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Letter from the Editors

It is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Welcome to the second issue of *Exegesis*! In line with this issue’s ‘Testimonies and Confessions’ theme, we feel we have our own contribution to make: the testimony of *Exegesis*. *Exegesis* was born eighteen months ago when a group of Royal Holloway’s English PhD candidates decided to establish a postgraduate e-journal. The team endeavoured to put together an open access, peer-reviewed journal consisting of critical and creative submissions as well as reviews of recent publications, conferences, and public events. Of course, we have experienced quite a few changes during the past year and a half and there have been many challenges along the way. We went from a completely diplomatic, free-floating team to one more structured, with volunteers having roles clearly delineated to them; we participated in conferences and seminars hosted by Royal Holloway; and, most importantly, we won nearly £1,000 in funding from the Student-Led Initiatives Programme of Royal Holloway. With that funding, we have been able to redesign our website, run two seminars, and provide two writing awards worth £100 each.

The recipients of these awards are Simon Cooper from Newcastle University for his essay ‘More Than A Metaphor: Fictive Privilege in *Trocchi’s Young Adam*’ and Katy Giebenhain from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg for her creative piece entitled *Still Quiet*. Both authors exemplify the theme of ‘Testimonies and Confessions’ whilst demonstrating a calibre of writing we believe represents *Exegesis*. Congratulations to them both!

The submissions in this issue are united by their sensitivity to the existential, political and ethical complexity of the confessional experience. We begin with Simon Cooper’s discussion paradoxical subjectivism in *Young Adam*, which performs a confession in reverse, followed by five other essays: Katherine Bank’s “‘Musicke doth witnesse call’: Representation and Truth in the English Madrigal’ deals with truth and subjectivity in this musical form; subjective truth and testimony are also the subject of ‘The Deformed Face of Truth in Erasmus, Montaigne, and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*’ by Sam Hall, through the use of the Silenus head; the next essay, ‘The Poetics of Double-talk: John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* as Cold War Testimonials’, brings us into the twentieth century, with Adam Beardsworth considering how *Dream Songs* responds to Cold War anxiety about confessions and their truth; Sarah Foust Vinson’s essay, ‘Testimony for Survival: Story and Memory in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*’, deals with the reconstruction of truth from memory and issues of storytelling as testimony; and finally ‘The Convergence of Memories: Photo-textual Testimony and the Restoration of Witnessing in W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*’ by Angeliki Tseti discusses multiple voices and their effect on witness and truth for the reader. All six essays respond to issues surrounding testimony and confession, from a wide variety of sources, and make for interesting reading both individually and as a collection.

The creative selection is opened by our prize winner, Katy Giebenhain, with her poem ‘Still Quiet’. This is followed by Christos Callow Jr’s series of letters, ‘Black List Magazine’, and the section continues by alternating between poems and prose pieces: Robert Selby’s ‘Acting’ and ‘Outside Elizabeth Greenwood’s’ and Natalie Woodward’s ‘Unspeakable’ are printed alongside Shane Strachan’s ‘Clype’ and Susan Gray’s ‘Mobius Strips’.


We hope that you enjoy this issue’s offerings.

Kelly Centrelli and Charlotte Keys
Editors-in-Chief

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More Than a Metaphor: Fictive Privilege in Trocchi’s *Young Adam*

Simon Cooper

*Winner of the 2013 Exegesis Critical Writing prize*

Towards the close of Alexander Trocchi’s 1954 novel *Young Adam*, narrator Joe Taylor finds himself drawn towards the Glasgow courtroom where a local man stands trial for the murder of Cathie Dimly, a young woman whose dead body Joe himself helped drag from the River Clyde. A university drop-out and aspiring writer, Joe has instigated a self-destructive affair with Ella, his employer and owner of the barge he spends much of his time on, floating between Glasgow and Edinburgh as a (very) casual labourer. The self-inflicted complication of the affair, Joe’s intimate, first-person narrative has made clear, is inextricably bound up with the discovery of the body and is on some level a disavowal of a deeper and more dangerous involvement: not only was Joe Cathie’s former boyfriend, he was also with her on the night she fell into the river. Tormented by his complicity in what he therefore knows to be the capital trial of an innocent man, Joe haunts the court district. Images of his dead lover co-mingle with what he already knows about legal procedure, and lead him, in a state of some desperation, to imagine a courtroom ritual performed in the nude. Here would be the answer to Joe’s predicament, the judge having lost all authority, ‘the naked truth […] more than a metaphor’. What I hope to show here is how *Young Adam* is itself written to the same template. More than a metaphorical representation of subjective alienation, Trocchi’s narrative pares away at the inessential in literary production, honing a kind of fictive privilege, a critical space where definitions of what counts as normative, either in literature or in life, are for a moment suspended.

During the early 1950s, as co-editor of the Paris-based journal *Merlin*, Trocchi was responsible for publishing work by Samuel Beckett, Robert Creeley, and Pablo Neruda, amongst others. But he was less successful in finding a publisher for his own work-in-progress *Young Adam*. In the erotic novels he wrote instead for Maurice Girodias’s Olympia Press, the sceptical sensibility of late modernism is realigned towards the brokering of a risky immediacy, an illicit connection both promised and withheld, as reader and text collude in self-incrimination. We are tantalised by the sharing of intimate revelations, the breaking of social taboos; but at the same time the works draw attention to the necessarily fictitious basis of that relationship. The narrator of *Helen and Desire* (1953), published under the pseudonym Frances Lengel, is driven to recording erotic experience so as, she claims, to ‘break through the shameful shell of civilised expression’.

Likewise, *Sappho of Lesbos* (1960) is presented by its ‘editor’ as an autobiography of the historical Sappho, a translation from a recently uncovered medieval Latin manuscript of albeit ‘doubtful authenticity’. That Trocchi goes to such lengths to provide a kind of fictional alibi for the existence of his texts suggests his investment, despite the obviously commercial motivation of the work, in establishing the grounds of writing. Because both Helen and Sappho are writers, the narrative frames which insist on the authenticity of the testimony they encompass do so only with the tacit acknowledgment of their artifice.

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1 Alexander Trocchi, *Young Adam* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999), p. 132. Further references are included in the text as *Adam*.
3 Trocchi, *Helen and Desire*, p. 16.
In these mildly grubby books, the confessional mode is engaged not to imply truth but rather complicity. *Young Adam*, too, was first published by Olympia under the pseudonym Frances Lengel, with pornographic content added (and later removed for what Trocchi described as his ‘definitive’ edition). Again, considerable attention is devoted to the grounds of writing, a reflexive concern with the conditions of possibility of narrative, figured here as clues to an unsolved murder. The novel begins with what amounts to a confession in reverse, and, moreover, in a double sense. Like Helen, Joe Taylor (not his ‘real’ surname, we learn) posits himself as a dynamic, fluid subjectivity. He begins his narrative with a disavowal of stable identity and the assertion instead of a ‘break in continuity […] between acts I committed yesterday and my present consciousness of them’ (*Adam*, p. 1). The blame for this sense of dislocation is laid firmly, and, it evolves, completely disingenuously, at language’s door: ‘There is no contradiction in things,’ Joe muses, ‘only in the words we invent to refer to things. It is the word ‘I’ which is arbitrary and which contains within it its own inadequacy and its own contradiction’ (*Adam*, p. 2). Thus if what follows is to be a form of confession (which it is), then it is made in the spirit of a somewhat elliptical stance toward personal responsibility. This conviction of the necessarily narrative constitution of the self leads to a paradox; any articulation of this fluidity risks its negation. Caught in the act of narrative, as it were, Joe is fixed as a literary protagonist.  

With the stakes set as high as this, the commitment of words to paper becomes the writing of a kind of death sentence, a denial of future possibility. This sense of complicity with finitude is woven throughout the first part of Joe’s narrative, but in the novel there is a more urgent meaning to Joe’s disavowal of the word ‘I’. That it should be Joe who discovers Cathie’s body by chance the morning after he witnesses her drowning is, as he later notes, ‘an improbable event’ (*Adam*, p. 74), the full significance of which he attempts to hide. Only halfway through the novel does Joe disclose the events of that evening, underwritten by the get-out clauses of accident and contingency. A chance meeting with Cathie leads to a night-time tryst by the river, an argument, a vague struggle and the virtually naked woman’s plunge into the water. Convinced that any recourse to the authorities would be an act of self-incrimination, Joe resolves instead to destroy the evidence at the scene of what now becomes a crime. Thus at the centre of a novel which begins with what seems a bold proclamation of existential freedom, is an attempt at total control: ‘The main thing was not to commit myself to any unanalysed act however slight it might seem and to destroy scientifically the absurd complex in which I had become involved’ (*Adam*, p. 80). Joe’s meditations on the permeability of the subject are a pose, an affectation adopted to mask his and therefore Trocchi’s guilt by association in what we begin to suspect as at one and the same time both the exploitation and concealment of sexual violence.

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5 Because Joe’s narrative begins with an attempt to deconstruct the concept of self, the novel opens itself to readings informed by some of the claims associated with poststructuralism, particularly, in this instance, Foucault’s notion of confession as a performative act in which the subject is constructed through discourse. The confession, in other words, is in reverse because it ends rather than begins in the ‘I’. From here it might be inferred that all identity, therefore, is a kind of fiction. Somewhat along these lines, Stewart Home, ‘Introduction’ to *Young Adam* (Oneworld, 2008), pp. 7-13, in his introduction to the Oneworld Classics edition of *Young Adam*, argues that Trocchi is strategically unconcerned with the representation of believable characters, or ‘geographical descriptions’ (p. 11). However, as Home notes, Joe is unreliable as a narrator, and so the difficulty is perhaps less that Joe is not intended to be a believable character but more that he is a character who is not always to be believed. To take the trait of his persistent evasiveness as evidence of Trocchi’s ‘proto-postmodernist approach’ (p. 13) seems to me to be jumping the gun. On the contrary, it is because Joe reveals himself through what he attempts to suppress and that as readers we invest in this process, that his confession is in reverse in a double sense. For Foucault on confession see *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), esp. pp. 57-65. For a reading of *Young Adam* that grounds the novel in geographical space see Gary A. Boyd, ‘Alexander Trocchi: Glasgow through the Eye of a Needle’, *Writing the Modern City: Literature, Architecture, Modernity*, ed. by Sarah Edwards and Jonathan Charley (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 146-163.

What to Joe savours of the appliance of science manifests itself as literary technique in Trocchi’s elaborate employment of figurative language. The narrator’s pseudo-scientific efforts to spirit away his part in Cathie’s death carry over a remainder in an artful overcompensation. By the end of the novel, Joe remarks on ‘how utterly dependent on things [he has] become, even if only to catalogue them’ (Adam, p. 135). The beginnings of this curatorial process occur with his description and itemisation of the dead woman in the water he somehow does not think of as a dead woman, but rather ‘like some beautiful white water-fungus, a strange shining thing come up from the depths’ (Adam, p. 2). Cathie’s body first appears to Joe ‘floating downstream […] like a tangle of weeds’; the flesh has ‘the ripeness and maturity of a large mushroom’; and the hair ‘had become a forest of antennae, caressing, feeding on the water, intricately’ (Adam, p. 2). When Joe takes hold of one of the ankles, the body turns in the water ‘like the fat underbelly of a large fish’ (Adam, p. 3). Such is the weight of significance afforded the body, indeed, that its immersion in water sends out waves of reverberations, echoes which begin to define movements and sensations which follow.

Joe’s narrative begins to form itself into the shape of what initially looks like an erotic confession. As Joe and Leslie, Ella’s husband, wait for the ambulance men to remove the body, Joe – who up until then has ‘always thought of her as Leslie’s wife’ (Adam, p. 5) – notices Ella hanging up washing. ‘I found myself looking at her in a new way’, he reflects, and this new way, paying attention to the contours of her body beneath her clothes, signals an erotic appreciation. Ella notices Joe ogling her, but her response remains – to Joe at least – unreadable. As stretcher bearers carry the body away, ‘[a] very naked white leg slip[s] from under the sheet and trail[s] along the ground like a parsnip’ (Adam, p. 7). Again, Joe is drawn to Ella, who seems at once horrified and fascinated by the sight. Once the body has been removed, the crew on the barge begin to speculate on the origins of the drama in which they now find themselves bit players. When Leslie comments on the absence of marks on Cathie’s body, Ella responds with a pointed remark about men being unable to keep their eyes off a woman’s body and Joe understands this comment to be directed at him. Thus just as Joe fixates on Ella’s body as a displacement from the guilt of his involvement with Cathie (both dead and alive – Joe has not been an attentive lover), Ella uses the latter’s dead body as an analogue for her own sense of violation.

For Joe, recalling the events of the morning, the moment when he had heard Ella laughing through the wooden partition that separates Leslie and her sleeping quarters from his own heralded ‘the beginning of it all’ (Adam, p. 9). Whatever ‘it all’ is, it is clear that there is considerable sexual tension in the cramped barge. As the day grinds on, with nothing to do but wait for a consignment of anthracite, Leslie begins to imagine the scene of the woman’s fall into the water, casting her as a prostitute, while Ella inscrutably peels potatoes. Both Leslie and Ella by now have their own imagined version of events, and Joe begins to piece together a story of his own for the benefit of the others. The closer it comes to the heart of the matter, of course, the further it departs from the facts. ‘[T]he irrelevant series of after-images of the morning’ (Adam, p. 12) are discarded in the search for some more cohesive means of binding understanding and untruth: ‘[i]t was strange, but Ella, on the contrary, was very close to it all, though she, strictly speaking, didn’t come until later, close enough so that I could not think of the corpse without thinking of her’ (Adam, p. 13). Reflection for Joe now takes on an explicitly imaginative dimension, as, conscious of the degree to which the fiction that is his ‘I’ feeds on both release and control, he visualises details of late night arguments between Leslie and Ella, confrontations he has only ever in actuality heard, concealed behind the wooden partition. Finally, Joe performs his own narrative – ‘a story about a bridge at night’ (Adam, p. 13) – which he relates to Leslie, as Ella drops significance-laden potatoes into a bucket.

7 In the pornographic version of the novel Trocchi submitted to Girodias, Joe recalls the day having begun not with laughter but with Ella ‘pleasuring herself while the drink-besotted Les snored beside her’ (A Life in Pieces, p. 85). Joe masturbates as he spies through a crack in the wall. Trocchi’s artistic compromise is therefore projected directly onto the testimony of his narrator who, in the recollection, reveals as false the statement, coming only a page or two earlier, that watching Ella hang out washing had afforded him his first glimpse of her as an eroticised body.
Joe's initial claim to infinite possibility, then, like his story about a bridge at night, is an act of bad faith, an evasion, and he is limited by a past that rises – as death – to meet him. If he is to end up constrained by the unfortunate materiality of things, what leads to this impending fixity is a process of objectification somehow inseparable from the act of narration itself. Joe's story becomes a meditation on the point at which objectivity, for the subject, begins, a point at which it is no longer phenomena per se that take priority but rather an expanding series of correspondences. The sense that Joe articulates of not being identical with himself begins to blur the distinction between confession – reversed or otherwise – and witnessing and so does not, as he initially suggests, imply the death of the subject but rather his disavowal of the actual physical death of the woman in the water.

What his senses reach out towards in his elaborate analogies is in actuality an immanent force, the pressure of a shared language. This force makes itself known through the impersonality of literary form, a material dimension to expression, objective because it exists independently of individual consciousness. Joe's apparent confusion as to what does or does not constitute 'the beginning of it all' becomes an insistent refrain, almost a catchphrase, marking the emergence of that sense of identity 'he' is in the process of resisting. There is a social dimension to all of this. Once Joe follows through the logic of his own compulsion and sleeps with Ella, he becomes defined by that relationship and with the growing normalisation of roles the first part of the novel ends.

In the first issue of Exegesis, Timo Uotinen posits the 'object' of criticism in a double sense: it is both the text under consideration and also the aim 'to achieve some kind of veracity'. Clearly, in confession veracity is a presupposition of the form, but the act is complicated by the fact that the object of the confession is in some senses also the subject: what mediates self to other? In order to avoid falling back on language alone as system – a situation analogous, as Uotinen points out, to 'a radically formalist [critical] method where there is nothing outside the text' – recourse can be made to the negative dialectics of Adorno, for whom subjectivity alone can do justice to objects. In his essay on lyric poetry, Adorno argues that criticism should look to the interpenetration of theme and form and to the objective existence of language as the mediator between the individual and the social. For Adorno lyric poetry, the most subjective of literary forms, achieves a kind of emancipatory force all the same because in plumbing the depths of introspection the subject in essence dissolves itself into language. The individual and the social at this point merge: '[t]he moment of self-forgetting in which the subject submerges in language is not a sacrifice of himself to Being […] but rather a moment of reconciliation'. This moment, it might be objected, is destined to remain only that: a temporary state. But the moment is also a momentum, and the temporary is a way through to temporality, the point at which the stasis of introspection opens out into history. When we read lyric poetry, in other words, we don't simply bury our heads in a book. Rather, the experience of the fleeting sets self-knowledge in motion, and, as Adorno points out, 'a thought once set into motion […] cannot be cut off'.

When, in the second part of Young Adam, the direction of confession takes a dramatic shift, it transpires that the supposedly free-floating Joe was all along hauling some weighty baggage. 'I killed Cathie', he claims. 'There's no point in denying it since no one would believe me' (Adam, p. 73). Once he opens up his own experience for examination he begins to recognise the immediacy of his determination, despite his professed existential idealism, by the social structure: in Uotinen's words, 'a coercive totality that Adorno calls the administered world'. What up to now has taken the form of a singular confession strains towards a kind of social critique, as Joe recalls the events of the night of Cathie's death. Shocked by Cathie's sudden disappearance, Joe lies by the river, and his own precarious situation takes a few moments to sink in: 'I felt very alone then, an alien, an exile, society already

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9 Uotinen, p. 35.
11 Adorno, p. 218.
12 Adorno, p. 213.
13 Uotinen, p. 35.
crystallizing against me, and only my own desperate word for what had happened’ (Adam, p. 78). As days turn into weeks he senses the relentless weight of a bureaucratic machine gearing up against him, generating the ‘convenient social fiction’ (Adam, p. 87) of his responsibility in events not of his own design, and in an effort to resist being constructed by the crime, he throws himself into life on the barge.

Joe wants to have his cake and eat it. If the situation he finds himself in is really the impersonal construction of the bureaucratic state, why does he feel the dilemma he faces in ethical terms? He makes an unlikely radical, struggling to disentangle himself from his culpability for the fate of the innocent man on trial in Glasgow, the ambivalently – and, as we shall see, suitably – named Goon. Joe’s musings on the permeability of the self in the early part of the novel are thrown into sharp relief by his disingenuous attempts to argue himself out of social responsibility later on. Goon, entirely unconvincingly it has to be said, is cast as an enemy of Joe’s insofar as he has a job, making him ‘a part, if an uncritical one, of the society which might condemn him in a sense in which I was not’ (Adam, p. 86). Joe too, of course, is still clinging on to a job, though not, like the plumber Goon, a trade, and so the university drop-out’s critique is levened by a dose of unseemly condescension. Joe is right to argue, nevertheless, that in effect he cannot establish Goon’s innocence without convicting himself. That there is a chance that he will not be believed if he comes forward leads Joe to the disavowal of self with which the novel began, a disavowal motivated entirely by self-interest, rather than phenomenology. Cathie’s body, he reflects, ‘came floating back to me like a little hunk of synthetic guilt’ (Adam, p. 89) on the day he began his affair with Ella. Sex and original sin are intertwined here, in what may be the sole point in the novel where the title seems to hold any resonance.

If the case against Joe falls along well-worn narrative lines, he takes this as a cue to seek anonymity along an alternative, though equally stereotypical trajectory. But the apparent ease with which he usurps Leslie’s position, and the sad predictability of his own moves, give him a sense of ‘vast gravitational forces which went beyond any ‘I’ I was conscious of, of a consciously woven matrix within which my own conscious decisions were mere threads’ (Adam, p. 90). A precarious sense of autonomy is therefore lived out, before two events become this new Joe’s unravelling. The first of these is the discovery of the affair by Leslie, whose total capitulation leaves Joe in the uncomfortable situation of having initiated a relationship – now rendered official as Leslie promptly leaves – of which he is already bored. Trapped on the barge, Joe now feels ‘robbed of [an] identity’ (Adam, p. 100) that from the outset of his narrative he has renounced. But the coeval existence of the affair along with the discovery of Cathie’s body leads to a moment of crisis as Joe feels the impulse, whilst making love with Ella, of confessing his fictive crime. He manages to restrain ‘himself’, conveniently enough, and the opportunity he is looking for to escape the relationship arrives when Ella’s brother-in-law is killed in an accident and her sister Gwendoline comes to stay on the barge. Whatever Gwendoline’s somewhat foggy motives are, that she soon sleeps with Joe one way or the other puts an end to his sojourn on the barge. As ‘the fantastic puppet-play’ (Adam, p. 120) of Goon’s trial draws near, the barge is moored where Cathie’s body was found and it becomes Joe’s turn to identify himself with the corpse: ‘I felt empty and very alone, as though in some anomalous way it was part of myself which had been labelled, boxed and interred’ (Adam, p. 121). Within days, Ella goes back to find Leslie, and Joe packs his possessions and leaves.

