old cliché. As Newmark muses, "It could be that the main interest of the prose poetry is to remind us that the narrative elements appearing in figural guise in the verse poetry are not the whole story."[239] Perhaps Baudelaire turned to prose poems to suggest that the shock of the manifest content of his poems is nothing compared to what lays in wait, buried underneath the surface.

Not All Men

While the narrator cannot love Bénédicta at her nastiest, the reader may enjoy her better that way. He or she may also derive pleasure from the ideal Bénédicta, but that

[237] Tamara Bassin, *La Femme dans l'oeuvre de Baudelaire* (Neuchâtel, Éditions de la Baconnière, 1974), 219.
[238] Baudelaire, "De l'essence du rire," quoted in de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" 225.
[239] Newmark, 214.

depends on one's tolerance for or perhaps susceptibility to the exquisite corpse cliché. The shock of the poem, and therefore the true pleasure of the poem, does not arrive until the "true" Bénédicta interrupts the tranquil moment. The melancholy of the graveyard scene, however poetical it may be, does not rouse excitement. In fact, another ambivalence of the poem might be between dulcet, even cloying melancholy and scintillating vulgarity. This ambivalence is prevalent throughout *Spleen de Paris* and reflects having one foot in each camp of lyric and prosaic language and tradition. Stephens notes that this poem is one of several in the collection that "figure[s] the duality of the prose poem, existing in a tension between the poetic suggestiveness of allegory and the prosaic rootedness of the language and situations."[240] The irony here is that the prosaic qualities of the poem are also its most "poetical" qualities, especially the overly narrated opening that exalts in the ideal woman. In taking Poe literally, Baudelaire shows his profound appreciation for his predecessor by creating a cliché in his honor: the clichéd beauty of the dead woman and the tragic poet who mourns her. Bénédicta's self-exhumation disrupts the poetic cliché, and with her brash dialogue (a marker of prose), gives her malediction to the poet who would mourn her. Sonya Stephens considers the poem to be "a gross exaggeration of [its] own meaning," and indeed, the poem does hyperbolize the distinction between the ideal and the vulgar and thereby caricatures the key tension of Baudelaire's art. And yet, the poem is not neatly ambivalent. Women do not speak often in *Spleen de Paris*, and even less often are they granted direct discourse. By depicting the narrator as the master of poetic cliché and the undead woman as the

[240] Sonya Stephens, *Baudelaire's Prose Poems: The Practice and Politics of Irony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 109.

master of laughter and torment, it is clear that the scales have tipped away from the promise of the ideal.

The prose poems, as Marder has argued, represent Baudelaire's nastier turn away from the public who misunderstood him. The litany of sin from "Au lecteur," the opening poem of *Les Fleurs du mal*, culminates with ennui, as Baudelaire opens his arms with brotherly disdain to the reader whose hypocrisy mirrors his own. "*Ennui* is a state in which *any* evil might be committed," Bersani writes. "Its peculiarity is to be empty; it is precisely because there is nothing in boredom itself that it accommodates anything."[241] In ennui, Baudelaire sees openness to both indolent and violent fantasy and therefore privileges it for its aesthetic potential. But after the trial, perhaps Baudelaire saw less of himself in his hypocritical public, for *Le Spleen de Paris* abandons the appeal to camaraderie; in fact, the first poem of the collection, a most unpoetic dialogue, asserts that the speaker has "ni père, ni mere, ni soeur, ni frère," does not understand the need for friends, and does not have a clue where his home country might be located.[242] Whereas the verse poems came from a spirit of what Marder calls "the residual ideal of homosocial complicity," the prose poems reject social order and its sense of justice by satirizing its norms of equality.[243] The problem, Baudelaire realizes after the trial, is that his readers are not complicit in his crimes after al, and so he will condemn them for their lassitude by showing the violence underscoring mundane Parisian life. Ennui has failed to live up its revolutionary potential, for the poet's call to languor has come to naught. Instead, he will offer us a portrait of how insufficient our desires are:

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[241] Bersani, 27.
[242] Baudelaire, "L'´Etranger," 105.
[243] Marder, 73.

“Portraits de maîtresses”

Dans un boudoir d'hommes, c'est-à-dire dans un fumoir attenant à un élégant tripot, quatre hommes fumaient et buvaient. Ils n'étaient précisément ni jeunes ni vieux, ni beaux ni laids; mais vieux ou jeunes, ils portaient cette distinction non méconnaissable des vétérans de la joie, cet indescriptible je ne sais quoi, cette tristesse froide et railleuse qui dit clairement: "Nous avons fortement vécu, et nous cherchons ce que nous pourrions aimer et estimer."

L'un d'eux jeta la causerie sur le sujet des femmes. Il eût été plus philosophique de n'en pas parler du tout; mais il y a des gens d'esprit qui, après boire, ne méprisent pas les conversations banales. On écoute alors celui qui parle, comme on écouterait de la musique de danse.

"Tous les hommes, disait celui-ci, ont eu l'âge de Chérubin: c'est l'époque où, faute de dryades, on embrasse, sans dégoût, le tronc des chênes. C'est le premier degré de l'amour. Au second degré, on commence à choisir. Pouvoir délibérer, c'est déjà une décadence. C'est alors qu'on recherche décidément la beauté. Pour moi, messieurs, je me fais gloire d'être arrivé, depuis longtemps, à l'époque climatérique du troisième degré où la beauté elle-même ne suffit plus, si elle n'est assaisonnée par le parfum, la parure, et caetera. J'avouerai même que j'aspire quelquefois, comme à un bonheur inconnu, à un certain quatrième degré qui doit marquer le calme absolu. Mais, durant toute ma vie, excepté à l'âge de Chérubin, j'ai été plus sensible que tout autre à l'énervante sottise, à l'irritante médiocrité des femmes. Ce que j'aime surtout dans les animaux, c'est leur candeur. Jugez donc combien j'ai dû souffrir par ma dernière maîtresse.

"C'était la bâtarde d'un prince. Belle, cela va sans dire; sans cela, pourquoi l'aurais-je prise? Mais elle gâtait cette grande qualité par une ambition malséante et difforme. C'était une femme qui voulait toujours faire l'homme. " Vous n'êtes pas un homme! Ah! si j'étais un homme! De nous deux, c'est moi qui suis l'homme! " Tels étaient les insupportables refrains qui sortaient de cette bouche d'où je n'aurais voulu voir s'envoler que des chansons. A propos d'un livre, d'un poème, d'un opéra pour lequel le laissais échapper mon admiration: "Vous croyez peut-être que cela est très fort? disait-elle aussitôt; est-ce que vous vous connaissez en force?" et elle argumentait.

Un beau jour elle s'est mise à la chimie; de sorte qu'entre ma bouche et la sienne je trouvai désormais un masque de verre. Avec tout cela, fort bégueule. Si parfois je la bousculais par un geste un peu trop amoureux, elle se convulsait comme une sensitive violée...

- Comment cela a-t-il fini? dit l'un des trois autres. Je ne vous savais pas si patient.

- Dieu, reprit-il, mit le remède dans le mal. Un jour je trouvai cette Minerve, affamée de force idéale, en tête à tête avec mon domestique, et dans une situation qui m'obligea à me retirer discrètement pour ne pas les faire rougir. Le soir je les congédiai tous les deux, en leur payant les arrérages de leurs gages.

- Pour moi, reprit l'interrupteur, je n'ai à me plaindre que de moi-même. Le bonheur est venu habiter chez moi, et je ne l'ai pas reconnu. La destinée m'avait, en ces derniers temps, octroyé la jouissance d'une femme qui était bien la plus douce, la plus soumise et la plus dévouée des créatures, et toujours prête! et sans enthousiasme! Je le veux bien, puisque cela vous est agréable. " C'était sa réponse ordinaire. Vous donneriez

la bastonnade à ce mur ou à ce canapé, que vous en tireriez plus de soupirs que n'en tiraient du sein de ma maîtresse les élans de l'amour le plus forcené. Après un an de vie commune, elle m'avoua qu'elle n'avait jamais connu le plaisir. Je me dégoûtai de ce duel inégal, et cette fille incomparable se maria. J'eus plus tard la fantaisie de la revoir, et elle me dit, en me montrant six beaux enfants: "Eh bien! mon cher ami, l'épouse est encore aussi vierge que l'était votre maîtresse." Rien n'était changé dans cette personne. Quelquefois je la regrette: j'aurais dû l'épouser."

Les autres se mirent à rire, et un troisième dit à son tour:

"Messieurs, j'ai connu des jouissances que vous avez peut-être négligées. Je veux parier du comique dans l'amour, et d'un comique qui n'exclut pas l'admiration. J'ai plus admiré ma dernière maîtresse que vous n'avez pu, je crois, haïr ou aimer les vôtres. Et tout le monde l'admirait autant que moi. Quand nous entrions dans un restaurant, au bout de quelques minutes chacun oubliait de manger pour la contempler. Les garçons eux-mêmes et la dame du comptoir ressentaient cette extase contagieuse jusqu'à oublier leurs devoirs. Bref, j'ai vécu quelque temps en tête à tête avec un phénomène vivant. Elle mangeait, mâchait, broyait, dévorait, engloutissait, mais avec l'air le plus léger et le plus insouciant du monde. Elle m'a tenu ainsi longtemps en extase. Elle avait une manière douce, rêveuse, anglaise et romanesque de dire: "J'ai faim!" Et elle répétait ces mots jour et nuit en montrant les plus jolies dents du monde, qui vous eussent attendris et égayés à la fois. - J'aurais pu faire ma fortune en la montrant dans les foires comme monstre polyphage. Je la nourrissais bien; et cependant elle m'a quitté... - Pour un fournisseur aux vivres, sans doute? - Quelque chose d'approchant, une espèce d'employé dans l'intendance qui, par quelque tour de bâton à lui connu, fournit peut-être à cette pauvre enfant la ration de plusieurs soldats. C'est du moins ce que j'ai supposé.

- Moi, dit le quatrième, j'ai enduré des souffrances atroces par le contraire de ce qu'on reproche en général à l'égoïste femelle. Je vous trouve mal venus, trop fortunés mortels, à vous plaindre des imperfections de vos maîtresses!"

Cela fut dit d'un ton fort sérieux, par un homme d'un aspect doux et posé, d'une physionomie presque cléricale malheureusement illuminée par des yeux d'un gris clair, de ces yeux dont le regard dit: "Je veux!" ou "Il faut!" ou bien: "Je ne pardonne jamais!"

"Si, nerveux comme je vous connais, vous, G..., lâches et légers comme vous êtes, vous deux, K... et J..., vous aviez été accouplés à une certaine femme de ma connaissance, ou vous vous seriez enfuis, ou vous seriez morts. Moi, j'ai survécu, comme vous voyez. Figurez-vous une personne incapable de commettre une erreur de sentiment ou de calcul; figurez-vous une sérénité désolante de caractère un dévouement sans comédie et sans emphase; une douceur sans faiblesse; une énergie sans violence. L'histoire de mon amour ressemble à un interminable voyage sur une surface pure et polie comme un miroir, vertigineusement monotone, qui aurait réfléchi tous mes sentiments et mes gestes avec l'exactitude ironique de ma propre conscience, de sorte que je ne pouvais pas me permettre un geste ou un sentiment déraisonnable sans apercevoir immédiatement le reproche muet de mon inséparable spectre. L'amour m'apparaissait comme une tutelle. Que de sottises elle m'a empêché de faire, que je regrette de n'avoir pas commises! Que de dettes payées malgré moi! Elle me privait de tous les bénéfices que j'aurais pu tirer de ma folie personnelle. Avec une froide et infranchissable règle, elle barrait tous mes caprices. Pour comble d'horreur, elle n'exigeait pas de reconnaissance, le danger passé. Combien de fois ne me suis-je pas retenu de lui sauter à la gorge, en lui

criant: " Sois donc imparfaite, misérable! afin que je puisse t'aimer sans malaise et sans colère! " Pendant plusieurs années, je l'ai admirée, le coeur plein de haine. Enfin, ce n'est pas moi qui en suis mort!

- Ah! firent les autres, elle est donc morte?

- Oui! cela ne pouvait continuer ainsi. L'amour était devenu pour moi un cauchemar accablant. Vaincre ou mourir, comme dit la Politique, telle était l'alternative que m'imposait la destinée! Un soir, dans un bois... au bord d'une mare..., après une mélancolique promenade où ses yeux, à elle, réfléchissaient la douceur du ciel, et où mon coeur, à moi, était crispé comme l'enfer...

- Quoi!

- Comment!

- Que voulez-vous dire?

- C'était inévitable. J'ai trop le sentiment de l'équité pour battre, outrager ou congédier un serviteur irréprochable. Mais il fallait accorder ce sentiment avec l'horreur que cet être m'inspirait; me débarrasser de cet être sans lui manquer de respect. Que vouliez-vous que je fisse d'elle, puisqu'elle était Parfaite?"

Les trois autres compagnons regardèrent celui-ci avec un regard vague et légèrement hébété, comme feignant de ne pas comprendre et comme avouant implicitement qu'ils ne se sentaient pas, quant à eux, capables d'une action aussi rigoureuse, quoique suffisamment expliquée d'ailleurs.