With this move Joe effectively acknowledges his own guilt, and so it is fitting that in the third part of the novel he finds himself drawn to the trial, finding lodging in an adjacent street to that once occupied by the hapless Goon, and unable to tear himself away from the spectacle of ‘lawyers and other functionaries committing legal murder’ (Adam, p. 131). Images of Cathie’s naked body fill Joe’s imagination, leading him – a little bizarrely – to the meditation on ‘the naked truth’ with which this essay began. The sentiment is amusing, but hardly radical critique. At this stage in the novel, however, I want to argue that Trocchi’s writing does achieve something more than analogy, with a further ‘confession’ made by Joe, one which does nothing to add to the dramatic momentum of the work, as readers have already been told more or less the whole truth, in an albeit fictive context. On the way
to the first day of the trial, Joe, feeling a new sense of confidence in ‘the necessity of his isolation’ (*Adam*, p. 132), observes passers-by through his own reflection in a street-car transformed into ‘an island of windows’. Almost as an afterthought he writes and posts a message addressed to the judge:

I HAVE NO INTENTION OF SURRENDERING TO YOU NOR OF PROVIDING YOU WITH FURTHER INFORMATION. IF YOU CONDEMN GOON YOU WILL CONDEMN A MAN WHO KNOWS NOTHING OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF CATHERINE DIMLY’S DEATH. I ALONE WAS WITH HER AT THE TIME SHE DIED. THE DROWNING WAS ACCIDENTAL. I CANNOT PROVE THIS WITHOUT IDENTIFYING MYSELF AND WERE I TO DO SO I SUSPECT I WOULD STEP STRAIGHT INTO HIS CONDEMNED BOOTS. I CAN’T TAKE THE RISK. BUT GOON IS INNOCENT. (*Adam*, pp. 133–4)

Commentators have emphasised Trocchi’s place in a distinctive lineage of literary confessions: Edwin Morgan notes Trocchi’s dialogue, throughout his career, with James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824); Greil Marcus highlights parallels with De Quincey. Young *Adam* began with what I have read as a confession in reverse, a refusal of the expectations of the genre. The intimate, revelatory tone of the narrative voice came barbed with the assertion that any attempt to impose an identity on it, to treat the fictional Joe as somehow a real person, would amount to a falsification. The protagonist, in this sense, stands outside himself, as witness to his own disavowal of agency. This strategic evasiveness is then redoubled through the implication of the reader in the construction of an alibi for Joe. If we suspect him of knowing more than he is letting on about Cathie’s plunge into the Clyde, we become in a real sense the willing victims of an elaborately executed deception. The insistent capitalisation of Joe’s note contains a warning.

We need to share Joe’s secret – that he was with Cathie on the night she died – before we read his confession of it, his commitment of testimony to paper, and because of this overlapping of Joe’s fictional experience with our own, real experience of reading the novel, Trocchi is able to reconcile three quite separate strands: literary, individual and social. To begin, as Joe does, with the proposition that identity is somehow an illusion, refracted through discourse, presents an immediate problem; if character is constructed in conformity to a set of readymade conceptual norms, then the conventions of realist fiction, in particular those of first person narrative, produce readings and readers dealing in a limited set of generalisations. To write against this formal problem becomes a real struggle – self-consciousness turns into a block. The writer can never let go, never allow the characters simply to be themselves, as this would risk lapsing back into default positions at best hackneyed and at worst perniciously ideological. Joe’s effort not to commit himself to ‘any unanalysed act’, I think, overlaps with the author’s. Thus the withheld promise of Trocchi’s commercially motivated, pornographic work, that illicit connection between a fictional narrator and a furtive readership here becomes an actuality. Literature, Helen’s ‘shameful shell of civilized expression’, is now itself experienced as taboo.

Joe’s witnessing is Trocchi’s confession: powerless to intervene in matters of life and death, writing is complicit in standing by at injustice, in confining critique to the armchair. But at the same time it cannot disavow its own anonymity, its refusal to be pinned down to a fixed, unequivocal meaning. Without this self-indulgence, this revelling in the unreal, literature is nothing; the truth of literature, indeed, is this evasiveness, a quality that can only make itself known in an abstract, negative sense.

The refusal to be named – the anonymous confession of anonymity – signals that the text cannot act, cannot be effective in the here and now, because were it to do so it would mean shedding its own immunity and therefore its

claim to truth. Fictive privilege, whether expressed in pseudonyms, metanarratives or the simple act of making something up, is this freedom of the subject. But this freedom is itself a fiction insofar as, like all privilege, it is far from universally realized. ‘[O]nly the fewest individuals, given the pressures of the necessities of life,’ writes Adorno, ‘are ever allowed to grasp the general truth or shape of things in self-immersion’. Those excluded from such privilege, the Goons, Cathies and Ellas of the world, perhaps, are ‘in the most literal sense […] reduced to objects, i.e., victims of the historical process’. If lyric poetry’s claim to truth is founded on anything more than self-indulgence, it must in some form bear witness to the pressure of this ‘collective substratum’. Whilst there is clearly an ethical dimension to this argument, the implications for aesthetic production are less to do with moral strictures than they are with art as social fact. Distortions of existing forms register this tension between the contingency of identity, the opening out of psychic space afforded a privileged minority, and the sensations of guilt, the experiences of angst or dread or plain self-disgust such experimentation could, even should, induce. Social antagonism, no matter how fuzzily acknowledged, becomes the motor of aesthetic innovation, of a modernism driven from below.

The distance travelled between the lyric and the erotic may seem to constitute something of a leap, yet both are essentially confessional forms, based on the making public of what usually takes place in private. In either case there is a materiality involved – an objectification, either of physical bodies or of literary forms. The narrative frames Trocchi employs in his erotic novels accentuate this materiality, presenting his works as diaries or lost manuscripts. But it is Cathie’s languidly resurfacing body and Joe’s plaintive note that constitute the ‘found objects’ that give substance to the paradoxical, twisting weaves of Young Adam’s narrative structure.

Although Trocchi excised most of the pornographic material from his ‘definitive’ version of the novel, an ambivalent layer of murk remains. One particularly depressing episode of sexual humiliation instigated by Joe against Cathie ends with her body coated in various household substances: custard, ink, ‘tomato ketchup, brown sauce, and a bottle of vanilla essence, blues, greens, yellows, and reds, all the colours of the rainbow’ (Adam, pp. 123-124). Situated towards the end of the novel, this incident is recalled as if, simultaneously kaleidoscopic and dismal, glimpsed through the oily surface of the river. As sensitive, privileged readers we may be put on the defensive here, and so to some degree we are invited to identify with the figure of Goon: literature refuses to shield us from the violence implicit in discourse. Yet the word ‘goon’, after all, signifies both victim and thug, and the fictional Goon is no innocent. An ex-lover of Cathie, a woman half his age, he is also a married man and a father of four. His crime, therefore, is one of infidelity. Likewise, though spared the guilt of participating willingly in the messy detail and moral compromise of the pornographic, as attentive readers of Young Adam we are placed in the dock all the same. If Trocchi’s kinky vision of courtroom drama succeeds in unsettling the authority of critical judgement and does indeed function as more than a metaphor, this is because it serves to face down the evasions and excuses of everyday life, moments when, as critics, we stop short, and allow the transformative potential of an albeit fictive privilege to congeal into a residue, sticky between the pages. Unless it is acted on, unless the witness of reading can blend back into confession, into raw self-examination, then that privilege is without value. Writing cannot intervene in matters of life and death on behalf of the individual; only individuals can.

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15 Adorno, p. 220.
16 Adorno, p. 220.
17 Adorno, p. 220.
‘Musick doth witnesse call’: Representation and Truth in the English Madrigal
Katherine Bank

This article will explore the role of the English madrigal as a means of expressing Truth in England around 1600, in the wake of new discovery and the first percolations of empiricism. It will consider the morphing contemporary conception of, and obsession with, truth and honesty in regards to travel writing, and how these changing ideas are reflected in the madrigal genre. With these shifting concepts of truth, the madrigal’s combination of text and harmony allowed music’s inherent subjectivity to invoke wonder and portray an evocative perception of reality. Music was an integral part of early modern natural philosophy; not only as a physical phenomenon to be observed, but also for the curious power it had over the ‘passions’—the bridge between emotion and action—that could move even the most rational of listeners. The madrigal, and its characteristic union of text and music, proves a fruitful source for interrogation of the emotional conception of Truth in early seventeenth-century England.

England around 1600 had a lot to be uncertain about—the discovery of the New World shook the authority of the Ancients and other established truths to their core. The ideological and philosophical ruptures created by the unearthing of this new landmass, combined with tides of theological insecurity generated in the wake of the Reformation, and uncertainty regarding the line of succession, left many people confused about which authorities to believe in. A people that was used to being spoon-fed truth through hierarchical structures such as feudalism, monarchy maintained by divine right, and Papal authorities, found itself in a position to question the old sources of truth and order, making room for new testimonies of ‘truth’ to gain status, eventually leading, as the story goes, to the Scientific Revolution. But the path towards empirical science as we know it now was certainly not a straightforward one. Though thought of as entirely separate disciplines today, poetry, music, and philosophy were firmly grafted in the roots of early modern science. As Stephen Greenblatt asserts, ‘great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture’,¹ and music perhaps uniquely so due to its notoriously abstract, highly subjective nature.²

Perhaps not coincidentally, ideas about the nature of music were also changing around 1600. Music was classified by contemporary scholars as a science and, as modern academics like Florence Cohen and Penelope Gouk have demonstrated, it played a vital role in the discourse of the Scientific Revolution. But by 1700, for reasons I cannot hope to cover adequately in this paper, the perception, categorization, and discourse of music’s nature had altered drastically.³ As many scholars have observed, up until the 1550s, most composed music was produced in a sacred context, a tradition that would be completely changed by 1700. Over the course of the seventeenth century, movement away from a Church-centered printed music culture led to expected social-musical changes, such as an increase in music literacy amongst educated classes. London, in particular, became the world leader in commercial music printing and as Gouk points out, ‘music itself became more visible, with compositions being embodied in texts as much as their aural performance’.⁴ This transition towards secular music as a textual, tangible object inevitably changed the way in which people interacted with the genre, as music became not only an aural

³ Changes in forms of patronage, printing, and the work of natural philosophers, to name a few reasons, all contributed to changing how music was made and thought about. Even advances in instrument technology vastly changed music making by 1700. Penelope Gouk, Music, Science, and Natural Magic in Seventeenth-Century England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 4, 9.
performance, but also a printed commodity. Additionally, contemporary debates about the nature of music and poetry were inextricably intertwined with discussions on nature, philosophy, and Truth. But before I can properly unwind this conflation of seemingly disparate subjects, I must first go into some detail about the idea of representation in madrigal texts.

The English madrigal is a genre largely known in the history of the western canon for its mythical, pastoral topics—dancing nymphs, kissing shepherds, and lamenting lovers—mainly figures in the domain of fantasy, though certainly not exclusively. This study focuses on the madrigal genre, as it was the most popular secular genre of its day, and proves an interesting starting point for a contemporary exploration of musical-rhetorical relationships. traditionally in madrigal compositions, a sense of realism was produced through the use of word painting, a compositional technique that represented and illustrated an underlying text. As the genre is mostly secular and intrinsically liked to its text, the madrigal allowed for more direct discussion of contemporary cultural phenomena. For the sake of interdisciplinary understanding, I intend to discuss music’s historicized station in this debate without the use of highly technical musical analysis. Though this approach may seem incomplete to some, I believe it will still prove informative for audiences both inside and outside musicology.

New World and Truth in Travel Writing

When faced with the unknown, many people turned to something familiar to find a tangible answer. For example, John Wilbye’s 1598 madrigal What needeth all this travail and turmoiling, laments, ‘What needeth all this travail and turmoiling, / Short’ning the life’s sweet pleasure / To seek far-fetched treasure / In those hot climates under Phoebus broiling?’ Anxiety about the New World is here expressed in the only way an Englishman around 1598 knew how, through the rhetoric of Old World mythology. This is not so different from the rhetorical techniques, usually metaphor and analogy, use by travel writers to close the experiential gap between traveller and reader at home.

When Marco Polo first beheld a rhinoceros in the late-thirteenth century, he lacked the relevant terminology to describe the animals to people back in Europe who had not seen one themselves. Naturally, he turned to analogy, the use familiar words to help describe the new, and likened the animal to buffalo, elephant, and boar, and called it a Unicorn. Of course, what we know a rhinoceros to look like now is not exactly the beautiful horse-like stallion with a goat’s beard, pearl-white mane, and a single spiraled-horn as depicted in Dominic Zampieri’s 1604 fresco Virgin and Unicorn. Exemplified in travel literature and maps from the period, knowing the world became the key to political supremacy. In turn, by the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, public interest in, and consumption of, travel writing from abroad flourished. Though London was not the cultural crossroad that Basel or Venice was, the foreign, at least in concept and object, was in vogue, and even those at home who never left the Island experienced excitement, interest, and anxieties about stories from faraway places. Consequently, a

5 Caveat: popular amongst a class of citizen that had access to published materials and musical interest/training.
6 For example, word painting might include descending, sad-sounding notes on the word ‘sighing’, notes going up on ‘ascending’ or ‘mountain’, or short, staccato notes on ‘laughing’, musically illustrating the textual underlay.
7 All madrigal texts may be found in the Fellowes Edition, and have been cross referenced with contemporary publications where possible. Edmund Horace Fellowes, English Madrigal Verse, 1588-1632 (The Clarendon press, 1920).
8 Phoebus is another name for Greek and Roman god Apollo. Also, note the similarity between ‘travail’ and ‘travel’.
9 Contemporaries were aware of the impact discovering ‘other’ has on one’s sense of identity and self. Michel de Montaigne discusses in his essay, ‘Des Cannibales’ (1580), the problem of encountering others in discovery and how those encounters are reflected in Europe’s view of itself. As Dudley M. Marchi states, ‘Montaigne generates levels of meaning which often abnegate closure and produce questions and answers suspended in uncertainty. He does so by weaving a complex of source material into a discourse dependent upon the absorption of otherness as a means of arriving at an enhanced understanding of ourselves and of our relations to other’. Dudley M. Marchi, ‘Montaigne and the New World: The Cannibalism of Cultural Production’, Modern Language Studies, 23 (1993), pp. 35–54, p. 35.
reliance on metaphor, this method of relaying unfamiliar ‘truth’ through an umbilical cord to the familiar, proved both problematic and profitable. That ‘unicorn’ came to represent an ambiguous yet wondrous space, both of reality and of myth, that captured readers, but also led to increased skepticism and uncertainty regarding the veracity of travel narratives. In madrigal texts, too, one can see understanding of new reality made possible through recourse to established tropes, tropes that all got melded into one ambiguous ‘Other’ fantasy. John Wilbye’s 1609 madrigal I live, and yet methinks I do not breathe raises several points of contemplation for the contemporary Englishman:\footnote{11}

There is a jewel which no Indian mines
Can buy, no chymic art can counterfeit;
It makes men rich in greatest poverty;
Makes water wine, turns wooden cups to gold,
The homely whistle to sweet music’s strain:
Seldom it come, to few from heaven sent,
That much in little, all in nought,--Content

The first line declares the subject (the spiritual ‘jewel’) superior to any real foreign gem, or anything created by modern science/alchemy (a coupling of New truths). Biblical references of ‘water into wine’ are meshed with, perhaps, a veiled reference to the mythical philosopher’s stone (wood into gold—a coupling of Old truths).\footnote{12} This free melding of popular images of authority raises the question of what counted as true for early modern English people. Jonathan Sell puts forth the term ‘consensual truth’, which he uses in place of ‘historically/socially relative truth’, a concept that is highly relevant and revealing in this discussion.\footnote{13} To early modern Europeans, a figure like a unicorn occupied a space somewhere between the mythical and the real—a creature of consensual truth. The inherent ambiguity in this sort of changeable, consensual understanding of truth produced reasonable confusion. The more stubbornly travel narratives insisted upon their credibility, the more their believability came into question. As Sell observes, intelligible lies are more easily believed than unintelligible truths.\footnote{14} Richard Braithwaite, writing in 1631, believed that ‘travellars, poets, and liars are three words of one significance’.\footnote{15} But much like consumers of today’s tabloids, perhaps actual truth did not matter to early modern readers—it was the perception of truth that sold copies. As will be discussed later, perhaps it is this ability to be perceived as real, where perhaps music’s abilities are most convincing.

In this skeptical environment regarding real and fake testimony, authors, composers, and travel writers alike became highly concerned with asserting the authenticity and veracity of their work. In 1588, explorer-astronomer Thomas Harriot wrote A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia in order to ‘set the record straight’:

Thus much vpon my credit I am to affirme: that things vniuersally are so truly set downe in this treatise by the author therof, an Actor in the Colony & a man no lesse for his honesty then learning commendable: as that I dare boldly auouch it may very well passe with the credit of tr

\footnote{11} This title is reminiscent of Charles I’s famous motto ‘while I breathe, I hope’ (dum spiro spero). The difference between how the phrase appears in Wilbye’s madrigal is rather prophetic of the impending changes in the perception of truth signified by Charles I’s execution in 1649, as well as to the shift from faith in regicentric truth to parliamentary truth, or faith in the people.
\footnote{12} Alchemy, poignantly, fits into both categories, as it was both a myth and a popular ‘science’. One must keep in mind that the Bible had at least the same truth-value as scientific treatises; a faith somewhat connected with the authority of ancient texts. One way to unarguably prove your case was to invoke the Bible or ancient scholars like Aristotle, even simply by printing their image on your cover page.
\footnote{13} Sell, p. 24.
\footnote{14} Sell, p. 25.
\footnote{15} Sell, p. 23.
“Musicke doth witnesse call”: Representation and Truth in the English Madrigal

the most true relations of this age.16

Even though Harriot is now considered one of the first champions of the empirical method (along with Francis Bacon), his assertion of truth in this introduction is less based on any empirical technique, and more on a personal testimony of his own honesty and quality of character. Harriot’s assertion also highlights his skepticism of other travel writers and their accounts of the New World (an assertion that comes with clear financial perks to his own account).17 Surely, the general mistrust of travel writers contributed to an already muddled perception of truth, leaving readers even more confused about whom and what to believe. But this need to assert one’s reliability is apparent in other printed genres as well. In William Byrd’s lengthy title to his 1588 set, he attests to his work’s authenticity:

Psalmes, Sonets, and Songs of Sadness and pietie, made into Music of five parts: whereof, some of them going abroad among divers, in untrue copies, are here truly corrected, and th’other being Songs very rare and newly composed, are here published, for recreation of all such as delight in Music.

Not only is Byrd clearly concerned with asserting his work’s veracity, but this also shows that by going abroad, his music has been in some way tainted by fakery or subjected to false alteration. In this environment where one is supposed to observe and report the real and the truthful, one can see the Other, as well as those who have claimed to have seen the Other, being accused as a source of false testimony.

Poetry and Parody: a ‘truthful counterfeit’

Poetry offered one way for early modern thinkers to write about the New and render a sense of reality, but without ever explicitly putting themselves at risk for being disgraced as liars. Poet and traveller Sir Philip Sidney wrote that poetry was different from other forms of rhetoric because it was a ‘truthful counterfeit’. To him, historians cannot help but lie, but in poetry the author ‘never affirmeth’.18 For Sidney, poetry is an art of imitation, ‘a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight’.19 Since poetry is inherently a representation or counterfeit of reality, it cannot possibly attest to be actual reality, and therefore it, or rather, its author, cannot lie. This, of course, contradicts Richard Braithwaite’s assertion that poets and travellers are the very definition of liars. Yet somehow, by employing metaphor to better portray a convincing sense of Truth (whilst teaching and delighting), poets and travellers alike become simultaneously accused of, as well as excused from, lying. How, then, might the science of music work with poetry to further this ‘figuring forth’ of reality?

In Thomas Weelkes’s 1608 composition Ha ha! ha ha! This world doth merrily pass, the composer set a seemingly whimsical text to a seemingly whimsical tune.20 On first examination this appears to be a silly strophic ditty without much historical weight. Yet the irony of Weelkes’ capricious musical setting is substantial. When read

19 Altegoer, p. 30.
20 I use the word seemingly twice, because, as Eric Altschuler and William Jansen have argued, Thomas Weelkes was probably a ‘man of letters’ of far greater sophistication than previously supposed, and may have even written some of his own texts. Amusingly, one modern publisher of Ha! Ha! This world doth pass, states that the lyrics are ‘nonsense’, which is itself a statement of nonsense! The composer who chose (or wrote) the texts to madrigals such as Ha ha! or Thule, the Period of Cosmography, was certainly not an ignoramus choosing random words to set to music. Eric Lewin Altschuler and William Jansen, ‘Thomas Weelkes’s Text Authors: Men of Letters’, The Musical Times, 143 (2002), pp. 17–24.
straightforwardly, the text comes across as rather nonsensical, though perhaps amusing in its social commentary.\textsuperscript{21} It is the coupling of the text with an overtly playful musical setting that makes this piece particularly interesting.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{verbatim}
Ha ha! ha ha! this world doth pass
Most merrily, I'll be sworn;
For many an honest Indian ass
Goes for an Unicorn.
Farra diddle dino;
This is idle fino.

Ty hye! ty hye! O sweet delight!
He tickles this age that can
Call Tula's ape a marmosyte
And Leda's goose a swan.
Farra diddle dino;
This is idle fino.

So so! so so! fine English days!
When false play's no reproach:
For he that doth the coachman praise,
May safely use the coach.
Farra diddle dino;
This is idle fino.
\end{verbatim}

The mixing of images from the New World with classical mythology is readily apparent: Leda and Tullia are both characters stemming from Greek mythology, and appear in company with Indians, marmosets, and the ambiguous Unicorn. New and ancient authorities come together, once more making a search for truth at the heart of the poem. Even though the uncertainty of ‘truth’ is directly commented on in this text, the musical setting amplifies this haziness yet further. The overall musical effect is one of madrigalized (word painted) laughter, skipping rhythms, and transparent homophonic writing that may initially give the impression of a more stereotypical pastoral English madrigal, like Thomas Morley’s \textit{Now is the Month of Maying}. Yet in conjunction with the double-edged words, these musical features seem exaggerated to the point of parody. When interpreted as a piece of satire, a very different impression emerges from the frolicking fantasy, as if the composer was amused by the very theatricalities of daily life, expanding on the common early modern theme of ‘all the world’s a stage’. As the onlooker watches life, and all its falsities, he cannot help but chuckle to himself. He will be ‘sworn’ (in itself an easily falsified act of testimony) that many an ‘honest’ Indian ass (objects from the New World are somehow portrayed as more ‘real’ – but also more mundane than the vivid European imagination might allow) may be mistaken for, or even maliciously passed as, a Unicorn—a creature that here implies the realm of fantasy, but is also of ambiguously consensually true origin. The next stanza suggests that the merchant (the used-car salesman of yore), or other man of hypothetically reputable power, has the ability to ‘tickle this age’ by misrepresenting and upselling mythical stories as real creatures. Despite the ‘realism’ created by Weelkes’s more straightforward madrigalizations, such as the punctuated laughter, the music adds a further layer of false impression to textual

\textsuperscript{21} The final stanza offers the most overt commentary, with a sarcastic ‘fine English days!’ where ‘false play’s no reproach’, implying that there are no consequences for falsifying information/representation—as long as you give the people what they want to hear, you gain fame and glory in return. The couplet at the end of each stanza punctuates the frivolity of the falsoess of life with the nonsense phrase ‘Farra diddle dino’. The meaning of ‘This is idle fino’, is somewhat unclear, but may signify ‘useless end’, or ‘all useless’ if ‘fino’ derives from the Spanish or Italian ‘fin’, but this is just pure conjecture; a self-conscious if not humorous way of acknowledging earthly life’s temporal limits.