Ensuite on fit apporter de nouvelles bouteilles, pour tuer le Temps qui a la vie si dure, et accélérer la Vie qui coule si lentement.[244]

The poem is clearly more of a portrait of gentlemen than it is a portrait of their mistresses. The men, to begin with, are average: not particularly old or young or handsome or ugly, and happy to indulge in banal conversation. They carry "cette distinction non méconnaissable…cet indescriptible je ne sais quoi," but again, these exaggerated clichés are the poet's winking way of informing his audience that the men are, in fact, *rien de spécial, rien d'original*. The men interrupt one another, talk past each other, and listen to one another as attentively as they would listen to dance music, only awaiting their turn to speak. The men are numbered rather than named, and recline in "un boudoir d'hommes," a dive specially designated for men who are nothing special. As he will do throughout *Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire treats men as the generic gender. "Tous les hommes," begins the first man, to underline the point. Although all women

[244] Baudelaire, 204-209.

(young or old, French or foreigner, white or black) rank higher on the suffering ladder in Baudelaire's work, there is a specific disdain relegated to these generic men. The flattening equivalence dramatized in a poem like "La femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse" or the sweeping rhetoric of statements such as "La femme est *naturelle*, c'est-à-dire abominable" are not matched with similar vehemence in his depiction of men, but in "Portraits de maîtresses," he is at his most withering. Throughout *Spleen de Paris*, he mocks the waste of *liberté*, the self-righteousness of *égalité*, and the hypocrisy of *fraternité* (ex. "Un plaisant" or "Le joujou du pauvre"). When the "homme épouvantable" argues for his right to look at his hideous self in the mirror, he contends, "d'après les immortels principes de 89, tous les hommes sont égaux en droits."[245] "Tous les hommes"—Baudelaire takes up the phrase to underscore the charade of equality in 19th century France. To be like "tous les hommes" is to be generic. Their commonality, "Nous avons fortement vécu" – a proclamation that drips with irony – is affirmed by all the men, and so all the bourgeois men of Paris, to follow the logic of the poem, could easily join the conversation.[246] (As it happens, the phrase has taken on an ironic inversion in 21st century Internet culture. "Not all men" has been mocked in contemporary pop-feminism as a cringe worthy protest of the man who, after hearing tales of sexism and misogyny, protests that "Not all men" are rapists, or sexists, and so on. We will return to this point.)

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[245] Baudelaire, "Le Miroir" 202.

[246] Indeed, as Jérôme Thélot elucidates, the men of "Portraits de maîtresses" are the adult versions of the children of "Les Vocations:" "Mais les adultes sont toujours des enfants, ils ignorent comme autrefois la fatalité de leur désir," he writes. One-upmanship is evidently a skill learned early. See *Baudelaire: Violence et poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 113-122, 147-8.

Of course, the limit to such an egalitarian brotherhood is showmanship. Each man tells a tale of how he suffered in love. The first was emasculated by his mistress, and after he catches her with his servant, he "fires" them both, after paying them their wages. The second was unable to give his mistress pleasure, or, in his words: "Vous donneriez la bastonnade à ce mur ou à ce canapé, que vous en tireriez plus de soupirs que n'en tiraient du sein de ma maîtresse les élans de l'amour le plus forcené." Disgusted by the inequality of the situation, he left her, and later she married, only to find herself in the same predicament with her new man. The third's mistress was quite the opposite—she was insatiable, and so she left him. While the first and third men are threatened by the surplus of vivacity in their mistresses, the fourth is disturbed by the seeming lifelessness of his mistress. But the fourth is convinced that none of these men had truly suffered or had any concept of what he himself had survived. His mistress, in contrast to the others, was perfect, but her perfection oppressed his desires to be imperfect:

> "L'histoire de mon amour ressemble à un interminable voyage sur une surface pure et polie comme un miroir, vertigineusement monotone, qui aurait réfléchi tous mes sentiments et mes gestes avec l'exactitude ironique de ma propre conscience, de sorte que je ne pouvais pas me permettre un geste ou un sentiment déraisonnable sans apercevoir immédiatement le reproche muet de mon inséparable spectre."

As with the ideal Bénédicta, whose eyes "répandaient le désir de la grandeur, de la beauté, de la gloire et de tout ce qui fait croire à l'immortalité," and who was similarly "trop belle pour vivre longtemps," the mistress's fate is already written. What is so offensive about the perfect mistress is that she reflects the man's desires with an ironic exactitude. Her perfection, it seems, is mimetic. While he refuses his likeness to other men (not all men are equal), he is horrified to catch a glimpse of himself through the eyes of his mistress. The man does not say that she is like him, per se, but rather that she

reflects him, that she exists as a purely reflective surface in which he may perceive himself. "Le reproche muet" he detects may just as well be a projection of his own self-reproach. "C'était inevitable," the man says, for he cannot permit himself to make a single act or gesture without suffering through her disapproving gaze. Perhaps this accounts for Bénédicta's demise. And as with Bénédicta, neither the reader nor the other men in the "boudoir d'hommes" sees her die.

According to Jérôme Thélot, the murder of the mistress is in fact self-sacrifice: if his narcissistic investment in the woman reflects back only his own desire, then to kill her, "c'est mourir soi-même."[247] "En racontant le fondement sacrificiel du voyage du désir," he writes, "le dernier homme a déjà détruit, malgré lui, son propre mythe."[248] While the other men tell anecdotes about their mistresses and describe their shortcomings, the fourth man turns to literary narration to paint the picture of her death: "Un soir, dans un bois... au bord d'une mare..., après une mélancolique promenade où ses yeux, à elle, réfléchissaient la douceur du ciel, et où mon coeur, à moi, était crispé comme l'enfer..." The ellipses suggest the part of the story that is left out, but in fact, they only serve to mark overly dramatic pauses. After an evening promenade so melancholy it grammatically forces the adjective before the noun to prove that the melancholy is the most important information he can convey, he succumbs to the need to destroy "son propre mythe:" the myth of the most melancholy subject. As I have argued, for the myth, or really the cliché, to function, the murder involved in producing a dead beautiful woman must be elided in the text for the melancholy to be effective. Violence needs to be repressed for the melancholy affect to thrive. If the fourth man is to

[247] Thélot, 154.
[248] Thélot, 154.

"destroy" the myth, he must destroy the woman. As Bersani writes, " Ultimately, there is perhaps only one escape from the 'hell' of insatiable desire: the forced and permanent immobilizing of the desiring woman, that is, murder."[249] The other men, of course, are listening to the man (perhaps more closely now than they would to dance music), and do not see any ellipses. But they are able to fill in the blanks, but they only ejaculate their astonishment: "Quoi!" "Comment!" "Que voulez-vous dire?" "C'était inévitable," the fourth man answers, adding "Que vouliez-vous que je fisse d'elle, puisqu'elle était Parfaite?" Again, the other men cannot hear the capital P in "Parfait"—it is only to clue the reader in to how ideal this mistress was, and that following Poe, there is only one inevitable fate for the Perfect woman. The fourth mistress is, in fact, a literalization of perfection, down to the capital letter.[250] As with "Laquelle est la vraie?," the poem writes its own end by taking up a poetic cliché.

Why does her death feel neither melancholy nor poetical? After all, the scene is set in a wood, by a pond, and he avers the walk was melancholy, that his heart "était crispé comme enfer" ("crispé" echoing the poetical strains of the one who fell in love at last sight in "À une passante"). These clichés should suffice to set the tone. Although he speaks of the sentiment that kept him from treating her like the other men have treated their mistresses, he protests that he had to "accorder ce sentiment avec l'horreur que cet être m'inspirait." Here, the cliché turns cold. Irony keeps the murder from being an act of sentiment, but rather a refined and logical choice to make, an inevitable duty he had to carry out. What "Portraits de maîtresses" illuminates is what "Laquelle est la vraie?"

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[249] Bersani, 69.
[250] My thinking here is indebted to the second chapter of Antoine Traisnel's work, *Hawthorne: Blasted Allegories* (Paris: Aux forges de Vulcain, 2015).

occludes: the repressed violence necessary for the most poetical topic to occur is not only no tragedy or crime of passion, but it is also a mundane disposal of life. The difference between the two poems is the kind of pleasure each produces. In "Laquelle est la vraie?" the pleasure comes from the cliché being inverted, for her sudden death coaxes less melancholy than the amount of shock provoked by the climactic arrival of the "true" Bénédicta. In "Portraits de maîtresses," however, the climax of the poem is decidedly the death of the fourth, perfect mistress. Both poems rely on irony to consecrate the most poetical topic into cliché, but the irony in "Portraits de maîtresses" is far bitterer, perhaps because none of the men are *poets*, as Baudelaire may have italicized. In fact, he ironizes the clichéd melancholy of the dead woman to demystify the trope.

The other men in the room do not appreciate the mistress's death as some sweet melancholy to be savored. Instead, they look at the fourth man "avec un regard vague et légèrement hébété, comme feignant de ne pas comprendre et comme avouant implicitement qu'ils ne se sentaient pas, quant à eux, capables d'une action aussi rigoureuse, quoique suffisamment expliquée d'ailleurs." Outwardly, they register their shock and swear that they themselves could never do those things. But the narrator, who is not an intradiegetic voice, clues the reader in to the fact that their vague stupor was meant to feign *as if* they did not understand, *as if* they would implicitly never act so "rigorously" (though, he *did* give a good explanation for why he did it). That is to say, "tous les hommes" have the capacity to act as the fourth man did. Not all men murder their mistresses! (But some do.) What distinguishes him from the other, generic men is the good taste to find a perfect mistress and the courage to be fair enough to kill her for it. By treating the men's *pudeur* with irony, Baudelaire also refuses to let the reader off

easily: anyone attuned to the irony must mistrust their conviction that they would never be so cruel. As Sanyal writes, "The critical energies unleashed by irony circulate within and between these texts, coercing the reader into relations of recognition, identification and complicity…the text's escalating ironies keep such identifications at bay by introducing a critical distance from the trauma it depicts."[251] The third person narration helps keep a distance between the scene he sets and the reader he allows to listen in, but the irony with which he treats the men's reactions prevents the reader from keeping too much of a distance from the ethical predicament of the poem and even allows a glimpse at the complicity he or she may have in enjoying the scene.

Again, there is one distinction that separates out *certain* men from *tous les hommes*: not all men are poets. And not all dead beautiful women are sacrifices to the poetic ideal. Because the poetical effect is what really counts, the woman herself is almost an afterthought. Both poems I have examined dramatize this action. It is almost as if the poet directly addressed the reader (or allowed him to overhear his thoughts) to talk about a woman who, although present, is not included in the conversation. The narrator of "Laquelle est la vraie?" spends two sentences on Bénédicta before he turns his focus to his own melancholy. In "Portraits de maîtresses," the men discuss women, and their absence in the room is made conspicuous by their presence in the poem. But there is no return of the repressed in "Portraits de maîtresses." There are only mundane men entertaining themselves by talking about women. Although the men do not have a particularly vulgar conversation, a short detour through Freud's discussion of obscene jokes, or "smut," in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* will prove revealing.

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[251] Sanyal, 35.

He notes that smut is usually directed at a certain person as a veiled attempt to convey sexual excitement (and in hopes of generating excitement in turn). Thus, he decides, men aim smut at women. But because women are not likely to appreciate such gestures (because of repression, of course), a third person, another man, is necessary to receive the bawdy joke and neutralize the offence towards the woman. It is the third person who ends up experiencing the pleasure intended for the woman. If the man cannot simply announce his attentions to the woman, the joke comes to his aid, along with a brother in arms to intercept it. The joke also helps the first and third man realize their libidinal impulses under a cloak of humor. To Freud, the first and third man are able to have a good laugh together, while the presence of the second person, the woman, is a moot presence at best: "a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled."[252] Such jokes satisfy an instinct for the first and third man in the face of an obstacle—the second woman's "incapacity to tolerate undisguised sexuality."[253] And as Freud reminds us, the power that keeps women (and sometimes men) from enjoying such cheerful ribaldry is, of course, repression. But repressed sexuality as hidden content is, unquestionably, *the most clichéd* claim psychoanalysis has to make. What else gets repressed behind the claim of repressed sexuality?