\textit{files.exegesisjournal.org/20131.pdf}
ambiguity, one that thrives on parody rather than literal representation. The piece seems to offer an indirect commentary on music’s capacity to create an illusion of reality, regardless of whether that reality is indeed true or false. Weelkes’s capricious setting thus enhances rhetorical meaning by musically illustrating its satirical character, but also engages with the pressing questions surrounding truth, illusion, and false representation associated with New World exploration.

**Truth in the Illusion**

In his bipartite madrigal *Thule, the Period of Cosmography* and *The Andalusian Merchant* (1600), Thomas Weelkes, a composer who never left England, paints a scene of strange spectacle complete with merchants from far off places, flying fishes, foreign islands, and exotic volcanoes. Upon first glance, this could be a madrigal like many others of its kind, full of lighthearted fantasy and myth. But perhaps the most curious thing about this madrigal is that, in addition to the sense of otherworldliness created by the musical illustrations, the ‘fantastical’ elements and events described in the text are not only real, but musically depicted with well-informed accuracy. ‘Thule’, was the northernmost region of the habitable world to ancient Greek geographers. The phrase ‘Period of Cosmography’, refers to the end of the mappable universe, making *Thule, the Period of Cosmography* an apt title for a piece in which Weelkes musically reports on marvelous phenomena that had been discovered around the world, such as the eruptions of volcanoes Hecla, Ætna, and Fogo:

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THULE, the period of Cosmography,
Doth vaunt of Hecla, whose sulphurous fire
Doth melt the frozen clime and thaw the sky;
Trinacrian Ætnaes flames ascend not higher.
These things seems wondrous, yet more wondrous I,
Whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry.
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The Andalusian merchant, that returns
Laden with cochineal and China dishes,
    Reports in Spain how strangely Fogo burns
Amidst an ocean full of flying fishes.
These things seem wondrous, yet more wondrous I,
Whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry.
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Though this piece has the usual and expected word painting, such as ascending notes on the text ‘ascends not higher’ and a brief interruption of triple meter on the phrase, ‘trinacreean Ætna’ (referring to Sicily’s triangular shape), there is more to the way Weelkes set this text to music than initially apparent. Weelkes most likely had some outside knowledge of, or had done his own research on, the phenomena described in the poem, and worked that information into his musical depictions. Hecla, a real volcano in Iceland, erupted in 1597, just before Thule’s publication in 1600, and it is not far fetched to suppose that news of this event probably reached England, piquing the poet’s, and Weelkes’s, interest. Weelkes makes musical comparisons between Hecla and Ætna that suggest that it is worth considering that Weelkes had some knowledge of the actual physical attributes of each volcano, as well as accurate knowledge of the particulars of each volcano’s eruption. For example, with Fogo, a volcano and island in Cape Verde, Weelkes’s musical description of a strange burning is quite precise, but in such a way that it is not obvious from the poem alone. Unlike Hecla’s showy explosion of semiquaver runs, Weelkes properly depicts Fogo’s ‘strange’ slow burn, like gooey melting magma and floating ash, through descending chromatic lines. In 1657, Samuel Clarke wrote, ‘the Isles of Cape Verde are nine; they were first discovered, Anno Christi

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23 Fred. M. Bullard, *Volcanoes In History, In Theory, In Eruption*, p. 252
1440… *Del Fogo*, so called, because it burns perpetually: They were taken by Sir Anthony Sherly, *Anna Christi* 1596. who had in one night such a shoure of ashes, as hee did lie by *Del Fogo*, that in the morning you might have written with your finger upon the Deck of his ship*.24 While this account by Clarke is of a later date than one Weelkes may have encountered to inform his composition, it presents at least one example of a comparable possibility.

Since the English madrigal gene was largely known for its mythical, pastoral topics, perhaps Weelkes was able to use this preconception of the genre (well-established by 1600) to convincingly compose about seemingly fantastical topics that were essentially rooted in consensual reality, not fantasy, with a poignant ambiguity of truthfulness. In this case, when the poetry is musicalized, Sidney’s ‘truthful counterfeit’ receives an additional layer of consensually/empirically based understanding, in addition to the aural illustration of the text. Though the ‘realness’ of the events described in *Thule* were enhanced by the musical setting (and further observation-based meaning brought to the descriptions of the eruptions that were not readily apparent in the text), the effects of the music are still only an illusion, a representation of reality printed on paper.25 Yet musical representation is never straightforward; as Gary Tomlinson reminds us, ‘it is a serious if common error to underestimate the complexity and diversity of text-music conjunctions that a late-sixteenth-century composer could command’.26 This model by Weelkes is just one example of the potential complexities of the textual-musical relationship in terms of representation of reality. When faced with uncertainty, perhaps a most realistic representation of truth allowed for listeners and composers to address anxieties, express wonder, and take (arguably false) comfort in that representation, but with the caution offered by subjectivity—the idea that poetry, and in this case music, ‘never affirmeth’ so it can never be wrong. As Greenblatt states, ‘representations are not only products, but producers, capable of decisively altering the very forces that brought them into being’.27 Clearly, the relationship between representation and reality is quite complicated, and a distinction not easily reconciled. Greenblatt warns that it is ‘a theoretical mistake and a practical blunder to collapse the distinction between representation and reality’, since '[t]hey are locked together in an uneasy marriage in a work without ecstatic union or divorce’.28 If the madrigal sought to convincingly represent reality in its texts, whether this was a true or false reality did not really matter as long as it rang true to its listeners. I do not mean to imply that composers intentionally tried or did not try to deceive their listeners, but rather that, in conjunction with poetry, music’s unique subjectivity could offer a palpable sense of reality to willing recipients. Using music and poetry, Weelkes could present to his audience a realistic picture of the real world, using illusion—a testament to the complexity of musical-textual relations in the period and the multifarious relationship between truth and artistic representations thereof.

If, as Susan McClary has argued, the illusion created by music potentially allowed for a wider spectrum of independent responses than other less subjective art forms such as literature, conceivably it is this very quality that helped early modern composers express uncertainty and other emotions in a way literature alone could not.29 This is particularly thought-provoking when combined with an explicit narrative-style poem, such as William Byrd’s

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25 As Plato would have argued all Art is.


28 Greenblatt, p. 7.

29 Though as McClary logically cautions, ‘if music is to figure as anything other than a mere epiphenomenon … then we must find approaches that will allow us to examine its meanings. Otherwise, we will continue simply to graft music onto an already-formulated narrative of historical developments; more important, we will fail to learn what music might have to teach us or to question seriously what may be incomplete accounts of the past’. Susan McClary, *Modal Subjectivities: Self-Fashioning in the Italian Madrigal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 7.
1588 setting of one of Sir Philip Sidney’s songs from *Astrophel and Stella*, called *O You that heare this voyce.* This poem shows a different sort of confusion about Truth, one not as directly related to anxieties about new discovery, but one that elucidates philosophical questions about music and reason that are likely related—an emotional and philosophical response to anxieties of the age. This relatively simple strophic song is another interesting case that speaks to the diversity and complexity of rhetorical-musical conjunctions within the madrigal repertory. Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, thought to have been written in the 1580s, was a series of sonnets plus eleven ‘songs’ (of the lyrical, not musical type). Sidney’s poetry was quite popular amongst several madrigal composers, and many of his poems were set to music. This musical setting by Byrd is a sweet, relatively homophonic tune with readily understandable lyrics. The same music is repeated for each stanza of text (though it is thought perhaps not all the verses were sung, or the last only halfway through, as there are basically 4.5 stanzas in the poem), in similar format to a hymn.

O You, that heare this voyce,  
O you that see this face,  
say whether of the choice, may have the former place.  
Who dare judge this debate, that it be void of hate:  
This side doth beautie take, for that doth Musick speak,  
Fit Orators to make, the strongest judgements weak.  
The bar to plead their right, is only true delight.  

Thus doth the voyce and face, these gentle lawiers wage:  
Like loving brothers ease, for fathers heritage:  
That each, while each contends, it selfe to other lends.  
For beautie beautifies, with heavenly hew and grace,  
the heavenly harmonies, and in that faultlesse face,  
the perfect beauties bee, a perfect harmonie.  

Musicke more loftie swells, in phrases finely plac’d:  
Beautie as farre excells, in action aptly grac’d:  
A friend each partie drawes, to countenance his cause.  
Love more affected seemes, to beauties lovely light,  
and wonder more esteemes, of Musick wond’rous might,  
but both to both so bent, as both in both are spent.  

Musicke doth witnesse call, the eare his truth doth trye:  
Beautie brings to the hall, eye witnesse of the eye,  
each in his object such, as none exceptions touch.  
The comon sense which might, bee arbiter of this:  
To bee forsooth upright, to both sides parciall is:  
He layes on this chiefe praise, chiefe praise on that hee laies.  

Then Reason, princesse hie,  
which sits in throne of minde:  
and Musicke can in Skye,  
with hidden beauties finde,  
say whether thou wilt crowne,  

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30 Technically, this work by Byrd (indeed all the settings in this 1588 set) is a consort song, not a madrigal (a piece for solo voice and viols). But for various reasons, Byrd (or his publishers) decided to publish the works for voices or viols, allowing the viol parts to be sung by multiple voices as well, perhaps due to the fashionable nature of the madrigal.
In this song, Sidney describes a trial-like setting for a philosophical discussion about which character, Music or Beauty, ‘may have the former place’. From the first stanza, it is clear that the two parties are more in cahoots with one another than competitors. The ‘lawyers’ are the voice and the face, the ‘witnesses’ the ear and the eye. Love is partial to beauty, but wonder is the domain of music. Both beauty and music are equally persuasive in their own ways, and even have a symbiotic relationship. The conclusion is left open, as the ultimate judgment is left up to Reason, who sits ‘in throne of minde’, as Reason is the only power capable of making such a verdict. ‘MusICKe can in Skye’ is most likely a reference to Pythagorean ‘Music of the Spheres’, a theory on the nature of music based on numerical sequences that was well-known but controversial amongst natural philosophers in sixteenth/seventeenth-century Europe.

It seems only appropriate to set such a text to music, although naturally I cannot attest that this was in any way an intentional comment on music’s individual power in the debate. If, according to the poem, music’s power is wonder, then such philosophical questions can only be heightened by music employing its power. Socrates called wonder the ‘beginning of philosophy’, as wonder is what drives us to seek answers. And according to Sidney, what better way to invoke wonder than with music? In a way, it might seem this poem couldn’t be aesthetically complete on its own without music. According to Tomlinson, for Italian composers like Monteverdi:

the expressive power of music was a function of its relation to text ... The highest goal that music could seek … especially in works from the years around 1600, was to form a syntactic and semantic union with its text so perfect that the distinction of musical and nonmusical elements seemed to fade before the heightened oratorical power of a single musical speech.31

In a way, by setting this text to music, Byrd completes the message of the poem, unifying verse, philosophy, and music as ideologically indistinguishable. What makes this piece an interesting case study is how straightforwardly it brings together contemporary debates about the nature of philosophy, poetry, music, and wonder. Straightforwardly, yet inherently not, as it is all mediated through narrative metaphor. Sidney was taking his own advice about the poet who teaches and delights, yet ‘never affirmeth’, thereby pardoning himself from any accusations of falsity.

As Gouk has written, ‘[p]oetry, rhetoric, and music are persuasive arts which exert their moral and ethical effects through emotions rather than by reason’.32 Contemporary discussion of music’s emotional effects stemmed from a reinterpretation of an Aristotelian approach to music as a sounding phenomenon, in addition to some natural philosophers’ shift away from Pythagorean cosmology.33 While some, like Joannes Kepler, maintained that music was a product of mathematics, others like Francis Bacon were not satisfied with that theory, and believed that there was something more to discover about the source of music’s power over man’s emotions and behaviors. Gouk theorizes that Bacon’s fascination with music was not a simple plight for Truth, but ‘an essential element of his ambitious scheme to dominate and control the forces of nature and the elements, to tame them for the service of man … [for Bacon, music was] an integral part of natural philosophy’.34 It is not difficult to see why Bacon would have been, for lack of a better word, concerned about the emotional power music holds over man. It is a truth universally experienced, yet far from universally understood. Bacon thought of wonder as ‘broken

31 Tomlinson, p. 7.
33 Gouk, ‘Music in Francis Bacon’s natural philosophy’, p. 143.
34 Gouk, ‘Music in Francis Bacon’s natural philosophy’, p. 149.
knowledge’, and if music wields the power of wonder, as Sidney thought, it is not surprising that a man of science like Bacon saw music as a central tenant in an understanding of the philosophy of nature. Wonder, like the discovery of the New World, was a force of both fascination and great fear: for in wonder, knowledge and Truth, are fundamentally incomplete.

The Moving Science of Music

The madrigal, a genre of song that by nature tries to integrate music with poetry, holds a lot of aesthetic responsibility for modern understanding of the period around 1600, far more than it ostensibly seems. It appears that in an environment of political, religious, and philosophical upheaval, the search for a source of security, for Truth, amongst ‘certainties’ both old and new, was at the forefront of the conscious and subconscious mind. As the rules of faith shifted and ancient authorities were challenged by new ‘proofs’, like objects and stories from the New World, testimony of truthfulness became a national preoccupation, as shown in both travel literature and other forms of printed word. This newfound demand for proof in the form of observation piqued wonder in the first empiricists, already supported by Aristotle’s correspondence theory of truth. Yet these well-known men of natural philosophy—Francis Bacon, Robert Hooke, and Isaac Newton—all wrote about music because it wields undeniable emotional power, raising wonder and complicating the search for truthful knowledge, whether one of mathematical, religious, astronomical, historical or other foundation. Music and poetry are our remnants, the existing representation of such emotions from 1600. Moreover, representation is crucial to the study of emotions, as it is impossible to have emotion in any unmediated form. The madrigal is one body of such representation; the physical item that we have that links us to an emotional history of the past.

Philip Sidney’s Defense of Poetry addresses the line between philosophy and poetry, asserting (against critics like Plato) that poetry could indeed satisfy the demands of philosophy by rousing men to virtue through pleasure. Sidney was not only a poet, but also a mathematician and astronomer, a combination of professions not so uncommon in the seventeenth century. To study the history of Truth in the early modern period, it is necessary to also study the emotional element, the ‘passion’, that was integral to understanding of even the most empirical of sciences. Though there is plentiful modern scholarship on English poetry and drama in terms of the Scientific Revolution, hopefully I’ve made a case for musicology to enter this discourse, as the English madrigal offers an unlikely but interesting portal to further inquiry into the historicized emotional side of empirical Truth—providing the wonder, the necessary realistic representation, and the metaphoric yet subjective understanding—that moves men like, in Baconian terms, a force of nature.

54 Some, such as twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger, have argued that this concept of truth, based on how early modern thinkers interpreted Aristolean principals, is actually a misinterpretation. Heidegger offers, instead, ‘aletheia’, or ‘unconcealment’ a separate concept explaining how things appear in the world contextualized as part of a background of meaning.
55 As Susan James points out, ‘the contrast between this all-encompassing knowledge and our confused, passionate ideas is sometimes conceived in musical terms … Bacon resorts to this image when he casts Orpheus, the master of all harmony, as Universal Philosophy’. Susan James, Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, New Ed (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999), p. 195.
57 ‘Passion’, being the physical manifestation that bridge emotion and action. Susan James, Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, p. 4.
The Deformed Face of Truth in Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*

Sam Hall

I

All humaine thynges are lyke the Silenes or double images of Alcibiades, have two faces much vnlyke and dissemble that outwardly seemed death, yet looking within ye shouldye fynde it lyfe and on the other side what seemed lyfe, to be death: what fayre to be foule what riche, beggarly: what cunnyng, rude: what strong, feeble […] Breifly, the Silenus ones being vndone and disclosed, ye shall fynde all things [are] tourned into a new semblance [sic]  

Erasmus¹

In *The Symposium* Alcibiades suggests that Socrates is akin to a ‘Silenus statue’². This is because there is an absolute disjunction between the philosopher’s foolish appearance in the world—his notorious ugliness, his incessant infatuations with beautiful young men, his poverty—and the ‘moderation’, ‘strength’ and ‘beauty’3 of his innermost thoughts, which ‘despised all things for which other mortals run their races’.⁴ These statues, observes Erasmus in his famous adage ‘Sileni Alcibiades’ (1515), were commonly carved in the shape of Bacchus’ tutor Silenus, ‘the court buffoon of the gods of poetry’ (CWE, 34, p. 264). They were ‘small figure[s] of carved wood, so made that they could be divided and opened. […] When they were closed they looked like a caricature of a hideous flute-player, when opened they suddenly displayed a deity’ (CWE, p. 262).

It is easy to see how this reversible image came to encapsulate the paradoxical and dialectically engaged wisdom of folly and folly of wisdom, which, from Erasmus to Cervantes, is a striking feature of many of the most significant philosophical and literary texts of the Renaissance. Walter Kaiser explains the seemingly infinite self-generative ironies of the *Praise* by evoking the idea of the Silenus,⁵ while Michael Screech examines its surprising centrality to Erasmus’ ‘theology of ecstasy’⁶; David Wootton argues that More’s *Utopia* must be interpreted as a Silenus;⁷ Terence Cave analyses how this equivocal image plays a role in shaping the philosophical content and literary form of Rabelais and Montaigne’s works.⁸ Indeed, Claudia Corti describes Erasmus’ ‘enormous’ influence on early modern English literature and literary theory in a deliberately Silenic way: ‘embedded within Shakespeare, Nasche, Ascham, Wilson and Puttenham […] lay Erasmus, with that ironic smile of his as immortalized by Holbein’.⁹

Through an analysis of the role of the Silenus—explicitly and implicitly, formally and thematically—in Erasmus, Montaigne and *The Merchant of Venice*, this paper contends that this ubiquitous image is key to fathoming the truth-claims of wise folly. This particular constellation of texts, tied together on a close intertextual basis, will unlock the transmission of Silenus in early modern humanist thought. After examining the its pre-history, I turn to Erasmus’ use of it both as a way of explaining the unexplainable, including the incarnation, and as a tool for social and

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³ *The Symposium*, 216c-217a.
⁵ *Ecstasy and the Praiſe of Folie* (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 3.
religion; I then briefly examine how it shapes Montaigne’s ironical conception of the world and his place in it as a truth-teller. Next I analyse Shakespeare’s most explicit dramatisation of the Silenic nature of things, the casket game in *The Merchant of Venice*. I conclude by using the Silenus’ slippery ironies, especially those generated by the casket game, as an allegory for interpretation. The ironic significance of the specious testimony that Portia gives in the trial scene is best fathomed by seeing it as a reversed Silenus: beneath its eloquence lies an instrumental evocation of mercy that is cynically employed for an earthly end, the destruction of Shylock.

II

From its inception, the Silenus head has been equivocal. Alcibiades behaves foolishly. Since he wanders into the *Symposium* late and drunk, we can infer that while he may find Socrates’ ‘moderation’ laudable, he does not feel compelled to imitate it. His encomium to Socrates’ wisdom and ‘moderation’ is decidedly double-edged. Alcibiades is both impressed and appalled that, despite his multiple attempts to entrap him, the philosopher refused to be physically ‘gratified’ by him. Socrates refused to ‘strike a bargain’ with him, in which knowledge is traded for sex; as he points out, not only does Alcibiades fundamentally misconceive the nature of love, but also, even by market standards, this transaction does not make sense. Socrates would be trading the ‘gold’ of his knowledge ‘in exchange for [the] bronze’ of the latter’s body. Moreover, at the end of the *Symposium*, Socrates contends that Alcibiades’ ‘Silenus-play’ itself has a deceptive double nature, for it furnishes the spurned lover with a way of venting his inner frustrations in the guise of praise.

But this disjunction between inner and outer is not simply a fixture of Platonic thought that was rediscovered by such editors as Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus. It is present in the vast corpus of medieval penitential and confessional literature. As David Aeres argues: ‘the whole medieval penitential tradition involves a fundamental and perfectly explicit distinction between inner and outer’, which harks back ‘at least as far as Augustine’s *Confessions*’. Medieval mystical writing is closely related to the devotional literature that flourished in Latin and the vernacular throughout the Middle Ages. While it is by nature idiosyncratic and thus generically heterogeneous, medieval mystical writing is premised on the idea that there is a distinction between the revelation of divine essence, experienced internally, and experience of external realities; it also concerns itself with the problems of communicating and evaluating this highly idiosyncratic event.

Space permits neither a consideration of the ways in which the affective piety of the mystical tradition fed into the devotio moderna, in which Erasmus was brought up, nor how this tradition continued to exert an influence on writing about interiority and duplicity in the early modern period. All that can be done here is to highlight some of the insights and techniques of negation that the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* employs. The visionary *cum* narrator insists that would-be mystics must renounce positive human categories, images and words to achieve a state of ‘unknowyng’ because ‘þou maist neiþe se [H]im cleerly by liȝt of understonding’. Even in this state, free of the mediating influence of ideology and language, the visionary does not see God; rather, he

10 See Cave, p. 94.
11 The *Symposium*, 218d-219e.
12 The *Symposium*, 218e.
13 The *Symposium*, 219a.
14 The *Symposium*, 222d.
intuits his absence—he must ‘bide in his derkness […] evermore criing after [H]im’.\(^{18}\) The narrator recurrently attacks what he calls ‘ymaginatiif witte’,\(^{19}\) by which he means the subject. Far from making sense of the world by categorizing and manipulating its objective elements, mediating ‘witte’ falsifies experience by naming and categorizing. It fills man with human knowledge that prevents him from achieving a state of kenosis in which God can be experienced, albeit negatively.

### III Erasmus

Erasmus was the first thinker to connect the Christian via negativa, so powerfully evoked in The Cloud of Unknowing, with the self-revelation of Socrates—considered by the Oracle at Delphos to know something precisely because he admitted that he ‘knows nothing’.\(^{20}\) By 1610 this connection had become, quite literally, commonplace: when these hairy Sileni are opened up we find a cross.\(^{21}\) If we trace the key arguments of Erasmus’ ‘Sileni Alcibiades’, which was translated into every major European vernacular, including English in 1543,\(^{22}\) then many of his chief linguistic, social and theological preoccupations can be discerned. Initially, he argues that there is a difference between the inner core and outer appearance of true philosophers and apostles: ‘they wear what is most contemptible […] concealing their treasure with a kind of worthless outward shell and not showing it to uninitiated eyes’ (CWE, 34, p. 264). Such prophetic souls have drank from ‘the true fountain head [of] heavenly wisdom, against which all human wisdom is mere folly’ (CWE, 34, 263). Their revelation confounds earthly cleverness and discourse. It is not that we are too naive to get to the truth, but rather that we are too sophisticated.

Next he contends that Scripture has a doubly Silenic nature. First, the reader must not ‘pause at the surface’ because all the allegories, ambiguities and textual instabilities make it seem ‘ridiculous’ (CWE, 34, p. 267). Instead, they must attempt to ‘pierce the heart of the allegory’ and ‘open up the Silenus’, so that they can ‘venerate the divine wisdom’ (CWE, 34, p. 267). Second, as Erasmus puts very clearly in the mouth of an educated layman in his Colloquies: ‘What the Old Law taught under a veil, the New Law placed before the eyes (CWE, 40, p. 167). For Erasmus, the importance of the Old Testament and pagan texts like The Symposium lies in what’s hidden beneath the surface. When read correctly, such writings display a partial and imperfect pre-figuration of Christ and his apostles’ explicit teachings (see CWE, 3, p. 127, et passim).

He then rephrases the argument that he makes most explicitly in his Enchridion Militis Christiani (1503), contending that in human nature there is perpetual strife between embodied existence and the being-for-the-Spirit that characterizes Paul’s ‘fools for Christ’s sake’ (I Corinthians, 4. 10):

> In this world there are, as it were, two worlds, which fight against each other in every way, one gross and corporeal, the other heavenly and already practicing with all its might to become what it one day will be. (CWE, 34, p. 276).

The coup de théâtre of his essay, however, is when he posits a deliberately provocative question: ‘what of Christ? Was not he too a marvelous Silenus? His appearance was not only human, but also a poor, even wretched human?’ (CWE, 34, p. 264). In Christ there is an absolute disjunction between appearance and essence. God’s embodiment provides a ‘cheap’, mortal ‘setting’ for that which is immortal and perfect, a ‘glorious pearl’ (CWE,

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\(^{18}\) The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises, p. 12.

\(^{19}\) The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises, p. 12.

\(^{20}\) The Symposium, p. 216c.

\(^{21}\) See Fig. 1 at the end of this paper.

\(^{22}\) For an English translation see, Here folowith a scornful image or monstrus shape of a maruelous stra[n]ge fygure called, Sileni alcibiadis, trans. by anon (London: John Gough, 1543). See also E. J. Devereux, Renaissance English Translations of Erasmus: A Bibliography (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).
34, p. 264). It is ultimately for this reason that the Christian ‘picks out what is least visible to the eye and pass[es] over all the rest or using them with a measure of contempt […] he draws his principles of judgment entirely from what is within’ (CWE, 34, p. 268).

Erasmus continually fugues on the idea that if the mean is splendid, the foolish is wise and the insubstantial substantial then the inverse must also be true; he regrets that the earthly experience, reality, is akin to a reversed Silenus head. The essence is absurd and ugly, but the external appearance is grand. The holy essence of things has been etiolated: the ceremonies and sacraments of the Church Militant are akin to ‘seeing the Silenus from the outside’ (CWE, 34, p. 167). This incredulity at visual signifiers of faith and his critique of the hypostatization of ceremonies in the Church corresponds with Reformist arguments against ostentatious displays of faith, which they saw as idolatrous attempts to positively represent the divine, and with the deep unease that the medieval mystics felt towards the iconography of their world.

IV Montaigne

In ‘Of Physiognomy’ Montaigne explicitly mentions Socrates’ Silenic nature. He inveighs against people these days because they would not appreciate Socrates: ‘they perceive no charms that are not sharpened, puffed out and inflated by artifice’. His primary interest in Alcibiades’ image, however, is how it relates to the philosopher’s style:

Socrates makes his soul move with a natural and common motion. […] His mouth is full of nothing but carters, joiners, cobblers and masons. His are inductions and similes drawn from the commonest and best-known actions of man. Under so mean a form we should never have picked out the nobility and splendor of his ideas. (EM, Book III, Chapter 12, p. 965)

Beneath the surface of Socrates’ homely metaphors and the commonplaces, there is profound philosophical wisdom. Erich Auerbach argues that by the Renaissance the Silenus head had become a metonym for the humanist ideal of absolute clarity of expression. Montaigne and Rabelais saw it as representing ‘Socratic style [which] meant to […] something free and untrammeled, something close to ordinary life’.

This ideal is derived from Erasmus. He writes admiringly of Socrates that ‘his language was simple and homely and smacking of common folk; for his talk was all of carters and cobblers’ (CWE, 34, p. 263), which Montaigne inadvertently quotes. As Ruth Calder argues, because his language mixed rough and ready expression with philosophical content, ‘Socrates was seen as the archetype of the Spondaiolios’ or mixed mode, characteristic of Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare. This register enables the ‘common characteristic of dissimulatio’, found in Montaigne’s twin rhetorical personae of Socrates and Horace, which consists of ‘an understated, self-depreciating form of self-expression, and a profound, smilling irony in their judgments’. Irony penetrates appearances. It

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25 The Essays of Montaigne, trans. by Donald A. Fame (London: Everyman, 2003), (Book III, Chapter 12), p. 965. Subsequent references are given in the text.
28 From Grotesque to Silenus, p. 256.
29 From Grotesque to Silenus, p. 256.
brings ‘human wisdom back down to earth’ (Book III, Chapter 12, p. 966). Such a style furnishes Montaigne with the perfect form with which to posit what is perhaps the central tenet of his philosophy: the ‘essence’ of human being is ‘radically imperfect’.30

It is not just Montaigne’s style of self-presentation that is Silenic. In ‘Of the Education of Children’, he conceives of philosophy in Silenic terms. For him, philosophy is intrinsically playful, but this playful essence has been obscured, made ‘inaccessible for children’ by modern ‘Sophists’ (Book 1, Chapter, XXV, p. 143). Their ‘quibbling’ and abstruse formalism have given ‘Lady Philosophy’ a grotesque outer appearance, ‘a surly, frowning, terrifying face’ (Book 1, Chapter, XXV, p. 143). But the shining deity beneath this formidable—yet risible—exterior is neither fastidiously sincere nor something that has been transformed into intangible method: ‘There is nothing more gay more lusty, more frolicsome. She preaches nothing but merry making and a good time’ (Book 1, Chapter, XXV, p. 143). Montaigne’s copia rhetorically embodies the playful essence of philosophy, which, for Adorno, is playful because it attempts to go beyond the given, yet remains essentially sceptical about the powers of human thought to get to an unequivocal or positive truth.31

V Shakespeare: The Casket Game

Erasmus suggests that one of the original functions of Sileni was to provide a ‘humorous surprise [that] made the carver’s skill all the more admirable’ (CIFE, 34, p. 262): the ‘ugly outer folded back to reveal a golden statue of a god’ (CIFE, 34, p. 262). Shakespeare delights in implying his audience’s wider delusion—by drawing attention to his own virtuoso skill at generating artifice. In the opening scene of The Merchant of Venice, Antonio displays a melancholic awareness that the world of appearances is not even, as Foucault, in his discussion of the Silenus, puts it, ‘coherent in itself’: ‘I hold the world but as the world, Graziano—| A stage where every man must play a part, | And mine a sad one’ (I. 1. 77–79). Antonio is virtually quoting Erasmus verbatim. Moments after her discussion of the Silenus, Erasmus’ duplicitous Folly points out: ‘All this life of mortall men, what is it els, but a certaine kynde of stage plaie? wheras men come forthe one in one arraie, an other in another, eche playing his parte’ (PF, p. 38).32

This uncanny theatrical self-awareness is not only way in which The Merchant of Venice is strangely duplicitous. The play has two generic aspects: it is tragicomic. The play’s dual loci are like Erasmus’ Silenus turned inside out. Beneath Belmont’s peaceful appearance lies the rancor and ruthless exploitation of the Venetian marketplace. Beneath the demotic discourse of the clown’s speech lies a grasp of the play’s central concerns. When, for instance, Gobbo voices regrets about Jessica’s conversion to Christianity: ‘This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs. If we grow all to be pork-eaters we shall not shortly have rasher on the coals for money’ (III. 5. 19-21), he furnishes the audience with a reductio ad absurdum of the logic of the marketplace. The conversion of Jews had an even more important significance than an increase in the price of bacon: it presaged the Second Coming of Christ.

The most obvious way in which the duplicities of Erasmus’ Silenus are evoked, however, is through the seriocomic casket game. Portia’s suitors must choose one of three caskets in order to marry her and acquire her fortune. Inside the winning casket lies a ‘picture’ of Portia (II. 7. 11). Each casket is inscribed with a riddle, which Morocco, the first to play the game, reads:

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This first of gold, who this inscription bears:
‘Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire’.
The second silver, which this promise carries:
‘Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves’
This third dull lead, with warning all as blunt:
‘Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath’.  

Correct interpretation of appearances, it seems, can enable us to fathom the essence of things. The audience is not informed which casket contains the image of Portia. They too are set an interpretative puzzle. Morocco is a naive realist: he thinks essence corresponds to appearance. No one, he comments, could bear to encase the beautiful picture in ‘gross’ (50) lead; besides, he loves himself well enough to know that ‘A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross’ (20).

When he opens the golden casket, he is disabused of his illusions. He is greeted with a skull—in the age of vanitas iconography, shorthand for the essential paucity of all human wealth and ambition. In its riddling couplets, the scroll, placed in the ‘empty eye’ of the skull, exhorts the wisdom of correctly interpreted commonplaces (or adages of the ancients): “All that glistens is not gold; | Often have you heard that told” (65-66).

When it is Aragon’s turn to play the casket game, he discloses the game’s rules to the audience. He may not say to anyone which casket he chooses and he must leave if he chooses incorrectly. Most seriously, ‘if [he] fail[s] | Of the right casket’, he may never ‘woo a maid in way of marriage’ (II. 9. 11-14). He is a little more successful in his interpretation. He will not choose gold, ‘what many men desire’:

ARAGON  
[...] the fool multitude, that choose by show,  
Not learning more than the fond eye doth teach,  
Which pries not to th’interior, but, like the martlet,  
Builds in the weather on the outward wall  
Even in the force and road of casualty.  

Like Montaigne in ‘Of Physiognomy’, Aragon does not assume that there is a correspondence between appearance and essence; later in the speech he employs the example of people who ‘cozen fortune’ and corruptly acquire ‘dignity’ (35-45) to prove this point. He chooses the silver casket. As its inscription predicts, he ‘get[s] as much as he deserves’ (48). He is presented with ‘a portrait of a blinking idiot’ (53). Here the Silenus has been reversed. Its appearance is precious silver, while its essence is a grotesque portrait of a fool. There are some more doggerel couplets with this portrait, which suggest that those who think themselves wise—not ‘fool[s] of the multitude’—are actually foolish. Such is the self-satisfied knowledge of what Portia calls ‘deliberate fools’ (79). The riddle allows him to marry (“Take what wife you will to bed”), but informs him that ‘I [i.e. the blinking idiot] will ever be your head’ (69-70).

Perhaps because Bassanio is a good Machiavellian—this prodigal son of Venice advises Graziano that one must manipulate appearances to give the right impression: sometimes one must ‘Use all the observance of civility’; at other times, ‘put on | Your boldest suit of mirth’ (II. 2. 172-95)—when he comes to play the game, he is not taken in by potentially deceptive appearances:

BASSANIO  
[aside]  
So many the outward shows be least themselves.  
The world is still deceived with ornament.  
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,  
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,  
What damned error but some somber brow  
Will bless it and approve it with a text,  
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament\[III. 2. 71-8\] [my emphasis]  

Aragon’s arguments against duplicity in public life are reiterated. The legal system is corrupt and so are the clergy, who, as Erasmus’ Folly also intuits, justify their vices with deceptive and self-serving interpretations of scripture (see PF, p. 88-91). But his critique of these duplicities is itself expressed through a piece of linguistic ingenuity: the word ‘Ornament’, signifying deceptive rhetorical embellishment, is itself expressed through epiphora.  

Social critique done, Bassanio rejects the ‘gaudy’ gold casket as ‘hard food for Midas’ (101) and the silver because it is a ‘pale and common drudge’ (106). He foolishly chooses the outwardly unpromising lead and is appropriately rewarded: inside he finds the picture and with it the right to marry Portia:  

What find I here?  
Fair Portia’s counterfeit. What demi-god  
Hath come so near creation? Move these eyes?  
Or whether, riding on the balls of mine,  
Seem they in motion? Here the severed lips  
Parted with sugar breath. So sweet a bar  
Should sunder such sweet friends. Here in her hairs  
The painter plays the spider, and hath woven  
A golden mesh t’untrap the hearts of men  
Faster than gnats in cobwebs. But her eyes—  
How could he see to do them? Having made one,  
Methinks it should have power to steal both his  
And leave itself unfurnished. Yet look how far  
The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow  
In underprizing it, so far this shadow  
Doth limp behind the substance.\[III. 2. 114-129\] 

On the surface, it seems as though Erasmus’ comment that ‘All humaine thynges are lyke the Silenes or double images of Alcibiades’ holds true in a straightforward way. The casket text has shown us that what ‘outwardly seemed death […] looking within ye shoulde fynde it lyfe and on the other side what seemed lyfe to be death’. Beneath ‘what men most desire’, the gold casket, lies a skull; inside the leaden casket—compared by Morocco to a shroud—lies the notably lifelike picture of Portia.  

However, when we look deeper this is not the case. When Bassanio opens his Silenus he gets a painting, a ‘counterfeit’ (115). Bassanio’s eloquent praise of Portia’s beauty furnishes the audience an ekphrasis—a vivid description of the beauties of a painting. Her radiant natural beauty, which, like all natural beauty is not pre-existing, but finds its realisation in art alone, is emphasized through two negations. First, the life-like quality of her eyes, which reflect a semblance or image of the beholder, captured by the miniature, cannot be expressed positively in the way her hair can. Second, Bassanio’s description of this painting is as insufficient—‘The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow | In underprizing it’—as this inexpressibly beautiful painting is at depicting Portia’s radiance, ‘so far this shadow | Doth limp behind the substance’. But this ‘substance’, which even this painting—or rather this lover’s ekphrasis of this painting by a ‘demi-god’ cannot fully represent—is no ‘substance’ at all, for she is an actor in a play.
VI Self-Serving Mercy

The peculiar ‘quality of mercy’ (IV. 1. 179) is of paramount importance in the concept of holy folly. It underlies what Paul calls the ‘great love wherewith He loved us’ (Ephesians, 2. 4). Because of His excessive mercies—most significantly, the incarnation and the general resurrection—God appears foolish by the standards of the world. For Erasmus, as for St. Paul, God’s mercy is a truth that confounds earthly knowledge and logic. But in The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare examines how seeming knowledge, infected with the pernicious logic of *quid pro quo*, can blind people to their better intentions.

The most obvious evocation of mercy in Shakespeare is furnished by Portia’s—frequently anthologized—courtroom speech. ‘Mercy’, she argues:

> [...] becomes
> The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
> His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
> The attribute to awe and majesty,
> Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
> But mercy is above this sceptred sway.
> It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
> It is an attribute of God himself,
> And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
>
> When mercy seasons justice. (IV. 1. 184-193)

The disguised Portia’s duplicitous testimony attests to how the relative truths of the marketplace can corrode even the supra-rational truth of God’s foolish mercy. Her speech is like an inside-out Silenus. Its passionate, erudite appearance hides the fact that the Christians of the play are as bereft of mercy as the individual this speech effectively condemns; they are rotten to the core.

Mercy, Portia argues here, is key in the paradoxical Christian weakness that is actually transcendent strength: ‘earthly power doth then show likest God’s | When mercy seasons justice’. She suggests that the real power of kings lies in the mercy ‘enthroned in [their] hearts’. This inner disposition is greater than his ‘force of temporal power’ and its outer signifiers. This sentiment recalls a similar claim to that made in Erasmus’ late sermon, *De Immensa Dei Misericordia* (1524), which contends that while ‘A king’s power and majesty are often admired even by those who hate or envy him […] clemency and generosity are loved even by those who have no need of them’ (*CWE*, 70, p. 231). Unlike ‘majesty’, mercy is a universally admirable quality.

Portia evokes four other Erasmian ideas. First, Erasmus holds that visual signifiers of faith or power—such as ‘scepters’—are at best a necessary evil and, at worst, nothing more than a deceptive stage property, which conceals a depleted or deformed essence. Her appeal to Shylock’s conscience, in addition to her suggestion that regal power lies in the heart, displays a typically Erasmian emphasis on an internalized kind of faith. This idea is, however, vigorously de-sublimated by Gobbo’s mock catechism, in which the clown’s seemingly intense self-scrutiny actually enables him to follow the urges of his stomach (II. 2. 1-25).

Second, Portia suggests that the ethical way to live is through the imitation of Christ. Man should be merciful because it is an: ‘attribute of God himself’. The Gospel should be lived, not merely recited parrot-fashion. Third, she suggests that man should actively seek his ‘salvation’ (195) through his acts of mercy, which ‘mitigate[s] the
justice’ of Shylock’s ‘plea’ (198). Shylock will not be saved unless he seeks out his salvation through acts. Erasmus contends that divine mercy is what enables us to exist and that ‘good’ and ‘justice’ come from a conception of mercy (CWE, 70, pp. 132-5).

Fourth, Portia echoes Erasmus’ emphasis on the reciprocity of mercy: ‘any gift to another human being for the love of Jesus is made in a worthy cause’ (CWE, 66, p. 137). She describes mercy as something that ‘blesseth him that gives, and him that takes’ (182). The use of anadiplosis rhetorically reiterates the reciprocity it denotes. And in an implicitly self-interested, but nonetheless effective, argument she comments that mercy should temper justice because men are judged by their acts of mercy in life. She asks Shylock: ‘how canst thou expect mercy giving none?’ Shylock, however, remains steadfast in his insistence on the immutability of letter of the law:

an oath, an oath! I have an oath in heaven
Shall I lay perjury on my soul?
No, not for Venice 

(222-25)

His conscience compels him in the opposite direction from Portia’s. Similarly, when Portia implores him for the sake of ‘charity’ (256), which Erasmus considers to be an offshoot of mercy (CWE, 70, p. 136), to use ‘some surgeon […] | To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death’ (252-3). Shylock answers prosaically: ‘I cannot find it. ‘Tis not in the bond’ (257).

This logic is responsible for his downfall. And, ethically speaking, Portia’s too. The paradox of this scene is that the action of the play hinges on an absolute or Jewish adherence to the letter of the law. It characterizes Portia’s dexterous quibbling just as much as it does Shylock’s insistent demands that he is allowed to fulfill his ‘bond’. Not ‘a jot of blood’ is allowed to be spilt if his ‘bond’ is to be kept to the letter; there is ‘just a pound of flesh’ (321) no ‘less nor more’ (320) stipulated in the bond; and he is not to receive the compensation, which she earlier promised, because: ‘He hath refused it in open court. | He shall have merely justice and his bond’ (333-34).

Indeed, this paradox speaks volumes about the play as a whole. Kiernan Ryan and Zdravko Planinc both argue that the reason why these Venetians hate Shylock is not because of their difference from him, but because of their similarity to him.33 In their Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that this hatred of one’s reflection, so cogently examined in The Merchant of Venice, proves key to understanding the Nazi hatred of the Jews: ‘in the image of the Jew, which the racial nationalists hold up before the world, they express their own being. Their craving is for ownership, appropriation, unlimited power […] at any price’.34

Planinc is quite correct to point out the hypocrisy of the Christian traders: ‘Neither Antonio nor Bassanio produce wealth; they merely redistribute it […]. And yet that is their ostensible basis of their hatred of money lending Jews’.35 Indeed, the state of Venice itself does not produce anything. It too merely redistributes. This is hinted at when the Duke hesitates to release Antonio from his bond: ‘the trade and profit of the city | Consisteth of all nations’ (III. 3. 30-31). The explicit views about merchants and usurers in Erasmus’ adage ‘To extract tribute from the dead’, in which he attacks how ‘money breeding money’ (CWE, 32, p. 184), has become ubiquitous, corresponds with what Shakespeare’s play implies: ‘I would accept a usurer sooner than this sordid class of merchants, who use tricks and falsehoods, fraud and misrepresentation, in pursuit of profit from any source’ (CWE; 32, p. 185).