"When the first person finds his libidinal impulse inhibited by the woman," writes Freud, "he develops a hostile trend against that second person and calls on the originally

[252] Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* 99.
[253] Freud, 100.

interfering third person as his ally."[254] According to Freud, smut is never merely an indirect libidinal impulse. It also involves an undercurrent of hostility towards the unreceptive woman. In fact, a woman need not even be present, for this hostility can sustain itself in her absence. Men, Freud points out, can "save up this kind of entertainment, which originally presupposed the presence of a woman who was feeling ashamed, till they are 'alone together.'"[255] It seems that not only is the woman unnecessary, her presence is not even wanted. There may be repressed sexuality in the poem, but as Freud helps show, what the men truly desire is to be with each other in the boudoir. The chatter they share is about the mistresses but is directed at one another. In Baudelaire's own essay on the comic, he also acknowledges the necessity of having another presence, a *semblable*, in the room to create the absolute comic; de Man takes up this moment to explain how irony forces a duality within consciousness.[256] Recall that his poems are for his lookalike brothers, *not* for women. Each of their mistresses is a hyperbole of emasculation – the first wants to be and claims to be the man in the relationship, the second cannot be satisfied whereas the third cannot be satisfied enough, and the fourth is Perfect – and so they retreat into the boudoir to enjoy the company of those they can actually please and those who make them feel like men. This queer desire is not repressed, since their pleasure in each other's company is clear, but it is not exactly conscious, either. Nor is the violence repressed—the fourth man's casual assumption of the necessity of murder is another way Baudelaire hyperbolizes the most poetical topic. And yet, the fourth man has a beautiful dead woman on his hands and the effect of this

[254] Freud, 99.
[255] Freud, 98.
[256] de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" 212.

poem is hardly poetical. Right down to its mundane title, "Portraits de maîtresses" has, in fact, one of the most conventional narratives of any of the prose poems.

Now may be the moment to ask why Poe's pronouncement seems so self-evident in its truth, at least as far as the history of Western poetry goes. His argumentation makes it seem that he arrives at his conclusions by the most logical route: the most melancholy topic is death, death is most poetical when it is aligned with beauty, and therefore the most poetical topic is a beautiful dead woman, when mourned by a bereaved lover, of course. His assumptions only hold up in light of the other claims he makes in the essay. An excess of meaning, he argues, reduces the poetical effect of poetry and renders it prosaic. And what, as we have discovered throughout this chapter, and "according to the *universal* understanding of mankind," is the *most* excessive force, the entity that indecently revels in its surplus of life? The woman—is the obvious reply. Get rid of the woman and you get rid of the excess of tension that disturbs you. As Bersani writes, "the woman is best remembered when she is continuously being forgotten."[257] She can only provoke the sweet pleasure of melancholy when she is recalled *in absentia*. It sounds like a bad joke: why is the death of the beautiful woman the most poetical topic? Because without the woman, you can actually enjoy the poem. Misogynistic violence isn't what is so disturbing after all. It's the woman herself who causes so much tension for the male poet that her death can only bring release and pleasure (though for decency's sake, we might prefer not to actually see her die, thanks). And once the woman is gone, all the bereaved lovers of poetry have the peace of mind to enjoy this most poetical topic. We can therefore read the death of the beautiful woman as a sort of antidote to male hysteria.

[257] Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* 41.

Both the narrator of "Laquelle est la vraie?" and the fourth man of "Portraits de maîtresses" suffer from the ideal perfection of their lovers and find release when the women die, at the hands of their lovers or otherwise. Although the narrator is tormented by the return of the repressed, the fourth man is able to relax in the company of his fellow man, and the poem is able to ironize the bereavement group that comprises so much of the Western poetic canon. It is *unquestionable* that I am making a hyperbolic statement. But if Poe speaks hyperbolically, and Baudelaire kicks the hyperbole up a notch by taking him literally, then perhaps we can take the cliché of the bereaved male poet-lover with more scrutiny.

The Grave of the Ideal

At the end of "Portraits de maîtresses," conversation drifts off, the men content to drink more wine, killing time by accelerating life, and presumably, telling more stories.[258] One of Baudelaire's favorite figurations, "tuer les temps," as Johnson so persuasively argues, "endows time with life only in order to take it away again; Time is personified only to be killed."[259] The poem that follows "Portraits de maîtresses" is "Le Galant tireur," the poem that Johnson reads to link figural violence to violence against women. In "Le Galant tireur," the doll that figures as the shooter's mistress is neatly decapitated. As I have discussed, when the woman is under the gun of the most poetical topic, her life is idealized only to make her death meaningful. But killing time, as the end of the poem

[258] Cheryl Krueger has argued that in Baudelaire's work, "plot itself kills time." The clichés of expository narrative are filler space in the text, another way of killing time as one reads. See, *The Art of Procrastination* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 51.
[259] Johnson, 107.

suggests, is a way of using up life. Here we find the banality of storytelling that Baudelaire ironizes in *Spleen de Paris*. Everyone's got a story, as the cliché goes—"tous les hommes." The men are not shocked by the fourth man's revelation because their desire is to use up life, to spout clichés like shooting blanks. In any case, the fourth man's confessed reason for killing his mistress is that she inspired him to do better and therefore prevented him from profiting from his profligacy. "What else could I do with her," he asks rhetorically, and the others are convinced. They feign to be scandalized, but then shrug. Where is the shock of modern experience with which Benjamin characterized Baudelaire's poetry? The men of both "À une passante" and "Portraits de maîtresses" are "crispé" with desire, but the "Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!" of *Les Fleurs du mal* has slumped into this line from "Les Yeux des pauvres": "Nous nous étions bien promis que toutes nos pensées nous seraient communes à l'un et à l'autre, et que nos deux âmes désormais n'en feraient plus qu'une—un rêve qui n'a rien d'original, après tout, si ce n'est que, rêvé par tous les hommes, il n'ai été realize par aucun."[260] The flash of shared understanding has become a mutually unacknowledged misunderstanding; a singular encounter has become a prosaic acquaintance. This "rien d'original," the dream that is not so much a failure than it is a mere dud, is the object of Baudelaire's scorn in the prose poems.

A testament to the lasting banality Baudelaire paints in his "Portrait de maîtresses" is that this conversation could be effortlessly reproduced in similar "chambres d'hommes" today. "There is about this poetry still nothing out of date," Benjamin remarked in the last century. "Baudelaire's poetry makes the new appear

[260] Baudelaire, "Les Yeux des pauvres," 165.

within the ever-always-the-same and the ever-always-the-same within the new."[261] Baudelaire reveals that this quality of the ever-always-the-same is precisely what exemplifies most misogyny. It is generic, widespread, and without imagination—a *cliché*. Considering the recent attention to rape culture and intimate partner violence on college campuses, one can easily imagine the ever-always-the-same (average men boasting of their casual disdain for women) appearing in the new (the dorm room, the locker room). If in the United States, the population most likely to encounter Baudelaire's poetry is college students, it is certainly worth asking how one teaches a poem that takes an ironic approach to misogyny. It becomes exigent to ask ourselves not only what effect this poem has on its readers, but how we also participate in the poem when we read it. As Sanyal argues, his poetry fundamentally destabilizes the distinction between executioner, accomplice, victim, and bystander. "Portraits de maîtresses" is not satirical, but it is ironic, an irony that portrays a deep complicity with structural violence. Still, Baudelaire is no moralist. As Benjamin observes, "when Baudelaire depicts depravity and vice he always includes himself. The gesture of the satirist was unknown to him."[262] A revisionary reading might suggest that to depict the banality of misogyny, the average men with their average tales of violence, is to be critical of it. And indeed, Baudelaire is critical of this banal violence, but on the grounds of taste rather than morality. The aim of his critique is not to say that it is wrong to kill your mistress, but that most people murder for uninspired reasons. He makes both an ideological and aesthetic critique of an insufficient commitment to pleasure, to our deepest drives. Reading the poem does not allow for self-righteous pleasure – if a feeling of that ilk,

[261] Benjamin, "Central Park" 43.
[262] Benjamin, 54.

driven by the superego, can even be described as pleasure – and not merely because of the ambivalence behind the shudder of disgust in the poem, the one that hints of a tingle of pleasure and a desire to move closer to the violence even as he or she feels repelled. What Baudelaire reveals is that misogyny is its own kind of cliché and arguably the oldest one around. Misogyny may be the cliché par excellence for its ability to deploy violence so thoughtlessly, even though its message always gets across.

Baudelaire achieved his goal of creating a cliché, but he also showed us that the distance between lyric language and everyday chatter is sometimes shorter than we'd like to believe. In poems that achieve the most melancholy, there is a similar intimacy between the poet and the reader as there is between the men of "Portraits de maîtresses." Instead of dirty talk, there is melancholy talk: the poet's true aim is not really to mourn the woman, but to produce melancholy for a third party. But as I have argued, this melancholy is the most poetic cliché of all. A cliché is a dead trope, one that has been beaten repeatedly ("vous donneriez la bastonnade à ce mur ou à ce canapée…") until it can be passed around without consciously thinking about it. The point of the cliché is that it speaks through us, that we deploy it without noticing. Baudelaire's ironic use of cliché allows the violence the cliché represses to break through, so that both registers of the cliché (tropological and thematic) are legible. Repression, after all, blurs the boundary between what is dead and gone and what is living and imposing. He reinvigorates the dead trope by hyperbolizing its mortification, such that that distinction between the living and the dead provokes uncertainty and a faint taste of disgust.

On that note, let us dwell for a final moment on Bénédicta's triumphant convulsion: "C'est moi, la vraie Bénédicta! C'est moi, une fameuse canaille! Et pour la

punition de ta folie de de ton aveuglement, tu m'aimeras telle que je suis!" What deserves to be punished is the narrator's susceptibility to cliché. As I have mentioned, the narrator repeats twice that it was he who buried Bénédicta—c'est moi, c'est moi! But by having the dead woman echo the poet's speech, she not only usurps the poetic cliché, she also repeats it with a significant difference. Rather than swooning over her beauty only to shed tears over her grave, what would it mean to love her as she is? The poem cannot tell us, as it leaves the question of which one is the true, which one to love, unanswered. Again, it is not an issue of identifying what is truly repressed in the poem. All we can read is the affect the repression provokes. But we need not react the same way as the narrator, incensed to be stuck in the grave of the ideal. There is another possible affective relation to the poem: disgust towards the intellectual profligacy of the men. Kolnai writes that disgust is also warranted towards "that type of aimless and over-subtle intellectual activity, better termed intellectual *wantonness*, that kind of subjective, irresponsible, and opulent, over-refined and sometimes bombastic reveling in thought itself and in its exhibition, which is at heart indifferent to its object: what one might call lascivious intellectualism."[263] Clichés, on a final note, are excessive language, phrases that get thrown around wantonly. A certain reader may roll her eyes at the first man's precious comparison to Chérubin, or curl her lip and narrow her gaze at the mention of "une sensitive violée," or feel disgusted by a whole tradition of poets swooning over their own sorrow. If women disgust men (or at least poets) because of an excess of sexuality

[263] Kolnai, 67.

men cannot handle, perhaps men disgust women because of their wastefulness, their profligate use of cliché, their privileged ability to kill time, and their poetic banality.[264]

[264] We shall indeed see how a certain poet figure handles excess(ive) sexuality and the allure of their own sadness in my next chapter on Rainer Maria Rilke.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MIRROR AND THE SHADOW
RILKE'S POETICS OF NARCISSISM

"Dichter sind doch immer Narzisse."
August Wilhelm Schlegel

Who are we talking to when we talk to ourselves? What pronoun do we use? The answer may depend on whether it is the stentorian voice of the superego that admonishes in the second person or if it is the ego that takes it upon itself to speak for the whole of the subject. In those moments when we are startled by our most intimate self-awareness that seems to come to us from beyond our consciousness, does this revelation address itself to "I" or to "you?" Such a moment occurs in Rainer Maria Rilke's famous poem, "Archaisher Torso Apollos."

> Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
> darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
> sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
> in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,
>
> sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
> der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
> der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
> zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.
>
> Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
> unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
> und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;
>
> und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
> aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
> die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.[265]

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[265] "We never knew his head and all the light / that ripened in his fabled eyes. But / his torso still glows like a gas lamp dimmed / in which his gaze, lit long ago, // holds fast and shines. Otherwise the surge / of the breast could not blind you, nor a smile / run through the slight twist of the loins / toward that center where procreation thrived. // Otherwise this stone would stand deformed and curt / under the shoulders' transparent plunge / and not glisten just like wild beast' fur // and not burst forth from all its contours / like a star: for there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life." "Archaic Torso

This poem, ostensibly about an encounter with a commandingly present ancient artwork, is arguably about what is not present. The speaker warns us (and I write "us," because the poem begins with the first person plural) that we do not know how the sculpture appears in its complete form, and the five instances of "nicht" in the poem attest to this fact. But we can imagine, for his, or its, steady, shining gaze lingers in the glow of his torso. Otherwise, the speaker stresses, the torso would not dazzle you, would not glisten like the pelt of a wild beast or break out of its boundaries like a star. The torso would be a disfigured fragment, instead of a sculpture that holds its power in what it is not. Although this torso has lost both its heads – the one we never knew, and the one where "die Zeugung trug" [where creation flared] – it seems to be anything but castrated, not in spite of but somehow thanks to its notably missing appendages. Absences are keenly felt in Rilke's poetry, from the fled angels of the *Duino Elegies* to the lamented lovers so achingly apostrophized throughout his work. Because his poetic vocation has always seemed to be to call upon the absent one and bring it near within the space of his poetry, critics have long identified the imposingly present absences in his work. The force of the archaic torso not withstanding, it is still the lyric speaker who coaxes out the image of its absent limbs and head.

"Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt," the speaker begins, not so much mournfully as matter-of-factly. The head of the torso, whose gaze, in an interesting catachresis, ripened in the apples of his eyes, had been "unerhörtes," or unheard of, unexpected. Its head is perhaps unexpected because a museumgoer looking at an archaic

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of Apollo," in Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems.* Trans. Edward Snow (New York: North Point Press, 2001), 182-3.

torso might be surprised to receive a vision of the statue in its full splendor, or moreover, to hear an oracular voice that calls up the long lost glory of the statue. If the head is unheard of rather than unseen, the subtle focus here is still attuned to the viewer's experience more than the statue's brilliance. The verb from which "unerhörtes" derives, "erhören," means to answer a prayer or to grant a plea. The word is used here both in a general way – the head is outrageously beyond our understanding – and also to sneak in a prayer. "Erhören" builds off "hören," to listen, and this poem indeed depends on listening to a plea. But by describing the torso's head as "unerhörtes," Rilke implies that something is also asked. There is a reciprocal relationship between the torso and the one who gazes upon it, as if making a silent plea for it to impart its wisdom. And significantly, Rilke does not devote the entire poem to a sculpture as commanding as the torso of Apollo, the god of poetry. For a poet who never shied from an "O Du," it is striking that he leaves the ostensible subject of the poem in the third person and instead turns to address an unidentified, yet prostrate "you." As William Waters notes, this is characteristic of how Rilke, "seeking to enact the enthrallment that [the poem] recounts, naturally discovers, in syntax, the electricity produced by a turn from third to second person; and this turn itself suggests, in pragmatics, the power of a poem over its reader."[266] Rilke evokes but does not apostrophize the torso. Even if the torso's gravitational pull forces the image of the rest of its body into our imagination, the poem condenses the effect of this force on the spectator, the "you" whose life must change, instead of giving an exalted description of the statue itself. For however dazzling the

[266] William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 93.

torso may be, without someone to gaze upon and be dazzled by the sculpture, it would remain a deformed fragment.

While the speaker begins by addressing all of us who encounter the torso, the speaker perhaps included, the address shifts to the second person in the second stanza, as if amid the plural experience of moving through the gallery, the other objects and other spectators drop away, and you are alone with the torso. Here, Rilke captures the intimacy unique to the artwork, where a solitary encounter with an ancient object is at once proper to the single viewer and unifying for all who are moved by it. If the "you" has the power to sweep us up and away with its final provocation, it is because the speaker first hails us as a "we." This famous last line of one of Rilke's most famous poems is often read as a kind of self-sufficient fragment in its own right: "Du mußt dein Leben ändern." Considering his penchant for intricate syntax, this line is surprisingly straightforward, as if its pronouncement is so unequivocal that no dependent clause can or should hang from it. Yet a detached mystique hovers over the final line. When the speaker's attention moves away from the description of the torso, the tone turns abruptly at the *volta* from exalting to unsparing, such a marked shift that everything that leads up to the final two lines all but falls away. The exquisite ekphrasis, it seems, only exists to serve the deliverance of the final message.

Is it the statue that beams a message into the mind of the spectator, or is it the poet who lets us in on a secret? As Peter Sloterdijk writes in his recent book that takes its title from the torso's "command," *You Must Change Your Life*, the power of the proclamation comes from the promise of meaning communicated by language, or in Heideggerean

terms, "the 'transformation of being into message.'"[267] This call from/to being resonates because it appears to come from both within and without, from the innermost corners of the mind and from an external authority. Thanks to the splendor of the torso, all the more perfect for its missing limbs, the poet is able to take on its ontological weight and "numinous authority" and convey a message to all who, whether by going to the Louvre or reading the poem, are ready to receive it.[268] "Du mußt dein Leben ändern"— who could argue otherwise? The poem's widespread power is no doubt attributable to some inner exigency against inertia that characterizes our being, waiting and ready to be pressed by the right encounter with the right object. The line translates into English easily enough—you must change your life. But while "ändern" may be translated as "to change," it does not carry the meaning of to transform or to alter. That is, "ändern" does not necessarily imply that one thing is turned into another thing. The statue makes no recommendations as to what you should change your life into, or what you should do with your life at all. The point here does not seem to be renewal or reinvigoration or some inspiring call to arms. "Ändern" has within it the word "anders," or something else, something different, otherwise. If the line were translated, "You must make your life otherwise," what sort of life would that entail? At the very least, the command would retain the mystery befitting a mute sculpture. Living otherwise suggests more of a change to one's relating with the world than a changed sense of who one is. The operative word here is "mußt," as if the command is constitutive, already inscribed within he or she who must change. Moreover, living otherwise suggests that this "you" whose

[267] Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 20.
[268] Sloterdijk, 25.

life must change is never self-same, never identical to itself. The five instances of "nicht" in the poem reinforce the necessity of stepping outside of the usual. "To change your life," Ulrich Baer explains, "means to expose yourself to the possibility that the familiar life no longer exists."[269] For life will change on its own. To live otherwise is to live in this instability, which is not limited to life itself but to the status of a subject that can be addressed as "you." "Du mußt dein Leben ändern" urges anyone who may be hailed by the second person to recognize how strange this hailing is and how estranging it is to be marked as the second person.

By the end of the poem, it is clear that it is the final line that lingers with the reader. This turns the poem upside down: without the final command, would the torso still dazzle you, reader, would you bother to imagine the unexpected head or the smile in the loins? In fact, you may not even recall the torso that glowed like a candelabra or a wild beast's pelt, and the poem would simply be one among another hundred in the collection of the *New Poems*. While the first twelve lines of the poem contain an elaborate ekprahsis, it seems as if the description of the torso only exists to give weight to what the poem conveys, or at least, the power of the torso is belatedly felt after the final line. The torso perhaps does not exist for the torso's sake, in other words. Although Rilke's work is usually discussed in terms of absences that are made present, it is equally compelling to turn our attention to the presences in his work that turn out to be absent or missing. Everything that the speaker describes in the poem is in fact not present. Yes, the torso glows, otherwise we would not see what it is missing. But we only see what is missing because the speaker fills it in our imagination, as if the torso only glows because

[269] Ulrich Baer, *The Rilke Alphabet*. Trans. Andrew Hamilton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 184.

the light of the poet's interest shines on it. For however much this poem is "about" the torso of Apollo, it is more preoccupied with the poetic process of bringing the torso to light. This problem brings to mind a question of the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott: "Did you create that or did you find that?"[270] Did the object, in this case the torso, enjoy its own independent existence outside of the poet's attention, or did the poet create its existence by writing about it? Who is it, then, who tells you to change your life? Apollo, after all, is an oracular god, but he is also the god of poetry, suggesting that he could be a stand-in for the figure of the poet. Either the message is written by the poet for the reader's benefit, or, in the realm of the poem, the spectator receives the message somewhat telepathically from the imagined gaze of the statue. In this case, the call comes from within the poem and within the reader, and the "you" is the pronoun used for talking to one's self. The poem's power comes from forcing us to articulate what we already know and what confronts us when we encounter something radically different from ourselves: an archaic fragment of a sculpture from a time not our own. This dazzling torso—what is it for? Does it exist for any other purpose other than to reinforce what is within ourselves?

Rilke Will Change Your Life

"Archaisher Torso Apollos" is one of Rilke's most famous, most popular poems because of how it hails us, but also because of the feedback loop it establishes between poet and reader. Critics frequently remark on Rilke's popularity, which manages to be both improbable and inevitable. Paul de Man begins his essay on Rilke's tropes in *Allegories of Reading* by noting how widely read the poet's work is, in spite of its

[270] D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality,* (New York: Routledge, 1971), 119.

manifest difficulty. In de Man and elsewhere, Rilke's allure is tied to his ability to seemingly directly appeal to his audience, to speak of intimacies unrevealed, "as if what he had to say," de Man muses, "was of direct concern even to readers remote from him in their language and in their destinies."[271] Even in translation, and from a hundred years ago, his poems are near to the readers who feel that they are not only spoken to directly, but that this voice also comes, somehow, from within. Many of his poems do implicate what Waters describes as "the unusually vulnerable position of a reader whose responsiveness to the text ends even to the feeling (implausible as it may be) that she herself is the poem's intended addressee."[272] This form of personal address accounts for how readily Rilke has been commercialized by the self-help industry, where the exigency of "You must change your life" becomes the encouraging "You *can* change your life." In Sloterdijk's wry reading of the poem, the vitality of the torso comes from its idealized athletic form. Rilke, "who, in the language of his time," Sloterdijk notes, "was a neurasthenic and weak-bodied introvert," was calling for more of a somatic than a spiritual awakening, where the final line becomes the encouraging push of a personal trainer.[273] But the famous pronouncement from "Archaic Torso of Apollo" is not a counsel on how to improve one's life, nor does it suggest how many times one should make changes. It is an exhortation to live in a state of otherness, where one is open to receive messages from stone, or to notice the unfamiliar familiarity of a flamingo or swan. "You must change your life" not to become a different person, but to live in a perpetual state of difference.

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[271] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 20.
[272] William Waters, "Answerable Aesthetics: Reading 'You' in Rilke," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring, 1996), 130.
[273] Sloterdijk, 26.

In Rilke's work, you are always a stranger to yourself. As the Rilke of *Letters to a Young Poet* warns his young correspondent, Franz Xaver Kappus, that "No one can advise or help you—no one. There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself."[274] Turn away from the external world, and draw inwards to confront yourself. If Rilke is to be taken as a metaphysical guide, he can only lead one to the cliffs of the heart, to borrow a title of one of his poems. His plea to "Go into yourself" may promote self-absorption, but it is also a way of preserving the strangeness of the self, where introspection becomes a kind of uncanny cave diving in the dark. And yet it seems that the more Rilke endorses estrangement, the closer readers feel to him. Part of the allure of *Letters to a Young Poet* is that there are no letters *from* the young poet, and so the reader is free to be hailed by Rilke's "you." As translator Stephen Mitchell shares in his foreword to *Letters to a Young Poet*, "I felt, as many readers have felt, that the letters were written for me."[275] One of the most popular pieces of advice Rilke has to offer, as evidenced by how often it appears on magnets and notebooks and greeting cards, is as follows:

> I beg you…to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.[276]

This is the Rilke who enraptures and comforts and helps us ("uns hinreißt und tröstet und hilft"), the Rilke of anxious hearts and charmed objects that beckon us near.[277] And yet,

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[274] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 6.
[275] Mitchell in Rilke, vi.
[276] Rilke, 34.
[277] These words conclude the "First Elegy" of *Duino Elegies*.

he *begs* us to stay with the strange questions and implies that the only life there is to live is the one that unsettles (the power of negative thinking, in other words).

What quality of Rilke's work invites such an intimate involvement? His most popular collections are tellingly not the poems he assembled himself, but collections of poems and letters curated by others to reflect a certain worldview. As early as 1907, Rilke was included in a volume entitled *Books for Real Life* (*Die Bücher zum wirklichen Leben*), an instructive guide for young people. Again, Rilke's counsel to retreat into one's self is what lends him to be appropriated as a self-help guru, for the self-help industry runs on the premise that the part of the self that causes pain can be tackled by a different, more empowered part of the self. (This is likely not the kind of "instruction" Horace had in mind.) Rilke's most popular works in the United States currently include *A Year with Rilke: Daily Readings from the Best of Rainer Maria Rilke* and *Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties: Translations and Considerations*. Aside from an edition of *The Selected Poetry* and *Letters to a Young Poet*, most readers are introduced to the poet not by his own work, but by editors who select his poems to serve as daily affirmations that salve the soul. Rilke has changed *their* lives, and they avow he will do so for *you*. There may be no apparent critical need to take such spiritually pandering editions seriously, but consider this: among the many translations of *Duino Elegies* (over twenty), none of the translators are fluent in German. This is not a rare occurrence in translation today, but as Marjorie Perloff chides, one would think that the poet who inspires us to change our lives might also inspire an "inner necessity" in one or two of these translators, somewhere

along the line, to study German, or to at least treat Rilke's work as if they were "books written in a very foreign language."[278]

It is worth dwelling on how Rilke is received in popular culture because it reflects a critical tendency to indulge in personal confession when it comes to the poet. Baer, for instance, cannot resist this parenthetical: "(I have relied on Rilke's words when I've found myself speechless in the face of loss.)"[279] Why include this sheepish admission? What is specific about Rilke's work that it so coaxes the personal? "Rilke's considerable audience," de Man observes, "is in part based on a relationship of complicity, on shared weaknesses."[280] This is as true today as it was in 1979, and, fittingly, it was true for the poet himself—he was counseled to read his own works to deal with his psychic ills. At the end of his life, suffering intensely from leukemia, he wrote to Salomé of his "teuflischen Bessessenheit" [devilish possession] – chronic masturbation – that he believed exacerbated, if not caused, his cancer.[281] Salomé, with great concern, replied that masturbation was not likely to have caused his cancer, but feeling guilty about it may have. Her advice: "nimm R. M. Rilkes Elegien vor (wie's, ich schrieb es Dir, manche meiner Kränksten taten). Ich kann es ja nicht hier so sagen, wie es dort, für alle Mühseligen und Beladenen, Wirklichkeit geworden ist, bis sie sich selig geladen sehen zu jedem Frieden" [take up R. M. Rilke's *Elegies* (as some of my most severely ill patients have done…) I can't verbalize here the way that for them, for all those who labor and are heavy laden, it has become a *reality*, so much so that they seem themselves blessedly

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[278] Marjorie Perloff, "Reading Gass Reading Rilke," *Parnassus* 25 (2001), 486-507, 2.
[279] Baer, 13.
[280] de Man, 21.
[281] *Rainer Maria Rilke Lou Andreas-Salome Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1989), 476. *Rilke and Andreas-Salomé: A Love Story in Letters*, trans. Edward Snow and Michael Winkler (New York: Norton, 2006), 355.

invited to every manner of peace.][282] Salomé here suggests that her friend rest his weary soul and find solace in reading *Duino Elegies*. Curiously, she does not suggest that he read *his own* elegies, but rather R. M. Rilke's. This is at once an estranging gesture (as if the poems were written by someone else) and an affirming one (as if by approaching them as a stranger he might be reacquainted with his poetic prowess and thereby heal).[283] If her primary concern was to dissuade him from feeling guilty about masturbation, then she replaces one form of self-love with another.

"Masturbatory" is sometimes uttered as a derisive term for a writer who makes an art out of his own self-regard, and so Rilke's affliction is, in a way, almost too perfect. Indeed, a word that invariably comes up in Rilke criticism, after a mention of his popularity, is *narcissism*. Either his works reflect a narcissistic interest in the self or he himself was a narcissist (as with Dickinson, even the most diligent criticism seems to pass freely through a semi-permeable membrane that separates life from work). Admittedly, there is enough biographical detail to provide an uninformed diagnosis for a bad case of self-involvement: the long line of jilted lovers, his abandonment of wife and child, his political apathy ("so total," scoffs Perloff, "that the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 seemed primarily a disruption of his own literary plans"), his predilection for solitude or otherwise nagging need to spend more time alone with his art, the torment of writer's block and the sudden rush of divine inspiration at Castle Duino that all but rendered his body an Aeolian harp, his reliance on wealthy patronesses, and the

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[282] *Briefwechsel*, 483. *Letters* 359.
[283] Salomé's advice is not unlike a certain masturbatory *Entfremdungseffekt* known as "The Stranger," wherein one sits on one's hand until it falls asleep, lending the effect of being stroked by someone else.

aforementioned final days of insatiable masturbation.[284] To put it another way, as John Berryman famously assessed: "Rilke was a *jerk*."[285] Read: a *narcissistic* jerk. Again, as in Dickinson criticism, there is a long paper trail that entitles the Rilke enthusiast to draw his or her own conclusion about who he was, based on his prolific letters. But this sort of interest in the poet's "real life" is more than likely a reflection of the reader's desire to know Rilke either as a mystic or as a neurasthenic jerk. This structure of mimetic narcissism is easily misread in sentimental terms. His popularity and his narcissism form a feedback loop where his laments become ours, and we delight in seeing our suffering reflected so compellingly in his words. Or, as de Man puts it, "Rilke seems to be endowed with the healing power of those who open up access to the hidden layers of our consciousness or to a delicacy of emotion that reflects, to those capable of perceiving its shades, the reassuring image of their own solicitude."[286] This certainly accounts for why Rilke has been construed, even within his lifetime, as a sort of self-help guru who turns our grief and sorrow into something beautiful that can be survived. (What are poets for in destitute times? Consolation.) To say the least, the problem with this misreading is that it would mean that he helps us recognize ourselves when in fact he consistently calls for – even begs – us to be estranged from ourselves. Rilkean recognition should be shocking and upsetting, just as Rilkean narcissism is anything but self-love. "The narcissism that is often ascribed to him no doubt exists," de Man continues, "but on a

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[284] Perloff, 3. Indeed, for Rilke, the trauma of World War I seemed to be that he was forced to return to Germany and work a desk job—"an inanity he had managed somehow to keep at bay by translating Mallarmé," writes Pierre Joris.
[285] John Berryman, "Dream Song 3," *The Dream Songs: Poems* (New York: FSG, 2007), 5.
[286] de Man, 20.

very different level from that of a reader using him as a reflector for his own image."[287] The focus might be inwards, but what is mirrored back startles.

Of course, it is facile to use narcissism as a synonym for being self-involved. Strictly speaking, narcissism is not a character attribute as much as it is a clinical term. While vanity, pride and selfishness are age-old sins, narcissism does not come into cultural parlance until the turn of the nineteenth century. The more general understanding of narcissism as "excessive self-love," as the OED defines it, likely springs from a Romantic emphasis first person self-expression; in fact, the OED's first example of the word comes from a letter of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.[288] In 1898, Havelock Ellis deemed chronic self-love (otherwise known as Rilke's affliction, incessant masturbation) to be "narcissus-like," while in 1899 Paul Näcke used the term to label the same affliction as a perversion. Freud cites both origins for his understanding of the term in the beginning of his 1914 essay, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," where he characterizes narcissists as "seeking *themselves* as a love object."[289] It is important to recognize, however, that this self-qua-love-object is in fact only a non-metonymical portion of the psyche. The psychoanalytic use of the term implies both a libidinal overinvestment in the ego and a withdrawal of libidinal investment in the object and subsequent turning away from the external world. Equating narcissism with selfishness, therefore, does not push the problem far enough. As Freud outlines, this self may be what one once was, or what

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[287] de Man, 22.
[288] "Of course, I am glad to be able to correct my fears as far as public Balls, Concerts, and Time-murder in Narcissism." *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, "Narcissism," http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125088?redirectedFrom=narcissism
[289] Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction" in *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychlogy, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 88.

one wants to be, or to further complicate matters, what one sees oneself as. The "self" need not be, and seldom is, who one "is." That a narcissistic object choice can attach to something the subject is decidedly not (what one was or wants to be or thinks one is) underscores the problematic fact that if narcissism is a kind of self-love, it is also a kind of self-estrangement.

One of the difficulties of Freud's essay is determining whether the narcissistic object choice is a cathexis or, as Freud's later work will suggest, an identification. Reading Rilke's poetry alongside Freud's essay reveals the work of narcissism to be more aligned with identification, for the figure of the subject in his poems, whether it takes the shape of the poet or Narcissus himself, does not invest or occupy the object in question with *libidinal* energy as much as it identifies with the object and pulls it into the ego's orbit. In his poems on the mythical figure of Narcissus, Rilke draws attention to the specular character of narcissism, where the "love" that is supposedly directed towards the self takes the form of identification with a mirror image. Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage elucidates how such an identification is an assumption in both senses of the word: to take in and to presuppose certainty. To identify with an object is always to mark a separation from that object, for in identification, the ego mirrors something external to it but can never achieve the parity, or for that matter, the unity it longs for. And because the narcissistic object choice is so often an investment in a projection of what one would like to be, narcissism, in spite of its being known for an overinvestment in the self, inevitably entails loss when the object choice falls short of the fantasy. As I will discuss, there is a trace of melancholy in the narcissist, whose heightened self-regard does not

keep him from feeling this "love" as loss. This loss is everywhere in the *New Poems*, as the object always eludes the poet who tries to represent it.

To call Rilke a narcissist is not to make a clinical diagnosis but rather to judge his character based on a blur of biography and mythos. And yet, if we hold close to the definition of the narcissist as one who suffers from an overinvestment in the unstable stock of the self, then we can reconsider what it might mean to read Rilke's work as a product of narcissism. For Rilke, narcissism is not a form of self-satisfaction, but a malady of self-estrangement. Just as Salomé advised him to read his work as if it were not his own to help break him of his self-enthrallment, in his poetry he meditates on exteriority and interiority to trouble the idea of the self-identical subject and the wholly other object. As a way of dealing with narcissism, both as an affliction and as a concept (the two are inseparable), he grapples with things and asks if it is possible to represent them without the intrusion of the self. Thinking about forms of narcissism and object-relations in Rilke's work does not necessarily lead to a conclusion about the poet's mental health or a judgment on his moral character, but rather involves questions concerning his poetic preoccupation with the interrelation and permeability between self and object, inner and outer life.

"Denn da ist keine Stelle / die dich nicht sieht," intones the disembodied voice of "Archaic Torso of Apollo," perfectly summarizing the subject position of the narcissist. The narcissist's affliction is precisely that there is no position from which he cannot be seen, that everything external to him is turned towards him, focused on him.[290] As

[290] I use the male pronoun for the narcissist, in part because I am writing about a male poet, and in part to push back on Freud's pronouncement that women are more inclined to narcissism then men. While it is possible to read his essay as a

Wolfram Groddeck points out, the famed gaze of the statue "ist zunächst nichts anderes als der umgekehrte Blick des Betrachters, der sich in der Selbstreflexion des Kunstwerks zu objektivieren scheint."[291] Does the torso exist for centuries only to wait for us to show up so it can remind us to change our lives? This is the task of Rilke's collection of thing-poems, written over and over again to answer whether or not it is possible to find an object instead of creating one, to write of the object without turning it in to a projection of the self.

On Being Too Into Yourself

In 1913, Rilke composed two poems, never published, on the myth of Narcissus.[292] The first is a quick sketch of Narcissus' unhappy fate:

> Narziss verging. Von seiner Schönheit hob
> sich unaufhörlich seines Wesens Nähe,
> verdichtet wie der Duft vom Heliotrop.
> Ihm aber war gesetzt, daß er sich sähe.
>
> Er liebte, was ihm ausging, wieder ein
> und war nicht mehr im offnen Wind enthalten
> und schloß entzückt den Umkreis der Gestalten
> und hob sich auf und konnte nicht mehr sein.[293]

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critique of patriarchal structures that give women few (object) choices of their own – and indeed, Freud promises that "this description of the feminine form of erotic life is not due to any tendentious desire to deprecate women" – these same structures enable a certain masculine entitlement where there is no need to recognize otherness when his sameness is everywhere affirmed. See "On Narcissism," 89.

[291] Wolfram Groddeck, ed. *Gedichte von Rainer Maria Rilke* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1999), 88.

[292] For a thorough account of the Narcissus mythos in German literature and his importance to Rilke, see Erich Unglaub, "Bildnis und Mythos des Narziss" in *Rilke-Arbeiten* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002).

[293] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Uncollected Poems*. Trans. Edward Snow (New York: North Point Press, 1996) 58.

Formally, the poem's seeming simplicity reflects the insidious self-seduction from which Narcissus suffers. Rilke employs the mirroring quality of even the most straightforward rhyme schemes to great effect. As Narcissus takes up the task of seeing himself in the first stanza, the alternating rhyme suggests a mutual relationship between him and his beauty, but the enclosed rhyme of the second stanza matches how Narcissus himself becomes enclosed in the perfect circle of his self-love. The two stanzas also have a reflective quality, as the verbs "heben" and "gehen" appear in altered versions in the first, fifth, and last line. Narcissus disappears (verging) because what escapes him (ausging) he loves back into himself; his beauty that lifts (sich heben) from his being like fragrance is likely what escapes him, and in the ceaseless back-and-forth of mirroring, Narcissus and his beautiful reflection, entranced, cancel each other out (aufheben). Aufhebung, we know from Hegel, carries contradictory meanings of transcendence and nullification. Charged with seeing himself, he goes into himself and turns himself inside out. In this poem, Rilke configures narcissism as an encircling self-regard in both senses of the word—seeing himself elevates his sense of self. But without airing itself out, as it were, this closed circuit of desire cannot sustain itself, and "konnte nicht mehr sein." The second stanza is one long sentence, perpetuated by the anaphoric "und" until the poem, like Narcissus himself, gives out.

"Narziss [1]" establishes narcissism as a dangerous play of interiors and exteriors, where a self-directed gaze loops from an exterior reflection to an interior satisfaction. "Narziss [2]" continues this attention to depth by expanding the "Umkreis der Gestalten" to include a woman:

Dies also: dies geht von mir aus und löst

sich in der Luft und im Gefühl der Haine,
entweicht mir leicht und wird nicht mehr das Meine
und glänzt, weil es auf keine Feindschaft stößt.

Dies hebt sich unaufhörlich von mir fort,
ich will nicht weg, ich warte, ich verweile;
doch alle meine Grenzen haben Eile,
stürzen hinaus und sind schon dort.

Und selbst im Schlaf. Nichts bindet uns genug.
Nachgiebige Mitte in mir, Kern voll Schwäche,
der nicht sein Fruchtfleisch anhält. Flucht, o Flug
von allen Stellen meiner Oberfläche.

Was sich dort bildet und mir sicher gleicht
und aufwärts zittert in verweinten Zeichen,
das mochte so in einer Frau vielleict
innen entstehn; es war nicht zu erreichen,

wie ich danach auch drängend in sie rang.
Jetzt liegt es offen in dem teilnahmslosen
zerstreuen Wasser, und ich darf es lang
anstaunen unter meinem Kranz von Rosen.

Dort ist es nicht geliebt. Dort unten drin
Ist nichts, als Gleichmut überstürzter Steine,
Und ich kann sehen, wie ich traurig bin.
War dies mein Bild in ihrem Augenscheine?