35 Planinc, p. 23.
Antonio’s business must be seen for what it is: reckless venture capitalism. And Portia’s testimony must also be seen for what it is: perjury—he ‘plea’ is both ‘tainted and corrupt’. As Planinc shows, she engages in entrapment; she appears in court in a disguise, ‘gives a false name and legal credentials’, is ignorant of the difference between ‘contract law and civil law’ and is the wife of one of the interested parties. It is safe to assume her instrumental evocations of ‘mercy’ and ‘charity’ fall on the deaf ears. Despite the fact that his losses have been common knowledge for some time, the Venetian Christians have conspicuously failed to give or lend Antonio ‘the money he needed in time, though he had often done so for them in similar circumstances’. This play furnishes the reader with a prophetic critique of how even the radically egalitarian concept of God’s mercy, which applies to all people from all times and of all creeds, can be used in earthly testimony as a means to an end. In Shakespeare’s Venice, even the concepts that ostensibly transcend the ruthless exploitation of the marketplace are not safe from it. He dramatizes what Adorno was later to formulate explicitly, the sad fact that ‘No theory escapes the market anymore’. The play suggests that mercy cannot be realized in a world in which even the minds of the ostensibly faithful are ensnared by a ‘mad passion for property [that] has gone so far that there is nothing in the wide world, sacred or profane, from which something like usury cannot be extracted’ (CfE, 32, p. 185). It dramatizes the process that Marx was later to formulate explicitly. The bourgeoisie—prototypically represented here by Shakespeare’s Venetian Christians—require incessant ‘revolution’ for their self-perpetuation; it is hardly an exaggeration to contend that in the Casket Game ‘all that is solid melts into air’ and in Portia’s specious testimony ‘all—or, at least much—‘that is holy is profaned’.

**VII Epilogue**

To draw, methodically, in the light of all the mutations surveyed, an affirmative theory about the truth claim of the Silenus head would be to arrest the dialectical motion of this image’s complex negativity and, thereby, fundamentally misconceive it. After all, what Erasmus finds so fascinating about it is its self-generative, self-reflexive possibilities. In Montaigne, Silenic style enables self-reflection, in which while he becomes aware of his own limitations. Through Socratic ‘ignorance’ he reaches a negative truth: ‘Ignorance that knows itself, that judges itself and condemns itself, is not complete ignorance’ (Book 2, Chapter XII, p. 451)—truth is not a consequence of human knowledge. Rather, a truth of sorts is found negatively through the unlearning of received wisdom. What ever else, the Silenic texts of Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare, all delight in lifting the veil of appearances to point out the untruth of the way things are, what passes as reality.

The paradox at the core of the Greek Sileni is that they did not contain a holy essence, but rather a gold statuette or representation of a deity. Similarly, the lead casket in *The Merchant of Venice* contained a semblance of an actor. It should not be forgotten that it is Erasmus’ Folly in her encomium to folly that evokes the idea of the Silenus as a metaphor for the truth of ‘[a]ll humaine thynges’ and that she points out that when you open the Silenus: ‘ye shall fynde all things [are] tourned into a new semblance’. ‘[S]emblance’ holds multiple connotations of dissimulation,
especially in early modern English. This duplicitous icon undermines its negative truth—that the reality is mere shadow play—but, by doing so, it supports the contention that it came to embody, which is that it is necessary to have a sceptical attitude towards determinate values, even the determinate value is of universal indeterminacy.

Isabella suggests something comparable Measure for Measure. She informs Angelo that man is ‘Most ignorant of what he’s most assured | His glassy essence’ (Measure for Measure, II. 2. 22-3). Shakespeare shies away from simply positing negative truths about man’s essential ‘ignorance’. The ambiguity in ‘glassy’ allows for an essence that is at once brittle yet solid, translucent yet reflective. If it is translucent, then there is a nihilistic implication. Appearances are an envelope around the void and, as such, all we have. Thus man becomes a perpetual actor—an appropriate enough creed for a dramatist, perhaps. If reflective, then the distinction between appearance and essence is collapsed. We are faced with the proposition that the essence of things actually reflects back this monstrous, quotidian world of appearances from which it is sought. This also suggests, paradoxically, that it is through speculative reflection on semblance that it is possible to get to the essence of things. The fragile truth of the Silenus head lies less in the uncovering of an essence, which is, in any case, a ‘semblance’, and more in the quixotic process of by which this semblance is uncovered.

Fig. 1. Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, ‘Sileni Alcibiades’, Emblema Morales, (1610), National Library, Vienna.

44 Semblance primarily signifies the outward appearance of a thing or a person, but holds multiple connotations of dissimulation, especially in early modern English (compare OED, definitions nos. 1a, 2a and b, 3a and b, 4a and c, 5, 6, 7, 8). 45 Compare OED, (definitions no. 1a,b, c).
The Poetics of Double-talk: John Berryman's *Dream Songs* as Cold War Testimonials

Adam Beardsworth

In *Witness* – his epic, histrionic, and often self-aggrandizing memoir – the reformed communist and senior editor of *Time Magazine* Whittaker Chambers recalls the sense of moral obligation he felt when subpoenaed to testify before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee in 1948:

> I snapped on the light and wrote my managing editor and understanding friend a brief memo. I told him that I expected to be subpoenaed. I told him that any act a man performs, even the simplest and best, may set up reverberations of evil whose consequences it is beyond our power to trace; that my action might cause great suffering. But one man must always be willing to take upon himself the onus of evil that other men may be spared greater evil. For the sake of his children and my own, that all children might be spared the evil of Communism, I was going to testify.¹

Conveyed here as an act of patriotic heroism, Chambers was in fact just performing a duty that government agencies would force hundreds of other Americans to perform as the anti-communist investigations of the 1940s and 1950s intensified. Chambers was a key witness in the case against Alger Hiss, the decorated and dignified State Department bureaucrat, secretary general of the inaugural meeting of the United Nations, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and, to his demise, Soviet agent. According to Chambers, he met Hiss during his own involvement with the Communist party, which purportedly ended in 1938. Though Chambers claims to have once regarded Hiss and his wife as ‘friends as close as a man ever makes in life’,² his testimony against Hiss helped secure an indictment for perjury in 1949. Hiss’s indictment was a pivotal moment in American Cold War culture. The publicity it generated further galvanized the public against the insidious threat of communist infiltration. Hiss’s station as a seemingly mild-mannered, ambitious, and conscientious federal employee only highlighted the inherently duplicitous nature of Soviet agents. The case told the public in no uncertain terms that if the most innocuous of individuals could be spying for the Reds then an even more vigilant surveillance of coworkers, neighbours, even friends was required to prevent communism from infecting the United States. Hiss’s conviction helped legitimize an increasingly pervasive discourse of anti-communist ideology that incorporated agendas of domestic security, internationalism, and xenophobia into a rhetorical strategy that sought to contain dissent and repressed, on the level of official culture, the legitimate anxiety raised by the spectre of atomic oblivion.

It is therefore not surprising that in an era when public objections to American policy were accompanied by the threat of stigmatization and even juridical repercussions a more private, personal style of poetry emerged. The confessional poetry of John Berryman exemplifies this turning away from the gaze of state surveillance and towards an exploration of the private ego in the age of atomic anxiety. *The Dream Songs*, his long-poem masterwork, functions as a sequence of private testimonials. They bear witness to the latent psychological damage caused by the combination of repressive state policies and the epistemological uncertainty that plummeted into American consciousness with the detonation of nuclear weapons in Japan. The instability of his gnarled syntax and ruptured grammaticisms, combined with the anxiety, avarice, guilt, and depression endured by his protagonist Henry, allow Berryman to forge a metacommentary on 1950s and 1960s political and cultural ideology that

² Chambers, *Witness*, p. 70.
testifies to the latent pathologies of containment culture without naming the names of its promoters or exposing its author as seditious.

Modeled, by Berryman’s own admission, after Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself, the poems reexamine the status of the self in post-war America only to find Whitman’s spirit of democratic optimism replaced with an ego torn asunder by the tension between the spectre of nuclear oblivion and the repression of containment culture. Taking the fragmented ego as his starting point, Berryman employs a paratactic poetics of ‘double-talk’ that bears witness to the era’s psychological trauma. The 385 poem sequence frequently enacts the relationship between an insidious body politic and decaying physical and psychological bodies. By evoking scenes of inquisition, torture, and personal disintegration, Berryman acts as a sort of secret agent: his poems use signs of physical suffering as means of asserting a passive agency against the ideological pressures endemic to the Cold War environment. At stake in Berryman’s evocations of inquisition and torture is a way of framing the fragility and weakness of sentient experience as a source of power. By identifying in the suffering body a vestigial core of subjectivity that resists interpellation and symbolization by ideological forces, Berryman retrieves a subject position rooted in the intractable boundaries of somatic experience. While the identification of a core of ontological being has often been deemed politically retrograde by historicist and relativist readings, Berryman’s emphasis on the suffering body places the impulse to freedom beyond cultural concern and reframes it in terms that are as obdurate and intractable as the instinctive desire for material survival. As such, his poems of physical torture, rather than positing the self as an agent of betrayal and confession in an era of political inquisition, evoke the moment of agony as that in which confirmation of the self’s autonomy as an individual agent is most fully realized.

‘Of all nations’, wrote Walt Whitman in his 1865 preface to Leaves of Grass, ‘the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most needs poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as poets shall’. By the mid-1950s, ninety years after Whitman published his preface, his optimism could not have appeared more misguided (nor, arguably, could America have been more in need listening to its poets). The fact that the Walt Whitman School of Social Science of Newark, New Jersey was one of dozens of organizations listed by the Attorney General as potentially totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive reveals the suspicion with which poets and poetry were viewed by the American anti-communist apparatus. The ambiguous nature of poetry could easily have concealed what FBI director J. Edgar Hoover referred to as the ‘deceptiveness of the “double talk”’ of Communism, which fulfilled ‘the useful propaganda technique of confusion’. Within this repressive climate poets such as Berryman had real cause for concern. Berryman relied upon university postings to sustain himself throughout his career. At a time when academics were being routinely purged from their posts for elicting communist sympathies publishing poetry that conveyed Leftist political sympathies, or even dissenting views that could have been construed as Leftist by anti-communist committees, was tantamount to professional suicide. The trick, for Berryman, was to use ‘deceptiveness’ and ‘double talk’ to his advantage. By cultivating an ambiguous subjective poetry that emphasized personal and psychological dissolution, he created a poetry that evoked the anxiety of the tense Cold War environment without ever explicitly challenging or engaging the state apparatus responsible for that anxiety.

Composed in a knotty, often violent, syntax, The Dream Songs chronicle the lascivious, lewd, guilt-ridden, and painful experiences of their protagonist Henry. While the confessional, syntactically broken, and often ambiguous nature of the songs makes their content resistant to easy categorization, they are nevertheless united in their consistent evocations of the experience of pain. The one thing that Henry, as emotionally unstable as he proves to be, is certain about is the fact that he is suffering. This relationship between suffering and certainty is one that Elaine Scarry elucidates in her book The Body in Pain. According to Scarry,

for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that “having pain” may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to “have certainty”, while for the other person it is so elusive that “hearing about pain” may exist as the primary model of what it is “to have doubt”. Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.[5]

It is precisely this relationship between having pain and hearing about pain, between certainty and doubt that Berryman exploits by adopting a confessional mode in The Dream Songs. In political terms, the act of confession under the agonizing duress of interrogation is often regarded as an act of betrayal, both of country and of self. Just as confessional poetry has at times been regarded contemptuously for its transgression of the lines between private and public, political confession under torture is more frequently regarded with contempt than compassion. In the torturer-victim paradigm, the torturer’s power is derived through the obliteration of the victim’s sentence. For the victim, that obliteration is accompanied by both a destruction of language and an absence of world. Conventionally that absence of world, that loss of autonomy under the influence of agonizing pain is the space in which the betrayal of self and nation occurs. Paradoxically, however, that obliteration of world is, for the victim, accompanied by a violent pain that amplifies the certainty of his or her species-being. By exploiting the conventions of confession, Berryman attempts to draw attention not to political betrayal but to pain, torture, and suffering as metaphors for a subjectivity that resists ideological interpellation.

In this regard, Berryman’s double-talk covertly asserts a sense of domestic agency and subjectivity that had otherwise been placed under surveillance and suspicion by state institutions such as the FBI. He dramatizes this experience in ‘Dream Song 8’, where he conveys a tension between torture and resistance as his persona is subjected to the violent inquisition of a group of nameless agents. The poem’s first stanza evokes a tension between a calm political environment and the turmoil of the individual subject:

The weather was fine. They took away his teeth,
white & helpful; bothered his backhand;
halved his green hair.
They blew out his loves, his interests. ‘Underneath,’
(they called in iron voices) ‘understand,
is nothing. So there.”[6]

Located early in the collection, the poem immediately distinguishes between a calm external state and an inner state tormented by persecution and violence. At the beginning of each stanza, Berryman’s speaker claims that the weather was fine; that calm climate is then juxtaposed with images of inquisition and decay. Berryman’s subject, presumably Henry, the protagonist of The Dream Songs, is systematically prodded and tormented by an unnamed ‘They’ who remove his teeth, halve his ‘green hair’, and blow out his loves and interests – lines that indicate he is being inflicted with both physical and psychological violence. The repeated focus on weather invokes not only environmental conditions but also the calm political and cultural climate that the containment apparatus sought to project onto the Cold War public. At the same time the paratactic juxtaposition between the climate and ambiguous forces of persecution suggests that such a calm climate is obtained (and maintained) by aggressively suppressing individual autonomy and expression. This violent suppression is manifested in the actions performed against Henry’s body as he is slowly taken apart by nameless agents. The images of decay suggest an ironic reversal of the biological metaphors often applied to the threat of infection by the insidious disease of communism. Disease and decay, for Berryman’s speaker, comes not from virulent communism but from the state apparatus

mobilized to contain its spread. By taking away his teeth and backhand, the ambiguous ‘They’ disarm the speaker, making him defenseless against their violations. Crucially, his loss of love and interests renders him flaccid and implies a transition from a state of vigour and creativity to a state of apathetic conformity. His inquisitors’ reminder that “‘Underneath’… is nothing” reads like an appeal against confessional poetry’s impulse to find meaning by exploring the self in its relation to the wider social context.

For Berryman, however, the ‘nothing’ that is ‘underneath’ also connotes an essential nothingness at the core of experience. His loss of faith in the progenitors of democratic American values suggests a loss of faith in the conventional, humanist epistemological values that, as some commentators have observed, were displaced by the trauma and violence of the Second World War. As John Gery asserts, “[f]or the person in the aftermath of the horrors of Auschwitz to be alive means to encounter an emptiness or nothingness within the self. This is the paradox of post-Auschwitz consciousness.” In poems such as ‘Dream Song 8’, Berryman heightens this paradox to a fevered tension by recognizing that the postwar individual is afflicted not only by an encounter with nothingness but by the discourse of containment propagated to control the anxiety linked to such an encounter. The self is therefore torn between a desire for autonomy and stability in the face of nothingness, and coercions to conformity made by a powerful apparatus of Cold War ideology.

This becomes clearer in the second stanza, where, after being surrounded by mirrors that prompt him into a state of self-examination, Henry begins to ‘flow’:

    The weather was very fine. They lifted off
    his covers till he showed, and cringed & pled
to see himself less.
    They installed mirrors till he flowed. ‘Enough’
    (murmured they) ‘if you will watch Us instead,
yet you may saved be. Yes.’

The esoteric application of the verb ‘flow’ evokes multiple meanings. On one level, it suggests a purgative bleeding or crying related to his loss of identity: Henry’s sense of stable selfhood figuratively flows out of him as he endures the attacks of his interrogators. On another level, the ‘flow’ evokes the flow of the pen, the act of writing an unstable identity that is further destabilized by the incursions of his interlocutors. The nameless ‘They’ who have coerced the subject into this state of flowing seem to immediately recognize that they have seen “Enough” flowing and that the subject should instead watch them if he wishes to be saved. This reveals how introspection beyond the gaze of state surveillance, and, more importantly, the recording of that introspection in the form of writing subverts their authority and therefore must be contained.

However, the broken paratactic style of Berryman’s poetics is devised specifically with the subversion of such containment in mind. It is stylistically evocative of what Theodor Adorno identifies as the paratactic method in Hölderlin’s hymns and fragments. According to Adorno, parataxis, the ‘juxtaposition, without explanatory correctives, of various syntactical and grammatical elements’, works to ‘reject a bourgeois poetic realism that strives to duplicate the unfreedom of human beings, their subjection to machinery and its latent law, the commodity form’. In Adorno’s terms, a fractured paratactic style is a necessary means of destabilizing a reality from which conventional notions of self have been estranged. The flow of Henry’s selfhood in ‘Dream Song 8’ is broken and fragmented by the paratactic method through which it is communicated. As such, it attests to the

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8 Berryman, p. 10.
fragmented nature of postwar identity. *The Dream Songs* therefore witness the schizophrenic nature of the ego on the level of structure as much, or more than, on the level of content. By integrating the concept of witnessing into his structural paradigm, Berryman imitates the experience of anxiety and repression while circumventing the repercussions of overt political critique.

While this paratactic flow of language seeks to subvert containment, the final stanza implies that overcoming such repression is difficult. Henry’s eyes are ‘weakened’ and his ears plugged by ‘burning thumbs’ as he listens to ‘long silent speeches.’ The silent speeches conjure the rhetoric of Cold War political ideology. Their assault on the speaker’s eyes and ears conveys the irritating persistence with which the Cold War citizen is exposed to a containment rhetoric that ranged from overt political speeches to discourses of consumerism and domesticity generated by an increasingly pervasive mass culture. The assault also indicates the damage endured by individual agency in a repressive environment, insofar as the very faculties required for the recognition of repression are being attacked. And while the speeches are ‘silent,’ an adjective that connotes both their lack of substantive meaning and their lack of visible effect on the public, their persistence and prevalence is still powerful enough not only to sandpaper his speaker’s ‘plumpest hope’ for discovering a stable identity but also to ‘take away his crotch.’

This final, emasculating blow conveys a lack of potency on behalf of the individual citizen, and a loss of fertility within the American critical and creative paradigm. The Cold War apparatus, by way of its tactics of repression and coercion, bullies citizens into a state of conformity that effectively castrates critical and creative concerns. The castration places the individual in a position of inferiority, one that closets or contains his identity. Berryman’s sexual metaphor asserts not only a loss of power against the ambiguous ‘They’ but also the implicit alterity of his speaker. His castrated, closeted sexuality subordinates his identity to the vigorous public authority of state ideology. As subsequent Dream Songs make clear, it is into the cloistered recesses of his own subjectivity that Henry turns in order to express the ethos of disintegration that characterizes postwar experience.

Rather than surrendering to this castrated position, however, Berryman exploits the pressures it places on somatic experience as signifiers of a vestigial core of subjectivity that remains obdurate even in the face of ideological repression. As Scarry argues, intense pain leads not only to the ‘destruction of the spatial universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body’ but it is also ‘language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject’. In *Dream Song 8*, Henry’s attempts to articulate his anxiety are frequently undercut by gnarled syntax and linguistic dissolution. (See, for example, Henry’s frequent forays into baby talk, as in Song 5 where: ‘Henry sats in de bar & was odd,/ off in the glass from the glass,/ at odds wif de world & its god’; or in Song 65, where his lines wander into tangled, Hopkins-esque grammatical dead ends: ‘Does Striding Edge block wild the sky as then/ when Henry with his mystery was two/ & twenty, high on the hog’; and also in his deliberate fracturing of his own metrical pattern, which occurs both frequently and haphazardly throughout the collection demonstrates his struggle to symbolize somatic experience in conventional linguistic terms.

In this regard, Henry’s struggles with language convey their own sense of suffering and torture. Slavoj Žižek, following Lacan, articulates this relationship between language and torture in *The Ticklish Subject*. According to Žižek:

> [m]an does not dwell in a mere [Heideggerian] “prison-house of language” […] he dwells in a torture-house of language: the entire range of psychopathologies deployed by Freud, from conversion-symptoms inscribed into the body up to total psychotic breakdowns, are the scars of this permanent torture, so

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10 Scarry, p. 35.
many signs of an original and irremediable gap between the subject and language, so many signs that man can never be at home in his own home.[11]

Henry, already tortured by the exterior pressures of his surveillance culture, experiences a further sense of suffering when his attempts to express his pain draw attention to this irremediable gap between, in Lacanian terms, the Real trauma the speaker experiences when confronted by the torturous anxieties of cold war experience and the ability to register that trauma symbolically in language. It is his inability to reconcile cold war traumas within the realm of symbolic representation that lead to his continued sense of frustration and psychological disintegration.

The need for a poetics capable of recording the traumatic anxieties of postwar experience is indicated by the immense and successful impact the ‘silent speeches’ of Cold War ideology had on the American populace. Evidence suggests that most Americans were listening carefully to the warnings about the communist menace issued by their government. Propagating the metaphor of communism-as-disease, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, whose own closeted sexuality has posthumously made him an infamous personage, warned in a 1947 HUAC testimonial that ‘Communism […] is a way of life—an evil and malignant way of life. It reveals a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic and like an epidemic a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the nation.’[12] The public testimony of HUAC witnesses such as Chambers, Hiss, and Hoover helped facilitate unprecedented measures of political repression. It is no coincidence that within two weeks of Hiss’s sentencing ‘the Lincoln Day orator for the Republican Women of Wheeling, West Virginia, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R_Wis.) claimed to have in his hand a list of 205 Communists’ still working for the U.S. State Department.[13] Throughout the McCarthy[14] era, hundreds of public officials, intellectuals, actors, writers, and private citizens were systematically called to testify before HUAC. Many, including the infamous Hollywood Ten[15], were denied Fifth Amendment rights and cited for contempt for their refusal to cooperate with the commission. Others, fearing for their personal well-being and the well-being of their families, spared themselves by naming names, often, as in the case of Chambers, those of close friends and associates. It was, as Ellen Schrecker observes, ‘a crude political test—and one that caused enormous anguish for the committees’ witnesses,’ particularly because ‘by the 1950s, many of the people who appeared before HUAC and the other committees had already dropped out of the Communist party and were no longer politically active’.[16]

For Berryman, as for many Americans, the anguish caused by repression was doubled by the epistemological incertitude created by the spectre of the bomb. The paradoxical tension between the desire for affirmation against both repression and the spectre of oblivion demanded a poetics capable of confronting and exploring that trauma and tension head-on, one that overcame modernist impersonality and broke back into the personal life.