Hob es sich so in ihrem Traum herbei
zu süßer Furcht? Fast fühl ich schon die ihre.
Denn, wie ich mich in meinem Blick verliere:
ich könnte denken, daß ich tödlich sei.[294]

The second Narcissus poem lacks the tight construction of its earlier incarnation, which could have appeared in *New Poems* both for its level of concision and the distance it maintains from its subject. Here, Narcissus speaks in the first person, and his plight is less controlled than the efficient aufhebung of the first poem. Instead of canceling himself out, he exceeds himself—his "Grenzen haben Eile," as if the limits of his anxious

[294] Rilke, 60-61.

being hasten to get to some unspecified "dort." If in the first poem, he finds in his reflection the serene image of his exterior, which he pushes back inside to contain it, in the second poem he suffers as his insides, his "Nachgiebige Mitte" and "Kern voll Schwäche," rush out of him to form a shaky self-image. But this image (also found "dort," in some other elsewhere) is as if drawn from a trembling hand, and as "sicher" implies, he is not all together certain in his reflection. In the first two stanzas, his reflection is referred to as "dies," a vague deictic befitting of such a tenuous possession. "Dies" functions as both the subject of each sentence, but as a relative pronoun, it feels like it refers more to an unidentified object – the poem, perhaps – than a grammatical subject that promotes an action. Something comes after "this," some object to which you gesture, but "this" does not usually refer to something that is proper to the self.[295] And indeed, this reflection, which rises from Narcissus, does not seem to belong to him. As Peter Por elucidates, "der deiktische Akt [ist] sonst inhaltsleer, daß er auf eine Entität verweist: Narziss will das Bild seines Inneren in die bildlose Wasser-Welt setzen."[296] Unlike the first poem, where the open air is shut out, in this poem "dies" escapes from him so fully that it dissolves every minute into the air: "Dies also: dies geht von mir aus und löst / sich in der Luft…// Dies hebt sich unaufhörlich von mir fort." Because we know the myth, we know that "dies" refers to his reflection in the pool, but in this poem we see this reflection for the illusory object it is. A reflection is real insofar as it is an image, but it has no material existence and only exists as a play of light and surface. For

[295] A notable exception would be in a poem such as Keats' "This living hand, now warm and capable," where the relative pronoun adds to the uncanny effect of the address.
[296] Peter Por, *Die Orphische Figur: Zur Poetik von Rilkes Neuen Gedichten* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997), 37.

the Narcissus of the poem, his image evaporates from him and settles on the surface of the water, tormenting him with the possibility of an externalized version of what he cannot contain inside. "Nichts bindet uns genug," he laments, and so the image-as-self eludes him just as the interior self he wishes to stay with, wait for, linger with.

The moment Narcissus directly refers to his image in the water, he introduces the possibility of a woman, to him an equally elusive object: "das mochte so in einer Frau vielleicht / innen entstehn; es war nicht zu erreichen, // wie ich danach auch drängend in sie rang." Here, the meditation on interiority that characterizes these poems takes on an embodied, erotic quality. In the throes of passion, he realizes that he has failed to reach some essential core of her being, and that to be "in her" is still to be separate from her.[297] To speak of the inside of a woman is necessarily less metaphoric than when Narcissus mentions his own insides, especially when he alludes to reproductive sexuality. His image, so shakily reproduced in the water, is a poor comparison to what a woman can bring forth from her own insides. If Rilke suggested that the young poet to "go into himself" to know whether or not he was able to be a poet, here the limitation of this advice is made clear: those who are too "into" themselves, like Narcissus, either cannot create or do not find satisfaction in what they create. Leo Bersani has argued that for the poet, "going outside oneself," in the outside world in general and during sex in particular,

[297] In his poetry, prose, and letters, Rilke is forthright about his skepticism towards the sublimative possibility of sex. The poet Robert Hass has remarked on the "Fifth Elegy," where the speaker asks a pair of spent lovers whether they have finally achieved union, that "no one has ever composed a more eloquent indictment of fucking: if it is so great, why hasn't it catapulted all the dead directly into heaven, why is the world still haunted by the ghosts of so much unsatisfied desire?" Hass notes that while Rilke does not call for asceticism, "the final confrontation was always with himself." See, "Looking for Rilke" in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1989).

is an act both penetrating and penetrative. Paradoxically, the narcissistic poet who is open to be penetrated, even rent apart, by the world's experiences in turn takes in all the external world has to offer and appropriates it with his art: "The self is 'lost' only to be relocated everywhere."[298] For Bersani, this self-shattering openness threatens to negate the poet's virility precisely because anyone in a position of "openness" is put in the passive, receptive position of the woman. In this economy of desire, virility is *not* creative, while passive openness breeds creative self-reproduction; to that end, he quotes Baudelaire: "To screw is to aspire to enter into another person, and the artist never goes outside himself."[299] The narcissist's predicament, as Bersani and Rilke elucidate, is that even in moments where he enters another person, he is in fact going so deep into himself that everywhere he is only met with his own reflection. As for Narcissus, he has a sense that his own form came from within a woman, but all he can see is his unsatisfactory image rippling "in dem teilnahmslosen / zerstreuten Wasser," or "dort:" elsewhere, over there, where he cannot reach.

"Dort ist es nicht geliebt," Narcissus laments, putting an interesting twist to the myth. Instead of gazing enraptured into his reflection, he takes a mournful look and sees not a loved object, but only a reminder of his own sadness. Narcissus's melancholic relation to his reflection evinces the overlapping relationship between narcissism and melancholia. While the mourned object is an object lost forever, the melancholic object is one that has been preserved by the bereaved projection of his own ego onto the object. Because the loss of the object is experienced as a loss of part of the self, the ego

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[298] Leo Bersani, *Freud and Baudelaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 11.
[299] Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes*, quoted in Bersani, 9.

subsumes the object and the relation remains narcissistic. In melancholia, the libidinal energy that has detached from the lost object is now free to be placed elsewhere, but instead of finding a new object, the libido withdraws to the ego and enables it to unconsciously identify with the lost object. Economically, melancholia has a narcissistic character in its egotistical object choice, but it is not, of course, the same psychical operation as narcissism. While melancholia results from an unexpected, unhappy loss of the object, the narcissist is chronically unable to enter into object relations, as all objects are perpetually withdrawn from the closed circuit of narcissistic self-interest. In other words, the melancholic suffers from the loss of an object, whereas the narcissist suffers from an absence of objects all together. Freud explains that melancholia can be read as a regression to primary narcissism because it enables the ego to identify with the object instead of making a libidinal investment in it. "Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego," Freud writes, "as though it were an object, the forsaken object."[300] Freud's metaphor, then, is particularly illuminating: the libidinal light shining on the object is cast back onto the ego as empty darkness, as an outline of an absence. When Narcissus shines his love onto his reflection, the emptiness of that love reflects back on him, which he internalizes as sadness and loss.

The narcissism that Rilke deals with in his poetry is an affliction, where the overinvestment of libidinal energy in the ego or heightened self-regard is not felt as pleasure or anything resembling love. As Narcissus states simply, "Und ich kann sehen, wie ich traurig bin," underscoring the "impoverishment of the ego" that strikes both the

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[300] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 249.

melancholic and narcisisst, who responds to this emptiness by overcompensating. As with narcissism, melancholia is a diagnosis easily thrown around, and the charge against the melancholic is that he may also be too "into himself," or into his own sadness. And again, there is some clinical justification in this lay prejudice. Here, it is his sadness that seduces Narcissus, for instead of regarding his reflection as an extension of his interior life or a second self, he feels it to be an alienating figure, one that uncannily resembles him and yet keeps a distance. Even when he looks into the eyes of his lover – "War dies mein Bild in ihrem Augenscheine?" – he treats them as mirrors in which to see himself. While he almost has an inkling of the fear she might feel, he returns to the fear he has for himself: "Denn, wie ich mich in meinem Blick verliere: / ich könnte denken, daß ich tödlich sei." The final lines mark a reluctant resignation to his fate. Unlike the Narcissus of the myth, he does not mistake his reflection for a lover who plays hard to get. This lover is, in fact, *impossible* to get, and so it is to his feeling of sadness, and not to his image, that he becomes enthralled, aware that such absorption will be the death of him.

Narcissus's sadness is his loneliness. While the first Narcissus poem is removed from his thoughts to portray the vortex of self-love into which he vanishes, in "Narziss [2]," the first person is the only person, and the solitude of this limited perspective amplifies his inability to touch something outside of himself. The "Umkreis der Gestalten" that operates in the first poem as a closed circuit collapses in the second poem, where we are privy to Narcissus's thoughts and recognize that it is his particular plight to be unable to reach anyone or anything, even the reflection he supposedly loves. But what both poems share is the suggestion that what is inside Narcissus's self spills out and exceeds him, and so he turns his emptiness to the outside world and invests what is left of

his depleted reserves to anything he recognizes as himself. What Rilke writes about, here, is an economic problem of narcissism. His take on the myth poses two questions that also prove difficult for Freud: Why isn't the narcissist satisfied, and does he even recognize himself in the ego he loves as an object? In his essay, Freud asks why the ego, which is not primary to the subject as auto-erotic instincts are, does not resist making libidinal ties to objects. If it is the ego's task to neutralize tension, would it not be in its best interest to stay within the closed circuit of narcissism? "A strong egotism," he observes, "is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love."[301] Narcissism may be a closed system, but it is not a stable one; it operates like a continuously overturned hourglass that never reaches equilibrium. Because narcissism is a condition of unbalanced energy, Freud turns "to the field of pathology with its distortions and exaggerations" to explain the "certain special difficulties" that prevent a stable understanding of it, and as is his tendency, draws from his observations of everyday suffering before he outlines it as a neurosis:

> It is universally known, and we take it as a matter of course, that a person who is tormented by organic pain and discomfort gives up his interest in the things of the external world, in so far as they do not concern his suffering. Closer observation teaches us that he also withdraws *libidinal* interest from his love-objects: so long as he suffers, he ceases to love…the sick man withdraws his libidinal cathexes back upon his own ego, and sends them out again when he recovers.[302]

The difference between the sick man and the narcissist is that the former suffers from what Freud would call "organic" pain or disease, while the later suffers from a neurotic/erotic imbalance. Narcissism is pathologized because it is a self-consuming

[301] Freud, "On Narcissism" 85.
[302] Freud, 82.

dynamic. Love for another depletes the ego-libido, and so a return to primary narcissism via a withdrawal from the object is necessary to replenish the ego. But as Rilke makes clear, this inward turn also damages the ego's need for wholeness, and so secondary narcissism, rather than being a solution to the economic problem of love, in fact exacerbates it.

That narcissism causes the subject to suffer does not account for why it is not preferable to the dangers of falling in love, or what he calls "sexual overvaluation" of the object. The Narcissus of Rilke's second poem does enter into object relations with a woman, to put it clinically, but he is no more successful in this object choice than he is in cathecting his ego/reflection as an object. As far as he is able to articulate, his hang-up over the woman comes from his own insufficiency before her reproductive capability. Compared to his own "Kern voll Schwäche, / der nicht sein Fruchtfleisch anhält," he is intimidated by the woman's power to hold a growing form within her, as he must once have grown within another woman. There are two original object choices for the infant (himself and his mother/nurse), and these attachments form his primary narcissism. Male object choice, Freud tells us, is likely to be a sexual overvaluation of the object deriving from this primary narcissism, and "thus corresponds to a transference of that narcissism to the sexual object."[303] Although he categorizes this as an anaclitic/attachment type of object choice, any return to primary narcissism is still a narcissistic object choice. This marks one of the main problems of the narcissism essay: it is difficult to determine what object choice is *not* a narcissistic one. Consider his chart of how a person may love, according to the narcissistic type: "(*a*) what he himself is (i.e. himself), (*b*) what he

[303] Freud, 88.

himself was, (*c*) what he himself would like to be, (*d*) someone who was once part of himself."[304] Clearly, it does not suffice to say that the narcissist loves himself or takes his "self" as an object. Freud complicates the desire of the narcissist and therefore the definition of the self, which seems to exist in the present, past, future, and conditional tense all at once. Option (b) in particular is suggestive of melancholia, for the self the narcissist loves as an object is a part that has been lost. Aside from option (a), each object choice is decidedly what the subject is *not*: who he used to be, who he desires to be, or someone who evokes some lost part of the self, namely, the feeling of unity at the breast. More than a desire for the self, narcissism is a desire for a return to some other state, whether it be the undifferentiated sensation of self during infancy or some fantasy of a more ideal version of the self. If "the finding of an object," as Freud has it, "is in fact a re-finding of it," then it is not really the object that is found, but a long lost part of the self. The only possibility for union in love is a reunion with a memory or feeling. Even the purest feeling of love for the object is mixed in with the feeling of the baby at the breast. And yet, there is no need to throw that baby out with the bathwater—pure love for the object may not exist, but object relations are unavoidable. Even the narcissist, who turns away from the object, goes into himself and makes an object of his ego. What these complicated object relations make clear is that the self the narcissist loves is not self-same.