12 Hoover, p. 133.
14 McCarthyism, or the McCarthy era, refers to a period of heightened anti-communist activity by the American government. Named for the Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was famous for extolling the need for increased vigilance against the communist threat, the term does not refer exclusively to McCarthy but to the general tactics of repression and persecution enacted by such government committees as the House UnAmerican Activities Committee roughly from the late 1940s until McCarthy’s death in 1956. The persecution of often innocent civil servants, actors, writers, and intellectuals that characterized McCarthyism has led some observers to label its tactics ‘witch hunts.’
15 On November 25, 1947, ten influential Hollywood writers and directors were ‘blacklisted’ and fired from their positions the Motion Picture Association of America. The blacklisting came one day following their citation for Contempt of US Congress after they refused to give testimony to the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. Those named included Ring Lardner, Jr. and Dalton Trumbo. While this blacklisting remains one of the McCarthyist era’s most infamous, it was by no means its only. The appearance of a pamphlet called Red Channels in 1950, which named 151 ‘Red Fascists and their sympathizers,’ meant many more Hollywood industry workers lost their jobs and had their reputations tarnished. The blacklist on many of those named was not lifted until approximately 1960.
Berryman's focus on anguish highlights a personal reaction to policies of cultural standardization. Nowhere is this more evident than in 'The Lay of Ike', a poem about Eisenhower's election to a second term, and one of the few Dream Songs that, to a certain extent, discusses politics overtly. The poem's first stanza reads:

Here’s to the glory of the Great White —awk—
who has been running—er—er—things in recent—ech—
in the United—If your screen is black,
ladies & gentlemen, we—I like—
at the Point he was already terrific—sick

Composed shortly after Eisenhower was elected to a second term in the White House in the late 1950s, Berryman uses the word 'lay' to invoke the anti-intellectual Eisenhower as a layman, a man ill-fitted for the task of president, and to suggest the deadness of his administration by asserting that Ike was 'lying in state'. The poem's coy sexual pun also posits Ike as a prostrate body getting 'laid' by an American populace that has been seduced by his anti-intellectual rhetoric. Berryman uses parataxis to evoke a sense of frustration with Eisenhower without manifesting an overt critique. However, the 'enervation and helplessness' of the actual response is itself an evocation of the subject's inability to express intellectual agency in the McCarthy era. Using guttural utterances as end points for apparent lines of praise suggests both an inability to verbally manifest such praise and a latent contempt for Eisenhower as its subject, as in 'Here's to the glory of the Great White—awk'. While 'awk' homonymically suggests a rare bird, the spelling implies a regurgitative sound meant to convey disgust. Later unable to complete Eisenhower's juvenile sounding 'I like Ike' campaign slogan, Berryman invokes Eisenhower's early promise at West Point Academy where 'he was already terrific—sick'. The word sick sits unpunctuated at the end of the stanza without making a tangible transition to the next stanza. It again serves a dual function: suggesting that there is something 'sick' about Eisenhower (or that the statement is incorrect, as in 'sic') but, more importantly, something 'sick' about the speaker himself insofar as he is incapable of utilizing language to convey an articulate political response.

From this linguistically fractured perspective, it is the actual form of the poem, rather than the message that it conveys, that is Berryman's most potent testimonial. By enacting both the body's physical and linguistic dissolution in the midst of pervasive ideological pressures, Berryman evokes the physical body itself as the sign of suffering. Paradoxically, it is precisely within this moment of suffering that he is able to retrieve a sense of identity that exceeds the ideological determinations of the Cold War surveillance state. Divested of both physical and intellectual autonomy, Berryman's speaker is frequently reduced to bare somatic experience. No longer sustained by language, his desires and actions now reside purely in the form of a tortured and mutilated sentence. For Berryman, this reductive stance is its own form of praxis. It recognizes a vestige of subjectivity in that bareness, one that, through its abject nature (and in spite of its linguistic irreconcilability), will not conform to the strictures of a socialized sentence. In this figure of torture and mutilation emerges Berryman's agent of resistance: not the transparent thinking self of the Cartesian cogito but the subject of mutilation which finds its indexical point in a space of violence and pain that resists objectification and symbolization. The very linguistic spasms of Berryman's style defy containment bearing witness to the volatile anxiety beneath the veneer of Cold War consensus culture.

While this form of agency is a compromised one at best, it nevertheless asserts that Berryman's confessional poems are in fact objects of resistance invested in maintaining a core of subjectivity rather than objects of betrayal that decry the self as purely maudlin, procean, and self-interested. In the figure of the body in pain, Berryman defines a moment of passive resistance, one that manifests itself in a desire to directly confront the most bare experience of existence, or confrontation with the Lacanian Real. In the penultimate Dream Song, number 384,

17 Berryman, p. 25.
Berryman conjures this confrontation with the Lacanian Real directly when Henry visits the grave of his father ‘who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn.’ Deprived of agency beyond his bare subject position, the poem helps to end the long sequence with an image of Henry seeking to gain further control of the irreconcilable gap between the his sense of bare, traumatic torture and his desire to render that experience linguistically, as he claims he would like to

Scrabble till I got right down
away down under the grass

and ax the casket open ha to see
just how he’s taking it, which he sought so hard
we’ll tear apart
the mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry will heft the ax once more, his final card,
and fell it on the start.18

Henry’s desire to encounter the corpse of his dead father indicates a longing to come to terms with the spectral violence that has haunted him for his adult life. The dead father, while clearly evocative of Berryman’s own personal history, also functions within the collection’s wider metonymic architecture as one of several ‘fathers’ who have abandoned Henry (and Berryman) in the postwar climate, a list that includes the likes of Whitman, Lincoln, Stephen Crane, Randall Jarrell, and several other key figures of stability within the American political and cultural environment. The absence of the father thus reflects the loss of a transcendental signifier capable of organizing experience within the uncertain postwar environment. While Henry wishes to ‘[s]crabble’ down and reclaim that signifier, doing so would be tantamount to an encounter with the Lacanian Real, the traumatic point of rupture that exists beyond symbolic formulation. Given that much of the tension generated by Henry’s testimony in *The Dream Songs* surrounds his inability to adequately symbolize the trauma of the postwar environment, it seems apt that the collection’s second-last poem expresses his frustration about his inability to fully confront the trauma of the Real. It is perhaps also apt that Henry appears to recognize that a full reconciliation with the Real will come only when he turns that axe on himself, which he claims will be the playing of his ‘final card.’

However, it remains significant that the voice Henry adopts for this poem is speculative rather than assertive. The final act that the poem foretells remains an act of futurity, one that gestures towards an incommensurable desire for the Real but that does not describe Henry actually going through with that act. Instead, it describes the suffering that Henry endures as he longs for reprieve from his tortured existences within the postwar ideological scenario. For Berryman, this emphasis on Henry’s suffering demonstrates the conviction that, in a historical moment of state surveillance and socialized sentience, the figure of the self-in-pain, as a signifier of injustice, also manifests itself as a primary object of resistance and rupture. By bringing to light a vestigial core of subjectivity in the figure of obdurate and material suffering, the poem, like many others in the collection, defines an age of violence and rupture.

Berryman’s confessional aesthetic therefore acts as a form of witnessing that is antithetical to the overt tales of communist infiltration and espionage recounted in texts such as Chambers’s *Witness*. Whereas Chambers’s content is manifest and supports the dominant anti-communist ideology of the era, Berryman uses Henry as an informant of the psychic fragmentation caused by confrontation with the era’s epistemological incertitude. The critical

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18 Berryman, p. 25.
consensus on John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* has too often ignored this political element of his work. Harold Bloom proclaims that ‘[t]o compare them, as some admirers do, to *Song of Myself*, is palpably an error; they are neither of that mode nor anywhere close to that astonishing eminence’.\(^1\) Bloom’s assessment, however, fails to contextualize the poems within their Cold War milieu. Though the songs were inspired by *Song of Myself*, they were composed in opposition to the ‘astonishing eminence’ of Whitman’s democratic vistas. While Whitman’s harmonious American ‘self’ inspired Berryman to reject New Critical impersonality and relocate the self in American poetry, the self he found was one that had been fractured, tortured, and rendered irreconcilably anxious by the ideological pressures of American Cold War culture. Rather than singing the harmony of the American self, *The Dream Songs* sing its cacophony. As a witness, Henry sees beyond the dominant narrative of anti-communism and reveals the domestic scourge of ideological containment. His metacommentaries function as compelling testimonials of the psychological burdens endured by individuals in Cold War culture. The dialectical nature of the poems enacts a tension between autonomy and conformity, while their parataxis evokes the psychic disarray caused by the excessive guilt and anxiety that is symptomatic in an environment afflicted by trauma and ideological repression. While saying very little about the public state of Cold War politics, *The Dream Songs* confess volumes about the private pathologies of a neurotic cultural era.

Since the time of Freud’s talking cure, it has been accepted that talking about one’s traumatic experiences allows for healing. In her study of trauma stories in contemporary women’s literature, critic Deborah Horvitz concludes that since narrative is ‘inextricably entwined with memory and the process of remembering, the greater one’s ability to ‘make story’ out of trauma [. . .] the more likely s/he is to regain control of her or his life after that trauma’.1 Indeed, since narrative is so clearly tied to identity construction, telling one’s story allows a trauma victim to make sense of the past in ways that incorporate it into a manageable part of identity. For as Susan Engel explains, by putting traumatic experience into a story, ‘you have a chance to rework it, go over and over it until you understand it.’2 Additionally, the act of being heard and seen by another individual in the process of telling can be healing. As Clare Woodward and Stephen Joseph explain, ‘the experience of being listened to and being seen by another person can be a powerful validation for those who have felt unheard and invisible.’3 Numerous studies have thus shown that having the ability and opportunity to engage in memory narratives is ‘fundamental not only to developing and maintaining a sense of self but to repairing a sense of self rendered vulnerable through harm or abuse’.4 Dorothy Allison reveals the power of narrating a history of trauma as she relates her memories of the childhood sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather in her semi-autobiographical novel Bastard Out of Carolina. In doing so, she begins to enact her own ‘talking cure.’ More importantly, through her fictionalized character, Ruth Anne Boatwright, nicknamed Bone, she demonstrates how storied memories, memories translated into stories that consciously and unconsciously blur fiction and truth, can lead to resistance and healing.

After reading Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, an account of a father raping his own daughter, Allison began to search through her own memories of childhood physical and sexual abuse, as well as her personal shame derived from her self-proclaimed white-trash identity. In a book of essays, she relates what she calls ‘the central fact’ of her life: ‘the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it.’5 Thus, in her own writing, published in the genres of short-story, memoir, performance art, autobiography, and novel, Allison has grappled with her memories of incest, trauma, and class-based shame. As she returns again and again to the same topics—a stepfather who abused her, a mother who literally and figuratively abandoned her, an extended family for whom she both loved and felt ashamed—she offers what Moira P. Baker calls ‘an uncompromising vision of the ugliness and injustice of poverty’6 and what Tanya Horeck calls ‘one of American literature’s most harrowing fictions of child abuse’.7 Her repeated focus on

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4 Sue Campbell, Relational Remembering: Rethinking the Memory Wars (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 43
these topics in so many of her written works illustrates Allison’s ability and need, to recount her history of trauma in multiple ways: indeed, she is constantly searching for ways to tell and retell her memories. Allison records her memories repeatedly, for, she found that the act of ‘writing it all down was purging’ and that ‘putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them’. Still, Morrison has said that in writing The Bluest Eye, she wanted to ‘write a book about a kind of person that was never in literature anywhere, never taken seriously by anybody’. Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina does similar work. Even though narratives about sexual abuse had become much more common by the 1992 publication of her novel, Allison paints Bone as a character who ultimately (re)claims power by finding voice in story. Bone narrates her own identity—initially through horror stories and masochistic sexual fantasies, and later, as a more mature storyteller—in ways that prompt her audience to take her, her traumatic experiences, and her white-trash identity seriously. Just as Morrison uses The Bluest Eye to validate the life experiences of Poccola, Frieda, and Claudia, claiming their stories are worth telling, Allison legitimizes Bone’s struggles with trauma and poverty, as well as her process of storytelling, claiming that her story/stories must also be told.

Just as Bone is faced with white-trash shame in addition to the trauma of physical and sexual abuse, Allison is acutely aware of the complex interplay of forces that have governed her own life. As she explains to her critics, it is necessary not ‘to ignore how much my life was shaped by growing up poor and talk only about what incest did to my identity as a woman and as a lesbian. The difficulty is that I can’t ascribe everything that has been problematic about my life simply and easily to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much denied class structure of our society’. All of these interconnected elements, many of them traumatic, have shaped her as a person and as a writer. At the same time, in describing her inspiration for Bastard Out of Carolina, she explains, ‘I knew there was only one story that would haunt me until I understood how to tell it—the complicated, painful story of how my Mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl’. The relationship between the protagonist of Allison’s semi-autobiographical novel, Bone, and her mother, Anney, then, becomes the key element in understanding both the novel and Allison’s own life and traumas. Bone and Anney’s relationship is shaped by patriarchy, incest, poverty, and shame—something that can also be said for Allison and her own mother. Thus, as literary critic Jillian Sandell has explained, Allison is ‘trying to perform what Minnie Bruce Pratt calls “practicing memory”’ as she develops the character of Bone in her semi-autobiographical novel. Like the victims of trauma described by psychologists, Allison ‘uses the narrative form as a safe space to hold culturally specific memories and family stories,’ specifically memories of trauma. In an attempt ‘To tell the truth and to pay homage to the people who helped to make me the person I’ve become’, Allison has created, in Bastard Out of Carolina, a narrative that is ‘not biography, and yet not lies’—a narrative that ‘resonate[s] to the pulse of my sisters’ fear and my desperate shame’. And in Bastard Out of Carolina, Allison captures both horrific scenes of violence, abuse, and shame as she tells the story of Bone’s traumatic coming of age and also shows how Bone, like the typical trauma victim, struggles to understand her abuse and integrate it into her larger life narrative. In so doing, Allison moves beyond her own story of victimization and empowerment, as well as Bone’s, to explore the potential power found in voicing one’s trauma in story.

At the most basic level, in what could be called a form of scriptotherapy, or ‘therapeutic writing’ that can ‘create a new context and the opportunity for reframing, which potentially generates different perceptions, expectations,
and ultimately, behavior’. Allison uses writing to work through her personal past. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, she has chosen the genre of a fictional novel that incorporates a number of autobiographical elements. According to Richard Riordan, in scriptotherapy, ‘The use of written imagery in creating a story, poem, or journal seems to give the writer access to more material, perhaps allowing the unconscious to become conscious’. He goes on to cite a 1984 case study of a rape victim, who, through writing a fictionalized short story about her rape, was able to ‘master the trauma by altering the fictional circumstances and creating a new outcome’. Indeed, revisiting one’s own history of trauma through a fictional account can allow for a sense of safety, providing distance from the actual event, while also allowing one to work through it to find ways in which to reclaim agency, something we can see in Allison’s novel. However, Allison’s choice to blur fiction with traditional autobiography is more than a simple example of scriptotherapy.

Allison’s complex blend of fact and fiction, played out over the course of her novel, suggests a more conscious investigation into the power of storied memory. In turn, she complicates our notions of what constitutes autobiography. In her examination of truth and fiction in the genre of autobiography, literary critic Leigh Gilmore considers traditional autobiography’s ‘almost legalistic definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable’. She goes on to suggest that, especially in autobiographical accounts of trauma, audience expectation for truth may be ‘inimical to the ways in which some writers bring trauma stories into language.’ She argues, ‘the portals are too narrow and the demands are too restrictive.’ Gilmore also identifies an inherent threat when narrating autobiographical accounts of trauma, especially in an age of ‘false memory syndrome’, where accounts of sexual abuse are often questioned and disavowed: ‘When the contest is over who can tell the truth, the risk of being accused of lying (or malingering, or inflating, or whining) threatens the writer into continued silence’. Allison acknowledges this form of critical response to the autobiographical elements of her novel, as she has felt the need to defend her family. As Allison explains in an interview, ‘The thing that must be kept in mind about Bone is that I gave her my family. Or at least a version of my family, and one thing that happened to me after I wrote the book is that when I went around with it, I had to answer for my family. There was no way not to talk about my real family in contrast to Bone’s imagined family’. To avoid such scrutiny surrounding accounts of trauma, Gilmore observes that many writers, including Allison, ‘move away from recognizable autobiographical forms’ as a way to ‘shift the ground of judgment toward a perspective she [the author] has struggled to achieve.’ In other words, readers will not question the veracity of the author’s history of trauma, but will, instead, explore the dynamics and implications of that trauma in the lives of the characters. However, Allison suggests that her move towards fiction is even more complicated than this. She says, ‘Sorting out reality from fiction is really difficult to achieve. And I’m not tied too tightly to the real world.’ Allison, here, dismisses audience concern over truth and fiction, suggesting that imagination and reality are inherently intertwined. Certainly, in a legal setting, debates about truth versus fiction are integral to the pursuit of justice, but in her novel, Allison is able to do a different sort of memory-work. Thus, she reshapes ‘our critical understanding of what autobiography is and what it can do’, by translating personal memories into storied memories. Consequently, she is able to demonstrate a model for empowerment through memorised-storytelling in her characterization of Bone.

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15 Riordan, p. 264.
17 Gilmore, p. 3.
18 Gilmore, p. 3.
20 Gilmore, pp. 7 & 23.
22 Gilmore, p. 49.
Bone’s abuse begins when she is five years old. Glen Waddell, Bone’s stepfather, first molests her while she and her sister are sleeping in the car in the hospital parking lot, waiting for their mother to have a baby that does not ultimately survive. Pulling Bone into the front seat of the car, Glen rocks her on his lap, and as he holds ‘himself in his fingers,’ Bone ‘knew what it was under his hand,’ just as she knew that ‘he was hurting me, hurting me!’ (p. 47). But after he leaves the car, returning to Anney in the hospital, she wonders if she ‘had dreamed that whole early-morning scene. I kept squeezing my thighs together, feeling the soreness, and trying to imagine how I could have bruised myself if it had been a dream’ (p. 48). Although she knows it was not a dream, as a pre-teen, she ‘remembered those moments in the hospital parking lot like a bad dream, hazy and shadowed,’ and she thinks, ‘Maybe it had not happened’ (p. 51). That Bone does not have a clear, integrated memory of the event, but instead she recalls blurry fragments of the trauma, reveals the haunting power of traumatic memory. While she does not repress her molestation, she does wonder about what actually occurred, asking herself, ‘Sex. Was that what Daddy Glen had been doing to me in the parking lot?’ (p. 63). As a five-year-old, Bone simply does not have the language to understand the traumatic event that has occurred. As Gilmore explains, ‘Bone’s pain, terror, and disorientation at the time of the initial molestation is compounded by the absence of language in which to say what has happened and is continuing to happen to her, as well as the absence of context in which to form this language.’ Likewise, Lynda Hart observes, ‘[O]ne of the effects of incest for the abused child is that she is unable to tell her “secret,” not only because she has no language, as a child, to articulate a sexual experience that surpasses her linguistic command but also because the “experience” itself surpasses the lexicon of “reality.”’ Thus, it is not only Bone’s age that makes her unable to narrate her memories of trauma. She is also encountering the struggle to put the unspeakable into language.

At the same time, Bone is taught at an early age that she must protect her mother. After her family returns from the hospital after the first molestation, Aunt Raylene says to Bone, ‘When a woman loses a baby, she needs to know that her other babies are well and happy. You be happy for her, Bone. You let your Mama know you are happy so she can heal her heart’ (p. 49). This becomes Bone’s task—to protect and heal her mother’s pain without consideration of the costs to herself. Even if she had the language to narrate her memories, she would continue to carry the burden herself to protect Anney. Therefore, as the abuse continues and becomes both sexual and physical, Bone refrains from telling her mother.

As she remains quiet about the terror she is being forced to endure, like many victims of sexual abuse, Bone begins to blame herself: ‘I only knew that there was something I was doing wrong, something terrible. He said, “You drive me crazy, in a strange distracted voice, and I shuddered but believed him’ (p. 109). Likewise, she begins to exhibit many of the classic symptoms of the trauma victim described by psychologist Kai Erickson. That Bone experiences the trauma victim’s ‘gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, and a general closing off of spirit becomes more and more evident as the abuse continues’. Over time, Bone begins to believe what Daddy Glen says of her. ‘Maybe I was a bad girl, evil, nasty, willful, stupid, ugly—everything he said. Maybe I was, but it didn’t matter,’ she thinks at one point (p. 252). Subjected to Daddy Glen’s contempt, she becomes deeply demoralized: ‘When I saw myself in Daddy Glen’s eyes, I wanted to die. No, I wanted to be already dead, cold, and gone. Everything felt hopeless. He looked at me and I was ashamed of myself’ (p. 209). At the same time, she also begins breaking into the ‘explosive rages’ that often are seen in trauma victims, further exhibiting her post-traumatic symptoms. As she stands in Daddy Glen’s parents’ yard, she says, ‘I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything I glanced at. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up’ (p. 103). Later, when she has a fight with one of her only friends, Shannon, she has a similar

23 Gilmore, p. 58.
26 Erikson, p. 184.
reaction: her anger is a ‘raw boiling rage in my stomach’ (p. 207). Over time, her rage begins to extend toward everyone and everything she encounters. As Bone asserts, ‘I was a bowl of hatred, boiling black and thick behind my eyes’ (p. 252).