Narcissism is an economic problem, but in Rilke's poems, it is also a topographic problem because it involves an inability to respect boundaries and keep things in, so to speak. The narcissist does not live in a world without objects, but rather in a world where

[304] Freud, 90.

he sees himself in everyone and everything. To say that the condition of narcissism is to treat the ego as an object runs the risk of obscuring the two important points that render this normal developmental stage a pathology: narcissism allows the ego to believe in a fictitious self-unity even as it involves a painful alienation of that ego. In Rilke's second poem, Narcissus's reflection leaves his insides and floats away from him. Because one's reflection does not come from one's insides, and only mirrors back the surface, we can read Narcissus's reflection as a sort of imago or self-image that he is unable to hold with any psychic stability "inside" him. Narcissus laments that "alle meine Grenzen haben Eile, / stürzen hinaus und sind schon dort." Not only does he feel his psychic life spill out into the external world, the very boundaries that could hold him in rush away from him and are "already there," apart from him yet everywhere he turns. As we see from the poem, this omnipotence of the ego does not placate it into thinking that everywhere it is met with sameness. Freud explains in the essay that the ego, which the narcissist takes as its love-object, was not present in the psyche from the start, as the autoerotic instincts were. Nor does the ego represent the whole of one's psychic life or internal world. It is in this essay that Freud develops the concept of the ideal-ego, or infantile omnipotent narcissism, and the ego ideal, the precursor to the super ego and the identification with one's parents and internalization of their morals or values in an attempt to recover narcissistic perfection. This is to say that in "On Narcissism," what is at stake is not just the exploration of a particular neurosis, but an understanding of how the psyche forms as a collection of identifications and interrelated parts. The narcissist is arrested in his longing for the time when his self was undifferentiated from the world, where there was no distinction between inner life and the external world. The topographic problem of

narcissism is that the ego, the psychic agency charged with reducing tension, has a tendency to spread itself over everything, to pretend that it is the metonymy for the psyche itself. The challenge of object relations therefore becomes recognizing otherness, or what D.W. Winnicott will call the "not-me." Adam Phillips accounts for the subject's resistance towards otherness as the ego's wish "to be personable, and to make everything personal. Where id was there ego shall be means whatever is strange about myself I must make familiar, recognition must replace bewilderment."[305] Because the narcissist is overwhelmed by the ego and does not regard his psyche as a collection of identifications and internalizations, he rejects external objects that present a challenge to his ego with their difference. Difference must be assimilated by the ego, which strives to neutralize all stimuli, and so narcissism creates a false unity of the ego with the neutralized external world.

"Difference" does not hold up well as a category, as it engulfs anything other than the self, the "not-me." The external world, the world of objects, is the domain of difference, and for the narcissist this world is unlivable unless the ego can be taken as the only object. Part of the problem with a lay diagnosis of Rilke as a narcissist is that the poet was nothing if not interested in objects. As we have seen in the Narcissus poems, he is also preoccupied with the self, but a self that is estranged, emaciated, unlovable and unlivable. He is equally troubled by his own subjecthood as he is by the objects he encounters, and questions whether such encounters are ever possible, or if they are mere projections. In Rilke's work, narcissism does not breed confidence or arrogance. Even if narcissism over-invests in the ego, it still entails an impoverishment of the external

[305] Leo Bersani and Adam Philips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 99.

world, and consequently the internal world—Narcissus wastes away. And in the end, Rilke felt he was wasting away from self-enthrallment. He staved off starvation with a series of princesses and patronesses, but he suffered his entire adult life from this problem of subjects and objects, exactly the sort of problem psychoanalysis deals in. Although he was interested in Freud's work, he shrank from being analyzed himself. He considered undergoing analysis during the extreme mental distress of beginning his Elegies in 1912. Feeling himself to be "rein körperlich recht unerträglich," he lamented that he was becoming used to the bad habits that earlier he could wave away like "schlechte Luft," but that now threatened to "einschließen [ihn] wie Wände" (250-1). From the outset, the task of psychoanalysis was to treat hardening, harmful habits and unbearable bodies by bringing repressed thoughts into the fresh air of conversation. But for Rilke, the process would cure him at the expense of his creative faculties. "Etwas wie eine desinfizierte Seele kommt dabei heraus," he wrote to Andreas-Salomé, "ein Unding, ein Lebendiges, roth korrigiert, wie die Seite in einem Schulheft" (250). Analysis, he was convinced, would cross out his errors and scrub his soul clean of everything that made him a poet. Even Andreas-Salomé was moved to agree—she sent him a telegram urging him not to undergo analysis at the risk of driving out his angels with his demons. While localizing one's creativity in madness is hardly unique (indeed, it is this sort of attitude that lends to the lay diagnosis of narcissism), it is singular of Rilke to believe that analysis would leave him an "Unding," an un-thing. What seems at risk for him is the construction of a clear, explanatory narrative that would tie up his loose ends and clean up his psyche messiness, his mind like a rough draft that needed correcting. This would leave him, ideally, as a well-integrated, self-possessed subject—and what is a subject if

not an un-thing, that which is not an object? But if, as Phillips remarks, "the ego's project is plausibility – satisfying coherent accounts of the subject's wants and moves," then it becomes the analyst's task to destabilize such an intelligible narrative.[306] The ego is an agency of the psyche and if it serves as a metonymy for the psyche, rigid psychic and behavioral patterns are more likely to emerge, exactly the sort of bad habits that Rilke felt enclosed him like walls. The point is not to argue that if he had taken up analysis and gone "into himself," he would have been rid of woe. Instead, we must take his concern about becoming an "Unding" seriously.

Having finished the *New Poems*, Rilke knew that a thing cannot be easily gripped, in part because things do not exist independently of each other. The psyche, too, is a collection, a storehouse of impressions (or "word-hoard," as it is kenned in *Beowulf*). If mental illness can be read as a more heightened awareness of the disconnection of the parts of the psyche, Rilke's problem was hardening of this disconnect. Narcissism, as we have discussed, was an affliction that left him unable to recognize otherness outside himself because he was so enthralled to the otherness inside himself, the ego that both keeps the subject from being self-same and strives for coherence. His fear was not that analysis would better integrate his psyche, but that it would further enclose him in a psychic reality dominated by the ego. This would make him an "Unding," a subject surrounded by objects that he could pick up and put down without curiosity. To that end, he wrote his *New Poems,* a collection of over a hundred and fifty things of all kinds, and as I will discuss, was no less bewildered at the end of it.

The Interpreted World

[306] Bersani and Phillips, 92.

A few things first about Rilke's so called thing-poems. Rilke himself neither called his poems "Dinggedichte," nor did he come up with the term. He simply considered them part of his *New Poems*, his attempt to write "not feelings, but things [he] had felt."[307] While the poems are indicative of a modern break from Romantic attention to "Gefuhl" or otherwise subjective experience, he does not write the things themselves or otherwise call for "direct treatment of the thing," à la his fellow modernist Ezra Pound. Calling attention to the "things he had felt" alienates these feelings so that while they may be part of his experience, they do not belong to him. Rilke's things have an air of self-sufficiency even as they exist in an overflowing collection. There are two editions of *New Poems*, one published in 1907 and a second, *New Poems: The Other Part*, published in 1908; together, they comprise one hundred and eighty eight poems. As William Waters outlines, the *New Poems* are "prepared experiences of kinetic motion…, a process undergone in time…, and founded on a network of manifold interconnections."[308] The things depicted in each poem are not static objects, and their being is expressed as they move and change. The poems themselves are often described as objects. Formally, they exhibit a complex syntactical structure that suggests a highly crafted, well-wrought design in every line. And perhaps most importantly, each thing exists in connection with and often in comparison to other things, suggesting that even if the things have no need of those who write poems about them or those who gaze upon them, they are never alone. The panther may pace in his cage, but joining him in the menagerie of the *Jardin des Plantes* are flamingos, parrots, carrousel horses and perhaps stray dogs and black cats.

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[307] Rilke, *New Poems,* 169.
[308] William Waters, "The *New Poems*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 60.

His things are often animals, often objects, plants, women, men, or captured experiences—anything that is not the subject, although his things occasionally speak in the first person, as a persona. The thing, in short, is the not-self. His animal-things are some of the most compelling of the *New Poems*, perhaps because he had a presentment of what he would declare in the first Elegy: "die findigen Tiere merken es schon, / daß wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind / in der gedeuteten Welt" ["already the knowing animals are aware / that we are not really at home in / our interpreted world."][309] The *New Poems* are written from the "gedeuteten Welt," which is an interpreted world, a signifying world, but also a foreboding world. Considering Aristotle's view that what separates the human from other creatures is its natural inclination for mimesis, what the sly animals already know is that the poet's interest in depicting or representing them only removes the poet further from them.

"Die Gazelle" reflects how the similarity we find with other creatures only makes human experience all the more other, where comparison ensures difference more than sameness:

> Die Gazelle
> (Gazelle Dorcas)
>
> Verzauberte: wie kann der Einklang zweier
> erwählter Worte je den Reim erreichen,
> der in dir kommt und geht, wie auf ein Zeichen.
> Aus deiner Stirne steigen Laub und Leier,
>
> und alles Deine geht schon im Vergleich
> durch Liebeslieder, deren Worte, weich
> wie Rosenblätter, dem, der nicht mehr liest,
> sich auf die Augen legen, die er schließt:

[309] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Die Erste Elegie" in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1989), 150.

um dich zu sehen: hingetragen, als
ware mit Sprüngen jeder Lauf geladen
und schösse nur nicht ab, so lang der Hals

das Haupt ins Horchen halt: wie wenn beim Baden
im Wald die Badende sich unterbricht:
den Waldsee im gewendeten Gesicht.[310]

Without reading the title, it would be a challenge to ascertain what this poem describes. Other than the quickness of the creature, none of its given attributes suggest that the poem is about a gazelle. This poem is exemplary of Rilke's tendency against mimetic depiction of things as static objects or *nature morte* in favor of a more experiential description of a moment in time. He does not, in a manner of speaking, nail down the gazelle. In our interpreted world, we do not enjoy unmediated experience, and so the poem of the gazelle barely approaches the creature. Indeed, the poem's subtitle, "Gazella Dorcas," refers to the scientific name for a species of gazelle. Naming implies a kind of ownership specific to *homo sapiens*, but after the title, the poem does not aim to capture any sense of gazelle-ness other than the one mediated by the imagination. The subtitle, nevertheless, is oddly taxonomic, as though the reader is going through the zoo and the poet is the tour guide, explaining zoological intricacies not through scientific language (genus, phylum, natural habitat, etc.), but through a lyrical language of *homo poeticus*. Rather than focusing on the movements of the gazelle enclosed in space and time, as in "The Panther," the poem moves through stages of comparisons of the lyricized, imagined gazelle. In fact, the poem opens with an apostrophe to a magical creature – "Verzauberte" – that the speaker, who cannot help but to poeticize, strains to evoke. The two chosen words that fall short of incantation may be that manmade distinction,

[310] Rilke, 64.

"Gazella Dorcas," that does not reach the rhyme of the gazelle's movements, described as the harmony of its coming and going. Rhyme is a figurative term that marks the correspondence in sound between two or more words, and so it requires some poetic license to be applied to physical motion. "How can my words reach your rhyme," asks the speaker, knowing that it is a hypothetical yet still yearning question, for even the very words he uses to describe the gazelle come from the lexicon of poetry. The rhyme undulates "wie auf ein Zeichen," but what it signifies or points to is deferred throughout the poem. It is fitting that nothing rhymes with "gazelle," for in the poem it enjoys a singular being. It can be compared to other things, but nothing is its equivalent.

"The Gazelle" does not have an organizing conceit, and at no point does Rilke settle on a depiction of it. Instead, the poet's image of the gazelle leaps from one comparison to the next. There are four "wie's" in the poem, and five colons, each designating a comparison. The opening call, "Verzauberte," invites the gazelle to mind, but the first stanza works to prevent it from fully realizing itself. The colon after "Verzauberte" sets the invocation apart from what follows, a rhetorical address that questions the possibility of bringing the enchanted creature into the poem. The second stanza begins with the assertion that "alles Deine geht schon im Vergleich," to underline the point.[311] Everything that is proper to the gazelle is inaccessible in the poem, and so the poet is left to describe the experience of imagining a gazelle, an experience that seems to be inescapably literary. And indeed, this poem is highly literary, as the poet's fictive discourse shies from natural speech with his apostrophes and amorous similes. The speaker makes no real attempt to summon a real gazelle, as the apostrophe "Verzauberte"

[311] "Schön / und lieblich is est zu vergleichen," writes Hölderlin.

implies a form of enchantment that exists only in the imagination. Note that what the gazelle is compared *to* is not explicit. The gazelle is not *like* a love song, but some elegant essence of the gazelle moves through love songs, whose words are *like* rose petals, which, metaphorically, gently land on the closed eyes of someone no longer reading. The second stanza uses metaphor, simile, and metaphor again to bring the imagined gazelle, the lyricized gazelle, literally into the literary. With his eyes closed, the reader turns from the representation on the page to the representation in his mind. The moment is set off by two colons to both mark the transition to and to separate off the vision of the gazelle. But even this imagined gazelle is not described straightforwardly, but in the conditional: "als / wäre mit Sprüngen jeder Lauf geladen / und schösse nur nicht ab, so lang der Hals // das Haupt ins Horchen halt." Though it seems that the gazelle has finally arrived, limbs taught and ready to jump off the page, it is still only *as if* the gazelle were there. The actual gazelle, in fact, does not appear in the poem.