Still, believing that she is at fault for her abuse and believing she has no power to stop it, Bone does not tell her mother about the sexual abuse: ‘He never said “Don’t tell your Mama.” He never had to say it. [. . .] I could not tell Mama’ (109). And when Daddy Glen begins to beat her—supposedly for her own good—Bone realizes that her mother cannot save her. The first time Glen beats her, Anney stands outside the bathroom door, helpless. Bone recalls:

> It [his belt] hit me and I screamed. Daddy Glen swung his belt again. I screamed at its passage through the air, screamed before it hit me. I screamed for Mama. He was screaming with me, his great hoarse shouts as loud as my high thin squeals, and behind us, outside the locked door, Reese was screaming too, and then Mama. All of us screaming, and no one could help. (p. 106)

As the beatings continue and Anney notices Bone’s bruises and fractures from the beatings, Bone is unable to testify to what is actually occurring, for she feels responsible in her abuse. She explains, ‘I was always getting hurt, it seemed, in ways Mama could not understand and I could not explain. [. . .] I didn’t know what to say to her. [. . .] I remained silent, stubborn, resentful, and collected my bruises as if they were unavoidable’ (p. 111). Bone cannot explain because she has not yet claimed her voice, nor does she know how to begin putting her experiences into words. Anney’s presence outside the locked door remains a constant factor in Bone’s story of physical abuse: ‘Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door. Afterward she would cry and wash my face and tell me not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad’ (p. 110). Anney’s response also seems to remain the same throughout the years of abuse—she continually places the onus of abuse onto her daughter. She cries, ‘Oh girl, Oh, honey. Baby, what did you do? What did you do?’ (p. 107). In effect, she blames Bone and excuses Daddy Glen, and Bone continues to believe this convoluted thinking to be true.

Without her mother’s protection, Bone is left to fend for herself, and she ultimately finds some semblance of protection in her emerging ability to tell stories, a mode of empowerment that ultimately helps her to survive and move beyond her trauma. Bone has always thirsted for family stories, and the skill of narrating a story is one Bone learns from her family and develops over the course of the novel. The Boatwrights are notorious storytellers. Bone describes how Granny ‘would lean back in her chair and start reeling out story and memory, making no distinction between what she knew to be true and what she had only heard told. [. . .] Everything seemed to come back to grief and blood, and everybody seemed legendary’ (p. 26). The uncles and aunts are also tellers of family lore. The uncles would go out to Aunt Raylene’s to fish, and although ‘the bells would tinkle now and then,’ signalling they had a bite, ‘they didn’t always stop to go get their catch. Sometimes the whiskey and the stories were too good’ (p. 181). Anney, however, does not share the gift of story that her brothers and sisters hold so dear. This becomes evident when Bone searches for information about her real father. Bone recalls, ‘There weren’t any pictures of my real daddy, and Mama wouldn’t talk to me about him—no more than she would about the rest of the family’ (p. 25). Bone continues, ‘I was so insistent on knowing anything about my missing father. I wouldn’t have minded a lie. I just wanted the story Mama would have told. What was the thing she wouldn’t tell me, the first thing, the place where she had made herself different from all her brothers and sisters and shut her mouth on her life?’ (p. 31). Bone, here, dismisses the desire to distinguish fact from fiction, instead suggesting that it is the story, itself, that is important. However, Anney denies Bone’s need for a storied history to make sense of the past. Anney’s resistance to the stories and memories of her past is reiterated in another incident, as Earle tries to tell Bone about her Aunt Carr, who has moved to Baltimore. Earle says to Bone, ‘You know your mama don’t want me to tell you that story’; to Anney he jokes, ‘You just don’t want me telling stories where you can’t hear, little sister.’ Anney retorts, ‘One of these days your stories are gonna come back on you. You ain’t gonna know

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what to say then, I swear’ (p. 90). Here, Anney demonstrates her knowledge that sharing stories of the past could affect her, or even come to haunt her. And if Anney ever did share her family inclination to tell stories of the past, her relationship with Glen simply silences her: ‘She just got quiet, more and more quiet all the time. I begged her to tell me stories like Granny did, but she said I was too young to hear such things’ (p.110). As Horvitz argues, just as Anney is unconscious when Bone is born, she is ‘metaphorically “unconscious” to Glen’s abuse.’ Horvitz asserts that this ‘addresses the potentially cataclysmic repercussions of lying to oneself and refusing to bear witness to one’s own story’.27 Anney never tells her story—and she suffers for it.

Additionally, it is no surprise that Glen does not like the girls hearing the Boatwright family stories, for the stories and memories connect them to a rich family history that he desires to destroy. As Bone explains, ‘Daddy Glen didn’t like us listening to all those stories Granny and Aunt Alma were always telling over and over again.’ He continues, ‘Your granny is the worst kind of liar. That old woman wouldn’t tell the truth if she knew it’ (p. 52). Glen remains uncomfortable with the family’s mode of history-making that blurs fact and fiction, unable to accept that there may be more than one way to narrate history. Although Bone ‘didn’t trust Daddy Glen, didn’t believe him when he said all Granny’s stories were lies,’ there are points when she, too, initially struggles with the distinction between reality and fantasy. She explains, ‘I never could be sure which of the things she told me were true and which she just wished were true, stories good enough to keep even if they were three-quarters false. All the Boatwrights told stories, it was one of the things we were known for, and what one cousin swore was gospel, another swore just as fiercely was an unqualified lie’ (pp. 52-53). As Sandell argues, Bone comes to realize ‘how meanings and histories are always both relational and contestable. There is no single truth, only versions of the truth’.28 By accepting that there are multiple versions of the past, Bone learns from her family the power of a good story to change the account of the past, and this is a lesson that will help her survive haunting memories of traumatic abuse. After hearing a family story in which Aunt Alma threw her housedress at the county sheriff as she was being evicted, Bone is told, ‘Oh no, girl. That’s just what people tell. She didn’t really do that. She just threatened to do that.’ And Bone concludes, ‘It’s a better story if she had done it, which is probably why they say she stripped down to her panties, huh?’ (p. 189). If the Boatwrights can change family history to make a better story, a more bearable storied memory can make a history of traumatic abuse easier to survive and overcome.

Allison, herself, is very aware of the power of story to reflect different versions of the past. As she describes the Boatwright family in an interview:

[T]hey all tell stories, and they have a way of storytelling that in some way parallels gospel music. Like choruses that repeat [. . .] Just different versions. [. . .] And everything was constructed around what these people, who were essentially aunts and uncles, were giving [to] Bone: a sense of who she was in the world—what her possibilities were.29

And so, as Bone spends time with each of her aunts in order to avoid encounters with Daddy Glen, she begins to learn of ‘her possibilities’ as a Boatwright woman—possibilities that are defined by shame and by strength. As Shawn E. Miller notes, ‘Throughout the remainder of the novel, Bone will concern herself with learning the lore of that matrix [the Boatwright clan] as a method of determining her place in it’.30 It is this lore that will ultimately help her to integrate her experiences of abuse and loss into her understanding of who she is as a person and who she is as a Boatwright woman.

27 Horvitz, p. 52.
28 Sandell, p. 218.
Significantly, when Bone begins to tell her own stories, she tells horrific stories of ‘boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered’—stories, that is, of abuse (p. 119). As the storytelling ‘habit’ becomes ‘strong’ in her, she compulsively tells stories, and the more stories she tells, the better the storyteller she becomes: ‘My cousins loved my stories. [...] I got to be very popular as a baby-sitter; everyone was quiet and well-behaved while I told my stories, their eyes fixed on my face’ (pp. 118-9). As she conveys her own horrific abuse in her horror stories, she feels empowered as a storyteller, and this power correlates with the power she achieves in her masturbatory fantasies of her abuse. Indeed, Allison’s novel, as Vincent King contends, ‘focuses on Bone’s awkward efforts to survive, and even transmute, these horrors’.31 Bone, in part, survives because her fantasies allow her, in the realm of fiction, what Tanya Horeck describes as ‘a space of self-preservation where she can survive the everyday violence she must endure’.32 While Bone has these fantasies because of Daddy Glen’s abuse, to Horeck, ‘the crucial point is that she desperately needs them,’ for they are one of the only places where she is in control.33 Not only do the narratives provide her a sense of control, but they also allow her to story her memories of abuse in such a way that prompts her to shift her conception of self from the powerless victim of oppression to the defiant survivor. As Bone rewrites the memories of her abuse in her masturbatory fantasies, Allison explains, ‘she retains a sense of power in a situation where she has none’.34 For instance, when she masturbates with the chain she finds in the lake, using the lock she found on the river bank to fasten the chain around her hips, she feels ‘locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched’ (p. 193). Likewise, Bone gains ‘comfort,’ according to Allison, by ‘retelling herself the story in which she is not the victim,’ but instead, ‘becomes the heroine. Even when she’s the martyred heroine, she’s still the heroine and they love her fiercely’.35 This is most clear in her masturbatory fantasy in which people watch Daddy Glen beat her:

I would imagine the ones who watched. [...] They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I’d stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and put my hands between my legs. It was scary, but it was thrilling too. Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (p. 112)

Bone further explains, ‘I loved those fantasies [...] In them, I was very special. I was triumphant, important’ (113). In them, she can see herself as a heroine, and this helps her to bolster her fledging sense of self. Likewise, as J. Brooks Bouson notes, ‘If in this replay of her stepfather’s physical and sexual abuse, Bone attempts to gain active mastery over passive suffering’.36 She uses her masturbatory memory-narratives, then, as space to regain power over her identity by blurring imagination with reality to tell ‘a better story’ (p. 189) where she recasts herself as powerful.

Understanding oneself first as a survivor and then as some type of hero within storied memory is integral for many healing therapeutic journeys. Therapist John McLeod, for instance, highlights the importance of the ‘heroic’ narrative in emotional healing: ‘In therapy, it can be useful to be given the opportunity to generate different versions of a story concerning life issues. Usually, the telling and retelling of the story produces at least some

32 Horeck, p. 51.
33 Horeck, p. 52.
34 Allison, ‘Moving’, p.72.
heroic and success narratives. . . . This process of sense-making helps to develop a perspective on the problem.37 We see Bone beginning this kind of retelling through her act of storytelling and fantasy. The fact that Bone is able to derive any pleasure out of such horrific abuse highlights the import of her storied memories. As Katherine Henniger claims, ‘Daddy Glen may claim access to her body, physically and sexually, but Bone learns to use storytelling as a way of re-claiming the power of that access’.38 This allows Bone to preserve a relationship with her body. Her storied accounts of her abuse do not stop at the level of fantasy, however. Instead, after her fantasy in which people are watching, she is able to bring elements of her storied memory of abuse into the reality of her beatings. Thus, when Daddy Glen beats Bone before Aunt Ruth’s funeral, just as in the fantasy, she does not scream: ‘I would not scream. I would not, would not, would not scream’ (p. 234). Afterwards, she concludes, ‘There was only one thing that mattered. I had not screamed’ (p. 235). Her storied accounts of her abuse—her fantasies—provide a form of agency and resistance that she would otherwise not have had.

Bone’s ability to create a story for herself and her memories of trauma, however, stalls before she is able to voice her trauma to someone outside of herself. She does come close to disclosure in a discussion with Aunt Ruth, before Ruth’s death. Bone tells her aunt, ‘Daddy Glen hates me’ (p. 122). Ruth goes on to ask if Daddy Glen has ever hurt her ‘Down here, honey. Has he ever hurt you down there?’ But instead of telling her aunt the truth about her abuse, Bone simply whispers ‘No.’ Inside she screams, ‘Tell her all of it. Tell her,’ but all she manages to utter is ‘He scares me,’ which elicits the same response she has heard from her mother—‘Oh honey . . . What are we gonna do with you?’ (p. 122). Thus, Bone continues to protect her mother by not sharing her narrative of abuse. Later, Raylene finally sees the bruises and welts under Bone’s skirt. As opposed to finding solace in the fact that someone finally shares her secret, all Bone can do is panic about the pain the public exposure of her abuse will cause her mother: ‘Mama! I’m sorry. I’m sorry,’ she pleads (p. 246). As Bone explains, she is ‘More terrified of hurting her than of anything that might happen to me’ (p. 118). She understands that her story has power, that words can hurt, and that they may damage her mother.

It is after she is confronted by a hospital intern, and again protects her mother rather than testifying to her abuse, that she begins to reconceptualise her understanding of the situation. As she lies alone in bed, attempting to remember the cause of her abuse, she finally comes to realize her mother’s complicity in the abuse, and she is able to truly condemn Glen for his horrific perpetuation of victimization. She tries ‘to remember how it had started. What was it I had done? Why had he always hated me?’ (p. 252). She realizes, then, that she ‘had been so proud of not crying that last time, so sure it was important,’ and she asks, ‘Why had it mattered?’ And she comes to an important realization: ‘Whether I screamed or fought or held still, nothing changed’ (p. 252). She continues, ‘it did not matter whether I had screamed or not. It had all been the way he wanted it. It had nothing to do with me or anything I had done. It was an animal thing, just him using me’ (pp. 252-3). With this hopeless realization that she has no control, she finally begins to ‘hold people responsible’ and get ‘angry,’ which Allison argues will ‘save her’.39 Thus, as Bone talks with her mother about what she believes will be Anney’s imminent return to Daddy Glen, she tells Anney, ‘I know you’ll go back, Mama, and maybe you should. I don’t know what’s right for you, just what I have to do. I can’t go back to live with Daddy Glen. . . . [N]o matter what you decide, when you go back to Daddy Glen, I can’t go with you’ (276). Finally deciding that she must protect herself rather than her mother—a lesson she learns after returning to face her memories of abuse—Bone exerts the agency necessary to begin the process of saving herself by trying to remove herself from the situation.

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39 Allison, Moving’, p. 73.
Unfortunately, the most brutal scene of violation is yet to come, as Glen comes to find Bone at her Aunt Alma’s and begs her to return to her family home. When she refuses, he sets himself upon her, brutally attacking and raping her. However, this time, Bone fights back as she attempts to resist him physically and mentally: ‘I wouldn’t hold still anymore. I tried to wiggle free’ (p. 283). Likewise, she tries to stab him with a butter knife: ‘I jerked that knife up and rammed it into his side as hard as I could’. (p. 283). She tries to kick and bite him, ‘All the time my left hand was flailing, reaching, scrambling for anything, something. Where was that knife?’ (p. 285). And when she is unable to fight his physical advances and he pulls her to the floor to rape her, she threatens to tell her mother, and fights him with her words: “You!” I told him. ‘Mama’s never gonna go back to you. I won’t let her. I hate you.” (p. 284). Likewise, she curses him: ‘Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! God will damn you! . . . You fucker!’ (p. 285). As Laura S. Patterson observes, ‘While not ultimately effective, Bone gains agency in the scene, acting out her own sexualized violence, though pale in contrast with what she experiences’. She continues, ‘For Allison, the rape scene might not contain a fully defended victim, but it keeps the rising agency and voice in control of the victim rather than in control of her male aggressor or male defenders’. The voice that Bone now has come to use and control is even more important than Patterson indicates, for Bone has taught herself how to resist domination by narrating the stories of powerful characters and survivors, and here, she applies these stories to the reality of her life. Thus, after the rape, as Anney walks in and sees Daddy Glen’s body on top of her daughter, Bone is ready to tell her story—the story of a girl who resisted: ‘I had to tell her that I had fought him, that I had never wanted him to touch me, never’ (p. 287). Her act of resistance belies reclamation of her own self-worth.

However, the most devastating moment in the novel occurs after Anney carries Bone to the car to take her to the hospital. Glen, after begging Anney to kill him and insisting that he cannot live without her, begins to beat his head against the car door, and Anney responds by turning to Glen and comforting him. That Anney turns away from Bone in her most desperate time of need is, in many ways, more painful than the rape itself, for it signifies Anney’s abandonment of her daughter as she chooses Glen over Bone. After dropping Bone at the hospital, Anney disappears with Daddy Glen, and so it is Aunt Raylene who visits Bone at the hospital and who takes Bone home, comforts her, and helps her regain her health, for after dropping Bone at the hospital, her mother’s abandonment, as much as the rape, has left Bone ‘older, meaner, rawboned, crazy, and hateful’ (p. 301). But by drawing on lessons from her family’s history, Bone is able to begin to overcome her hatred for herself and her mother. Raylene tells Bone that she ‘can’t understand it yet. You don’t have to. It don’t make sense, and I can’t explain it to you. You can’t explain it to yourself. [. . .] It’ll be better in time, I promise’ (p. 301). Raylene understands both the distancing power of time on memory, but also that Bone’s trauma and her mother’s abandonment cannot yet be integrated into her understanding of herself. Sharing her own memory of asking her lover to choose between herself and her child, Raylene tells Bone, ‘We do terrible things to the ones we love sometimes. [. . .] We can’t explain it. We can’t excuse it. It eats us up, but we do them just the same’ (301). Raylene’s memory will ultimately help Bone understand her mother’s life choices more clearly, but for now, Bone simply remains silent. She ‘was willing to eat and sit up, but not to speak’ (p. 303), but her memories of trauma and abandonment are simply too much to put into language, and they simply hurt too much.

When Anney appears on Raylene’s porch a few days later, Bone sees the truth in Raylene’s assessment of Anney—’She loves you more, and she ain’t gonna forgive herself for what she’s done to you, what she allowed to happen’ (p. 301). Anney’s face has changed: ‘Now that face was made new. Bones seemed to have moved, flesh fallen away, and lines deepened into gullies, while shadows darkened to streaks of midnight’ (p. 306). Anney’s choice has hit her harder than anything else in her life, as is made clear in her changed appearance. And seeing this, Bone realizes that just as she was unable to control her situation of abuse, perhaps Anney also has suffered from events outside of her control. She thinks, ‘Maybe it wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t mine. Maybe it

wasn’t a matter of anybody’s fault. Maybe it was like Raylene said, the way the world goes, the way hearts get broken all the time’ (p. 307). ‘This realization leads her to start to understand her memories of hurt in a new way, and she begins, at least, to express her pain. As she presses her face into her mother’s neck, she lets go of her ‘grief,’ ‘anger,’ ‘guilt,’ and ‘shame’ (p. 307). In this final brief encounter with her mother, Bone voices her pain and anger, and thus begins to integrate her traumatic experiences and memories into the larger picture of her life and the life of her mother, while also letting go of some of her hatred and shame. After Anney leaves, it is clear that Bone has reclaimed her voice. When Raylene says that she doesn’t know where Anney and Glen are going, Bone is able to fill in the details of the story: ‘California, I said. Or Florida, maybe. He always talked about taking us off there sometime’ (p. 308).

As the novel ends, Bone realizes that she does not know who her mother was before she was born, and ‘Once I was born, her hopes had turned and I had climbed up her life like a flower reaching for the sun. Fourteen and terrified, fifteen and a mother, just past twenty-one when she married Glen. Her life had folded into mine’ (309). This realization provides important information for Bone—it provides a context in which to understand her mother’s abandonment during and after the abuse. Bone begins to grasp the effect of her mother’s poverty, her white-trash shame, and her dependence on patriarchal modes of thinking on the choices she made. In an interview, Allison explains that Bone begins to understand that her mother was ‘powerfully caught’ in the things she was ‘supposed to do [. . .] keep kids safe, find a good man, save him, and hang on for dear life’.41 Once Bone begins to understand the true context of her mother’s life, she is able to integrate her memories into that larger context in a way that is healing.

As multiple critics have noticed, Bone does find redemption, as is evidenced in the narrative voice of Bastard Out of Carolina. For instance, as Horeck notes, ‘The opening of the novel underscores the narrative voice as that of the mature storyteller: one who speaks from the present as a survivor of past events’.42 What critics ignore, however, is that Bone’s narrative power and ultimate survival comes from her ability to tell the story of her trauma in a way that helps her overcome the horrors of her past. It is not only important that she tells her story, then, but that she tells it in a way that provides her hope and agency in the future. Thus, Bastard Out of Carolina is Bone’s storied memory of endured and survived traumatic sexual and physical abuse and abandonment. She is the heroine of her story. Through it, she comes to know herself as one who was able to face great trauma and overcome great oppression. Bone ultimately narrates her trauma, and successfully integrates it into a larger understanding of herself and her family, situating her at the end of the novel, not as a victim, but as a survivor.

And yet, this story is not only Bone’s, but also Allison’s. Eunjo Woo argues that ‘Allison not only re-creates herself as a girl in the novel but also makes the protagonist break her silence and speak out against the oppression in order to find her own identity’,43 and while Bone cannot be conflated with Allison, the move towards storytelling, the blurring of fact and fiction, and the ultimate empowerment through storied memory can be seen in the lives of both character and author. However, Allison does more than simply embody her own “talking cure” through the novel. By telling this story in the form of a novel with a fictional protagonist, she tells ‘a better story’ (p. 189), one in which Bone comes to serve as a mirror not only for Allison, but for many others who have faced trauma and oppression. Through Bone, Allison wants readers to see the possibilities for agency and resistance found within storied memory. In Allison’s Two or Three Things I Know For Sure, a performance piece that is often read as a companion piece to Bastard Out of Carolina, Allison concludes that ‘The story becomes the thing needed’.44 The storied memories paying testimony to trauma allow both Allison and her fictional representative,
Bone, to move beyond their pasts which were driven by pain, suffering, and domination. Likewise, understanding the history of her family allows the survivor of trauma to more fully integrate that trauma into the context of that history—a process Allison values. She writes, ‘Two of three things I know for sure, and one of them is just this—if we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind’.45 We must be able to testify to our story of trauma; we must also understand it in the context of our larger histories. In this way, we must save ourselves through our narratives.