In the last stanza, there are two final colons and a final simile, comparing the hypothetical creature to a bathing woman who freezes when a sudden sound interrupts her solitude. It is a pretty image to be left with: a nude bather, in the forest, in the moonlight perhaps, as the reflection of the lake suggests. And yet, this simile differs from the romantic comparisons of the second stanza as it intimates a violence done to the represented figure, the violence of capturing someone or something unawares. There is a subtle turn towards the aggressive in the *volta*. Although Rilke grants the hunted animal the ability to shoot, or at least hold its fire ("schösse nur nicht ab"), its head "ins Horchen hält," implying a sense of obedience. The bathing woman, too, is held "ins Horchen" by whatever it is that disturbs her, or to keep closer to the German, breaks in on her ("sich

unterbricht"). For both the gazelle and the bather, the poem does not make clear what intrudes on their privacy, unless it is the poem itself, or the speaker invoking them. In the second half of the poem, the literariness of the poem falls away – the apostrophe, the elaborate conceit, the mentions of rhyme, words, and lyre – leaving the speaker alone with the imagined creature, who becomes motionless as soon as the speaker's attention is fixed upon it. Or *her*, as "die Gazelle" is feminine, setting the speaker up for one final simile. The gazelle is compared to a bathing woman because they are both presented as content in their own solitude, but made vulnerable by the poet's evocation. With one final colon, the poem proposes its final image: "den Waldsee im gewendeten Gesicht." Significantly, the bather does not see her own face in the lake, but the reader sees the reflection of the water on her face, turned suddenly towards whoever is looking at her. While the bather may see herself, the speaker does not see through her eyes or take on her persona, and can only describe the reflection on her face. That the pond could, impossibly, reflect onto the woman's face implies the impossibility of arriving at a depiction of it that could do it justice. Even if the more overly poetic conventions have been dispensed with, the poem cannot resist one final trope, or turn, of the woman's "gewendeten Gesicht." The poem portrays the limits of representation, even of such delicious creatures as the elegant gazelle or bathing female. Even the repetitive language (Baden/Badende; Wald/Waldsee) suggests an exhaustion of creativity. Considering the sonnet convention to propose a problem or question for the poem to work out, one argument could be that the poem asks how to ethically evoke the exotic, in its etymological sense of coming from outside. As we have seen in the Narcissus poems, the

speaker/poet knows he is limited to the exteriors and pulls back when he approaches the inside.

In an inversion of the Narcissus myth, the woman is absorbed in her bathing, but the force of the image is not what she sees, but how her surroundings reflect onto her. Her face (or rather, an impersonal face, "im gewendeten Gesicht") absorbs the lake's reflection, which in turn reflects the poet's own narcissism rather than the woman's. For rather than showing what the woman sees, the poet focuses on his own carefully constructed conceit, marked by one final colon. Part of the project of the *New Poems* is to determine whether the narcissistic subject position of the poet can ever have an encounter with the object that is not a projection. Wrested from her literal self-absorption in the water (while she was doing her thing, we might say) when the poet interrupts her, we do reach her in her otherness, and so we see the ripples of her previously absorbed attention in her face. In rendering the solitary woman an object of the poet's perception, she recoils on herself. The narcissistic poet figure here realizes that in trying to represent the gazelle, or even gazelle-as-woman, he only interjects himself and sees himself (or his own creation, the lake) in everything. Here Rilke plays not only with the myth of Narcissus, but also of Orpheus, for the woman is lost the moment the poet turns towards her. Only here, it is the woman's face that turns, and nothing of her is to be found there. One more mythic intertext can be added to the list: Actaeon and Artemis. Actaeon spies the virginal Artemis while bathing, and to avenge herself, she turns the hunter into a stag who is subsequently torn apart by his own hunting dogs. We see Artemis in the quick-turned face of "die Badende," and though the explicitly female gazelle shadows the stag, in Rilke's rendition, the act of representation transforms one's secret form into a legible

form. The violence in the poem is to be found in the male hunter's gaze upon the gazelle (if only the pun worked in German) rather than with the dogs. The animals, after all, serve through Rilke's poetry to show the limits of our ability to capture them through literary representation. Artemis is Apollo's twin sister, moreover.

By apostrophizing the gazelle as "Verzauberte," Rilke conjures an enchanted creature that takes many forms and exists strictly in an elevated, literary plane—"im Vergleich."[312] The similes are peculiar in this poem, for a simile usually holds two things in comparison. Rilke's similes, however, protect the difference of the gazelle from the literary treatment of the magical creature, even within the space of a poem. Compare this treatment of the *gazella dorcas* to the suffering creature in the poem that precedes it:

> Der Panther
> Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris
>
> Sein Blick is vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
> so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr halt.
> Ihn ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
> und hinter tausend Stäbe keine Welt.
>
> Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
> der sich him allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
> ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
> in der betaubt ein großer Wille steht.
>
> Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
> sich lautlos auf—. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
> geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille—
> und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.[313]

The poem opens and closes with "sein," operating respectively as a possessive pronoun and a verb. The only use of the possessive pronoun in the poem is "Sein Blick,"

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[312] Rilke likely chose the gazelle as his enchanted creature for its long literary history, from the "Song of Solomon" to Thomas Moore's "Lalla Roohkh," let alone the Arabic tradition of the *ghazal*, or love poem in which the gazelle reminds the poet of his beloved.
[313] Rilke, 62.

indicating that the only thing that belongs to the panther is his gaze, and that the limit of his vision is the limit of his being in the world. His gaze has grown tired, so that it no longer holds anything in sight, or even holds at all. On occasion his eyes receive an image that courses through his limbs and, in the heart, ceases to be. Rilke stays close to the panther's endless pacing and to his dull gaze at proliferating bars, but the detached voice that narrates the panther's strides does not see the image that enters him, and does not speculate on what it might be. As with the bathing woman, what holds her vision is beyond the ken of the poet. But unlike the bather and the gazelle, the panther exists in a specific place (the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes) and has a represented existence as well as a lived one.[314] That is, the panther may look back at the poet. Curiously, the image that meets the panther is not one that the panther perceives. "Dann geht ein Bild hinein"—the image is both passive and somehow aggressive as it penetrates and passes through the panther's body. If what ails the narcissist is that "there is no place / that does not see [him]," then what Rilke focuses on in these poems is the blind spot of perception where he cannot see what he looks like when he is being looked at. Again, the narcissistic poet-figure of the *New Poems* has gone to far into himself [hinein gehen] to see himself from without.

The Foreign Familiar

The "newness" of these *New Poems* lies in the shift of attention from the lyric speaker to the thing described, but one must note how Rilke still hesitates to speak for the thing itself. In the interpreted world, the encounter with the thing is always an uncanny

[314] The turn of the animal's face towards the poet who would represent him or her also appears in "The Unicorn" and "Black Cat."

one, for it comes forth with strangeness. To render it more familiar by putting the encounter into language only maintains its strangeness, for something always eludes the description. Rilke always preserves the otherness of the thing. He gets close to it, but not so close that we know it inside and out, not so close that we become inseparable with it. If anything, Rilke stresses that the thing has an existence away from our imagination that cannot be represented. The things depicted in *Neue Gedichte* are not always discrete things. While most of the poems are written either as direct addresses to or personifications of people, mythic figures, animals, or inanimate objects, these poems, as I have shown, eventually reveal that the "subject" of the address or personification is not so much the thing described as the poet or speaker's attempt to describe it. A few of the poems are more ambiguous and depict undefined moments or fleeting encounters or otherwise take on less defined objects. The poem "Fremde Familie," for instance, is not "about" a family who comes from another country:

> So wie der Staub, der irgendwie beginnt
> und nirgends ist, zu unerklärtem Zwecke
> an einem leeren Morgen in der Ecke
> in die man sieht, ganz rasch zu Grau gerinnt,
>
> so bildeten sie sich, wer weiß aus was,
> im letzen Augenblick vor deinen Schritten
> und waren etwas Ungewisses mitten
> im nassen Niederschlag der Gasse, das
>
> nach dir verlangte. Oder nicht nach dir.
> Denn eine Stimme, wie vom vorigen Jahr,
> sang dich zwar an und blieb doch ein Geweine;
> und eine Hand, die wie geliehen war,
> kam zwar hervor und nahm doch nicht die deine.
> Wer kommt denn noch? Wen meinen diese vier?[315]

[315] Rilke, 216.

Rilke may have heard the word "familier" in the Latinate "Familie," lending the title the paradoxical implication of "foreign familiar." In French, as well as in English, to say that someone has a familiar air or looks familiar is to say that someone seems recognizable although they are not recognized. In other words, one would not likely greet a family member by remarking on how familiar he or she looks. Familiarity then maintains a vague strangeness – an uncanniness – in its connotation, and as the poem shows, moments that should feel like close encounters can slip into unfamiliar territory.

The poem is explicitly vague in its content. The subject of the poem is something plural, "sie," a group or a family of some kind, but at every turn the speaker emphasizes that "sie" take shape "wer weiß aus was," were "etwas Ungewisses," and are even compared to dust, "der irgendwie beginnt / und nirgends ist, zu unerklärtem Zwecke / an einem leeren Morgen." Like man, this strange family is created from dust, but a dust that clots into a form, as if something so dry could curdle. The poem gropes for a description and falls not only short, but also past. As in so many of the *New Poems*, the speaker here is a detached presence that offers a glimpse of an experience other to himself and to the reader, but in this poem above all others, the speaker's feeling of approaching foreignness or misrecognition is the subject of the poem. This family "bildeten…sich," suggesting that they were not the creations of the speaker/poet figure. Furthermore, the final stanza rejects the role of the speaker all together by proposing that this foreignness that longed for the speaker, that sang to him and reached for him, was perhaps destined for someone or something else. This is an extremely unusual moment in Rilke's poetry, which so often speaks directly to a "you" that encompasses us all, "Archaic Torso of Apollo" being emblematic of these moments. As I have argued, part of the popular appeal for Rilke's

work is that the voice of the speaker in each poem, from nowhere and belonging to no one, undeniably hails *us*. In "Fremde Familie," the speaker appears to be the "you" who is addressed throughout the poem, a "you" with which the speaker might address himself in his own thoughts. As "Archaic Torso of Apollo" may be read as a disembodied command that has power because it resonates with our interior thought process, "Fremde Familie" follows a similar logic where the speaker addresses himself in the second person to underscore his own self-alienation. And yet, "Fremde Familie" is somehow both an anti-Rilkean poem, for that which hails us is that which rejects us, and the exemplar of a Rilke poem, for the aim of the message is to estrange whomever it reaches.

While the speaker's final questions – "Wer kommt denn noch? Wen meinen diese vier?" – are rhetorical and unanswerable, they take on a certain significance in light of the poems that precede and follow "Fremde Familie": "Irre im Garten," "Die Irren," "Die Bettler," "Leichen-Wäsche," "Eine von den Alten," "Der Blinde," and "Eine Welke." In each poem, the speaker traces the limit of experience he can imagine – madness, death, poverty, blindness, the decrepitude of the elderly male, the nonbeing of the elderly female – and moves on to the next. This series of poems marks a darker turn in the *New Poems*, and gives weight to the subtitle of the collection, *The Other Part*. Even the poems that introduce this line of unsettling figures, "Adam" and "Eva," suggest an entry into a world of obscurity and danger. Here, we see Rilke's debt to Baudelaire, although his speaker-flâneur encounters the dregs of society with decidedly less irony. As in Baudelaire's work, the encounter with the wholly other is fleeting and self-estranging, but in Rilke's poems the moment is mournfully meditative rather than shocking. Rilke's interest in the boundary between himself and the external world

accounts for the difference, for the Baudelairean poet, as Bersani has argued, is porous. If in his *New Poems* Rilke explores the possibility of finding an object that is not a projection of himself, but rather something outside himself than he can encounter, a poem such as "Fremde Familie" illustrates what kind of a conclusion he reached. In over a hundred poems, the object appears either partly obscured, or as an uncanny meeting of unfamiliarity in a familiar place, or it is missed all together. For Rilke, it is impossible to enter into object relations that are not narcissistic in nature, and even the poet – *especially* the poet – is hemmed in by this narcissism. The narcissism Rilke deals with in his work is one of weakness, for to be a narcissistic subject in a world full of objects is to suffer from the inversion of omniscience—"For there is no place / that does not see you." And as the double negative suggests, there is nothing redemptive to be found in this gaze. In the end, "Archaic Torso of Apollo" is a lament more than a call to action, a melancholic meditation on a lost artwork that turns into being all about "you." The poet-narcissist shines the light of his projection onto the object he tries to represent, and the object, passively refusing the attention, casts the obscurity of its shadow back onto the poet.