45 Allison, *Two or Three*, p. 12, Italics hers.
The Convergence of Memories: Photo-textual Testimony and the Restoration of Witnessing in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants and Austerlitz*

Angeliki Tseti

Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, defines trauma as ‘the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena’.\(^1\) The inability to articulate horrific experiences lies precisely in the lack of pre-existing schemata that could provide a prior scheme of knowledge and thus possibly absorb the traumatic experience and integrate it.\(^2\) Hence, what is needed, is a space where traumatic memory, ‘inflexible and invariable, a solitary act’ – as was described by van der Kolk and van der Hart in *The Intrusive Past*\(^3\) – becomes ‘narrative memory’, a social act that can be shared. Literature constitutes a privileged medium for traumatic memory to become narrative memory as the text undertakes the responsibility for testimony, for bearing witness, so that meaning can be restored not only individually but also culturally. As suggested by Shoshana Felman, the act of writing and reading literary texts can be compared to the act of bearing witness and so she proposes ‘considering […] literature and art as a precocious mode of witnessing – of accessing reality – when all other modes of knowledge are precluded’.\(^4\) How, then, can a novel, other than a memoir or an autobiography, rise against the ineffability of a traumatic event? How is it possible for a work of fiction to (reliably) explore inexpressible facts or distorted realities rather than perpetuating the ‘crisis of truth’?\(^5\) And how can the novel remedy the ‘collapse of witnessing’?\(^6\) in other words the failure to give testimony, and be considered as a ‘precocious mode of bearing witness’?\(^7\)

I contend that the answers lie in bimediality, specifically photo-textuality. The collaboration between written and visual narrative results in a ‘topography’\(^8\) where memory does not simply surface; instead, the spatial dimension created by the passage between the two media enables different and diverse traumatic experiences to resurge and converge with each other and, thus, the texts become – in Michael Rothberg’s words – ‘a field of contestation’ where memories ‘interact productively’ and flow ‘multidirectionally’.\(^9\) This essay intends to examine W. G. Sebald’s novels *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* as examples of trauma literature testifying to moments of rupture, dislocation and suffering but also, predominantly, as a topos and tropos for memory to unfold and (the functions

\(^1\) Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 91 The same issue is raised by Robert Jay Lifton who elaborates on the difficulties faced by people who have been subjected to extreme situations due to the lack of ‘prior imagery’ while discussing the victims of Hiroshima; Lifton explains how the process of working through the experience was hindered by the fact that there was no prior imagery to connect to since the destruction of an entire city was an event without precedent (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 135).


\(^5\) Felman and Laub, p. xx.

\(^6\) Felman and Laub, p. xx.

\(^7\) As Silke Horstkotte has suggested, Sebald becomes the architect of idiosyncratic ‘photo-text topographies’, where images introduce a spatial dimension and become linking devices that ‘connect distant or incommensurate spaces’. Silke Horstkotte, ‘Photo-Text Topographies: Photography and the Representation of Space in W. G. Sebald and Monica Maron’, *Poetics Today*, 29 (2008), pp. 49-78 (p. 49).

of) testimony and witnessing to be restored. In my reading of Sebald’s work, the novel becomes a vehicle for transmission and the event is narrated so that testimony eludes the sphere of the private, reshapes and is reformulated, and becomes pertinent to the experience of the collective. This is achieved through the brikolage form of these novels, specifically their photo-textuality, which assigns the pivotal role to the reader: the reader in Sebald’s novels is invited to become a participant in the fiction-making by distinguishing between different narrators and sorting out blends of life stories and, moreover, to make the connections and provide interpretations by becoming a ‘viewer/reader’.

9 Within this context, the viewer/reader assumes the role of the witness while testimonies – now mediated through the author/narrator – are delivered in both verbal and visual terms and ‘the truth’ lies in the combination and complementarity of the two elements: within this mode, there are as many listeners as there are readers. Arguably, this is achieved initially via the novels’ multi-vocality and progressively through the interaction of word and image.

W. G. Sebald’s work has received wide critical attention and has been internationally acclaimed for the high lyricism of his linguistic and pictorial landscapes but also, mostly, for the originality of his prose, the hybrid quality of his mosaic novels that are neither purely biographies nor exclusively travelogue memoirs. Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, Sebald’s novels employ both elements to constitute loci of encounter between private stories and public histories, investigations of the individual’s place and interaction with(in) the collective and, more importantly, representations of personal narratives developing in the midst or aftermath of historic calamities. In fact, what most critics have focused on is the author’s insistence on what many among them have termed ‘the return of the dead’: W. G. Sebald’s writings perform a return to the past as the author delves on the intricate workings of remembrance, the resurgence of memories, and an incessant sense of haunting. In Arthur Lubow’s words: 'Sebald, temperamentally, preferred to keep his eyes averted from the future, which for him impended heavily with disaster […] he regarded remembering as a moral and political act'.

The Emigrants (1996) traces the life stories of four Jewish émigrés, reconstructed through personal accounts but also through testimonies provided by material documentation such as diaries and photographic albums. In Austerlitz (2001), the protagonist has been displaced from his homeland but also from his memories by being sent to England in 1939 as part of the Kindertransporte programme: the book follows his trajectory as, later in life, his trauma surfaces and he ventures to retrace his roots and his past. In both novels, the stories are relayed through a narrator – perhaps the author himself – who is appointed the role of the listener and assumes the responsibility for reformulating, and becomes pertinent to the experience of the collective. This is achieved through the brikolage form of these novels, specifically their photo-textuality, which assigns the pivotal role to the reader: the reader in Sebald’s novels is invited to become a participant in the fiction-making by distinguishing between different narrators and sorting out blends of life stories and, moreover, to make the connections and provide interpretations by becoming a ‘viewer/reader’.

9 The term has been introduced by Liliane Louvel, 'Photography as Critical Idiom and Intermedial Criticism', Poetics Today, 29, (2008), 31-48 <DOI 10.1215/0335372-2007-016>, to discuss the reader response aspect of intermediality. For Louvel, there is a distinction between the ‘viewer/reader’ of photography-in-text fiction and its counterpart, the ‘reader/viewer’, in cases when the photographs are ekphrastic, in other words rendered verbally. Silke Horstkotte uses the term ‘reader/spectator’ to discuss the interpretative processes of intermediality.

10 Sebald himself has used the term ‘documentary fiction’ to describe The Emigrants, and has characterised Austerlitz as a ‘long prose elegy’ or ‘a prose book of indefinite form’, strongly refusing to designate it as a novel.

11 Inspiration for this phrase has been provided by the author himself when, in the second story of The Emigrants, Paul Bereyer, the narrator leafs through Paul’s family albums and observes that: ‘looking at the pictures in it, it truly seemed to me, and still does, as if the dead were coming back’, W.G. Sebald, The Emigrants, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 46. For further elaboration of the theme see Stefanie Harris, ‘The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G.Sebald’s Die Ausgewanderten’, The German Quarterly, 74, (2001), 379-91 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3072632> [accessed 05 January 2010].


13 Although not specified, the little information given about the narrator(s) draws direct parallels between them and the author. The Emigrants’ opening lines, for instance, are: ‘at the end of September 1970, shortly before I took up my position in Norwich’ and the encounter with Max Ferber takes place in Manchester where, as is well-known to those familiar with the author’s biography, Sebald taught in the mid-1960s as a language assistant. Both the author and the narrator were born in the Alps in the town ‘W’ (Wertach) towards the end of WWII and so on and so forth. What is interesting to note is that despite...
to bear witness. These narrators, however, reach further than merely voicing the testimonies of the exiled: wanderers themselves, they seek to make connections by traveling to the places mentioned in the narratives, by making enquiries with people who can shed light to the stories, provide details or the missing links, and by retrieving the material objects that would authenticate the accounts.

While reflecting the author’s burden created by the German post WWII ‘conspiracy of silence’, these narrators act as active facilitators of the testimony and communicators of the experience rather than restricting to the role of the passive interviewer/enabler. Hence, in *The Emigrants*, the narrator reconstructs his great uncle Ambros Adelwarth’s life through family accounts and photographic albums, ponders over his uncle’s travel diaries. The narrator also retraces his subject’s steps by visiting a sanatorium in Ithaca where Ambros voluntarily retreated to spend the final years of his life, and interviews one of the doctors who were there at the time as witness to his uncle’s end. In the fourth part of the novel, Max Ferber narrates his story to the narrator – albeit reluctantly at first – and then entrusts him with his family documents, ‘a number of photographs and almost a hundred pages of handwritten memoirs penned by his mother’, thus sharing but mostly transferring their traumatic impact with his witness as:

The memoirs, which at points were truly wonderful, had seemed to him like one of those evil German fairy tales in which, once you are under the spell, you have to carry on to the finish, till your heart breaks, with whatever work you have begun – in this case, the remembering, writing and reading.

This is why I would rather you took this package.

Similarly, in *Austerlitz*, after having on numerous encounters recounted to the narrator his life experience, the painful resurgence of memories, the haunting, and the quest for answers, Jacques Austerlitz embarks on a new venture to seek out his father but not before giving the narrator a key to his apartment and saying: ‘I could stay there whenever I liked […] and study the black and white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of his life’. Therefore, the narrator(s) of these stories constitutes a witness that, in Dori Laub’s words, becomes ‘a co-owner of the traumatic event’. Laub defines this listener as someone who ‘through his very listening, […] comes to partially experience trauma in himself’, while simultaneously preserving his own position and perspective, protecting his own private space, and acknowledging his status as a separate entity that will relate to the victim but will not identify with them.

The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself. It is only in this way […] that he can become the enabler of the testimony – the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum.

the presence of such details, the narrator, in effect, remains an obscure persona and, eventually, readers seem to know very little, if anything, about him.

One of Sebald’s main pre-occupations, was the silence covering the Nazi years in Germany, where nothing of what happened was discussed. The author himself first learnt of the atrocities when seeing a film in his grammar school, but even then he could not appreciate the magnitude or fully grasp it as the environment he was growing up in was one of peace and quiet. ‘There is something about Germans, which for lack of a better word we’ll call cowardice’, he said. ‘They have the habit of avoidance. People don’t want to know. It’s as if it never happened’. Another aspect of the same theme was expressed in his posthumous book *On the Natural History of Destruction*, where Sebald discusses the ‘collective amnesia’ covering the bombing of German cities by the Allied Forces during WWII, and how these destructions were never addressed in post-war literature.


Both *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* constitute, in effect, a choir of voices joined by their experience of persecution, uprooting and exile, dislocation and estrangement. In the former, multi-vocality is explicitly present given that the novel is structured in four parts each dedicated to the story of a different person. These stories, however, are told through different (always noted) sources as the narrator proceeds with his visits and research and, therefore, more instances of traumatic experience are brought to the fore and testimonies multiply. The narration shifts smoothly and seamlessly as the author changes from third to first person without using quotation marks and each character steps forward to unfold their own story in monologues that eventually efface the narrator. Max Ferber’s mother’s diaries, for instance, constitute a blend of perspectives narrated in indirect discourse where Ferber’s, his mother’s, and the narrator’s viewpoints interchange freely and unobtrusively. In the second story, Paul Bereyter, the protagonist’s life story is recounted by Mme Landau in a hypotactical manner interspersed with constant reminders of the source: ‘continued Mme Landau’, ‘Paul once described […] said Mme Landau’, ‘as Mme Landau emphasized’. Ambros Adelwarth’s story, the most mediated of the four, is delivered through the perspective accounts of the narrator’s aunt and uncle as well as the physician who had treated Ambros in Ithaca. Accordingly, in *Austerlitz*, the protagonist’s account is complemented and enriched with his nanny’s, Vera’s, narration as well as anecdotes of similar experiences taken from books. Vera’s testimony is a twenty-four-page-long stream of recollections articulated in a structure similar to that of Mme Landau’s: ‘Vera remembered, said Austerlitz’, ‘Vera continued, said Austerlitz’, ‘Vera told me, said Austerlitz’. The same syntactic patterns of page-long sentences are also abundant in the different parts of the story where information is provided via books and the voices of their authors. Hence, testimony is reiterated to the point where the experience is no longer pertinent solely to the protagonist’s life story but also to the many victims and/or survivors of the history of catastrophe.

In fact, during the process of articulating their repressed memories and the experiences that have determined their lives, Sebald’s characters bring to the center stage the two novels’ haunting theme, namely the Holocaust. Although never directly confronted or explicitly mentioned, specific references in the books – such as the recurrent scenes of railroad tracks and stations – draw direct, albeit subtle, parallels to the horrific experience that led to the disappearance or dislocation of European Jews. Sebald complies with the idea that the magnitude of the atrocities committed in the Holocaust prohibits the representation of the event. In an interview to Michael Silverblatt he expressed his views stating:

> to write about concentration camps is practically impossible. So you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something on your mind but that you do not necessarily roll out, you know, on every other page. *The reader needs to be prompted* (my emphasis) […] and this is why the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people, because *we’ve all seen images* (my emphasis), but these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things. And also paralyze, as it were, our moral

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21 Jean Améry’s descriptions of the tortures he suffered in Breendonk are mentioned, as well as Wittgenstein’s texts and Kafka’s diaries and H. G. Adler’s treatise on the organization of the Theresienstadt ghetto, among others. It is characteristic that the book ends with the narrator reaching the end of a book Austerlitz had given him, presumably written by one of his colleagues, Dan Jacobson, describing the author’s search for his roots and his grandfather, Heshel.


23 As Silke Horstkotte notes in ‘Pictorial and Verbal Discourse in W. G. Sebald’s “The Emigrants”’, *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2 (2002), 33-50 (p. 46), ‘railway tracks are one of the pervasive symbols of the Holocaust’. Railway trains especially have been traditionally and consistently associated with the Holocaust as they allude to the massive deportations of Jews to concentration camps conducted through the railway. Consequently, such images are present in practically every literary or filmic representation of the Holocaust. This theme is also discussed by J. J. Long, ‘History, Narrative and Photography in W. G. Sebald’s “Die Ausgewanderten”’, *Modern language Review*, 98 (2003), 117-37 (p. 133).
capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation.24

Reference in Sebald’s work involves images of a different kind. Indeed, the visual is central to the author’s narrative – as the great majority of his texts are interspersed with reproductions of photographs, cards, paintings, and architectural maps – and essential to the emergence and convergence of memories. Images play a pivotal role, functioning multifariously as elements of the plot but also as carriers of memory and materials of constructing relationships between the verbal and the visual, the familial and the historical, and the individual and the collective. Arguably, it is precisely the photographic element in Sebald’s prose that reinforces the thematic content of his novels and invites their inclusion in trauma literature. Photography and the visual have often been connected to narratives of trauma, even promoted as a literary expression of trauma par excellence. Ulrich Baer discusses the photograph’s ability to capture instances that were not discernible with the naked eye at the moment it was shot and suggests that

this possibility that photographs capture unexperienced events creates a striking parallel between the workings of the camera and the structure of traumatic memory […] because trauma blocks routine mental processes from converting an experience into memory or forgetting, it parallels the defining structure of photography, which also traps an event during its occurrence while blocking its transformation into memory.25

Similarly, Marianne Hirsch writes about trauma and loss and suggests that photography

is the visual genre that best captures the trauma and loss […] this is related to photograph’s temporality. Photography interrupts time […] to photograph is to look in a different way – to look without understanding. Understanding is deferred until we see the developed image. Deferral connects photography to trauma, which is characterized by a delayed understanding.26

As a locus of trauma, however, in addition to issues of belatedness or deferral, the photograph also relates to Felman’s ‘crisis of truth’. In other words, the photographic still, in its frozen ambiguity and provisionality, reenacts the inaccessibility of the experience, the distortion of reality, and, in effect, the suppression of memory. Consequently, the photograph prolongs the impossibility of narration and, far from resolving the incompleteness of memory, perpetuates Laub’s ‘collapse of witnessing’: the impossibility of telling represented by photographic silence signals the failure to give testimony and reproduces the inability to bear witness.

The photographs embedded in Sebald’s novels are no different. Captionless and ambiguous, often grainy and unclear, occasionally of indeterminate origin, they are more destabilizing and disturbing rather than illustrative and documentary. As Samuel Pane suggests:

they paradoxically reinforce and undermine the credibility of accounts offered and recorded by Sebaldian characters […] they manifest the disparity between the catastrophic events of history and the ability of human memory and archival technology to accurately recall them.27

These photographs are, as often mentioned by the author himself in several interviews,\(^28\) authentic in their majority collected from the personal archives and family albums of the protagonists in the book. In *The Emigrants* instances where stories are unfolded in front of a family album abound; in *Austerlitz*, the protagonist is often depicted taking photographs: ‘in accordance with his usual custom, Austerlitz took a few photographs’.\(^29\) Their primary function, therefore, is to equip the text with veracity and act as testimonial evidence in its simplest, crudest and most literal form. There are numerous examples of informative accordance between the verbal and the visual narratives: for instance, the images of Ambros Adelwarth’s diaries accompanying the account of their contents and the family album photographs performing a visual diegesis of Aunt Fini’s recollection of the family history; also, the photographs of chemical plants, rivers, cemeteries, and train stations illustrating Austerlitz’s wanderings in search of his past that are explicitly referenced in the verbal narrative immediately preceding or following the image. Sometimes these very photographs also acquire a symbolic function since, as Horstkotte says, ‘a single, isolated photograph can hint at a larger context with which it stands in a conventional relation’.\(^30\) Photographs of cemeteries, for instance, symbolizing absence and loss, bear direct and explicit connotations, in the same way as the photographs of railway tracks and train stations in the context of the Holocaust.\(^31\) Nevertheless, a closer examination of the visual element in the two novels destabilizes the original notion of authenticity: the photographs embedded in these books are, as mentioned above, often vague and unclear, embodying the author’s notion of ‘oblique, tangential references’.

Further still, the same photographs that are presumably used to authenticate the tales occasionally prove to be deceiving, one of the most blatant examples being, in *The Emigrants*, the image of Paul Bereyer’s notebooks: whereas the verbal narrative informs us that Paul had been obsessively reading writers ‘who had taken their own lives or had been close to doing so’ and that ‘he copied out passages into notebooks’,\(^32\) when we turn our gaze to the photographic reproductions of the notebooks we realize that what they truly contain are descriptions of ‘Tante Olga’ and ‘Tante Lula’\(^33\) respectively.\(^34\) Similar is the case with the story of Dr Henry Selwyn which includes a photograph of the protagonist\(^35\) that is, in reality, a photograph of Nabokov\(^36\) and a newspaper clipping supposedly cut out of a Lausanne paper\(^37\) that, when closely examined, bears a stamp and a handwritten note which leads us to believe that it has been retrieved from an archive. Soon, viewers/readers realize that for every image corresponding to the verbal narrative there are others that stand in isolation, without written referents, such

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\(^{28}\) See for instance, interview with Carole Angier, included in *The Emergence of Memory*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories press, 2007), pp. 63-75.

\(^{29}\) Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 141.


\(^{31}\) See note 23 above.

\(^{32}\) Sebald, *The Emigrants*, p. 58.


\(^{34}\) Sebald has admitted to doctoring or creating some of the documents himself. In the interview with Carole Angiers mentioned above, when asked about certain parts in the diaries of Ambros Adelwarth, he explicitly states ‘Ah. That however, is falsification. I wrote it’ (p. 72), and proceeds to explain that although his great uncle did in fact write a travel diary.

\(^{35}\) Sebald, *The Emigrants*, p. 16.

\(^{36}\) Nabokov, an exile himself, has been often mentioned as ‘the fifth emigrant’, as he appears in the form of the ‘Butterfly Man’ in all stories. The photograph in question is a well-known photograph of the author that, whether recognized by the readers or not, destabilizes the narrative in its contrast with the written description below it and disturbs by casting doubt.


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as the initial photograph of a cemetery dominated by a huge oak tree in The Emigrants\textsuperscript{38} or some of the products of Austerlitz’s first attempts at photography.\textsuperscript{39}

Through its intricate workings, therefore, the photographic element in the novels proves inconclusive and interrogatory rather than enlightening and explanatory; as text and image overlap and intertwine, the very possibility of narrative is brought into question and it is thus that the ‘crisis of truth’ and ‘collapse of witnessing’ are staged and performed. In fact, in Austerlitz, this ‘crisis of truth’ is reenacted when the protagonist tells the narrator how he placed the photographs on his table searching for clues in an incessant yet futile ritual that strongly resonates a traumatic ‘repetition compulsion’.\textsuperscript{40}

[H]e sat there for hours, laying out these photographs or others from his collection the wrong way up, as if playing a game of patience, and that then, one by one, he turned them over, always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the grey table top, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering’.\textsuperscript{41}

Far from undermining the process of witnessing to the point of impossibility, however, the photographic indeterminacy ‘prompts the readers’. Despite the perplexity of the visual narrative and its disruptive quality, viewers/readers are not faced with yet another instance of ‘collapse of witnessing’; instead, within the photo-textual mode, witnessing is reshaped and restored since, during the process of interpretation, the viewers/readers are based on their own knowledge and assumptions and so, along with their efforts to assign meaning, they also bring to the fore different instances of catastrophe lying in their own backgrounds and engage in acts of testimony and witnessing that expand further and include more historical instances of trauma.

Specifically, the disruption and fissures created by the insertion of the photographs and photographic reproductions of documents in the text – when these are arranged in a bimedial layout\textsuperscript{42} – but also, more importantly, their relation of ‘interreference’\textsuperscript{43} with the text play the most crucial role in the viewer/reader’s interpretative processes. The aporias raised by the interplay of the two media and their spatiotemporal relations incite the viewer/reader to pause in contemplation and thus, in Louvel’s words, ‘a seesaw movement between photograph and text’\textsuperscript{44} is generated that opens up a third space where the ‘pictorial third’ is formed. Louvel has defined the ‘pictorial third’ as

the in-between image conjured by a “pictorial reading”, that is, one in which word and image combine and intermediality fully plays its role. This in-between image floats in the reader’s mind

\textsuperscript{38} Sebald, The Emigrants, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{39} Sebald, Austerlitz, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{40} In Unclaimed Experience, Caruth reads Freud’s ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ and discusses the ways in which ‘not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. For consciousness, then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life’ (p. 62). The act of survival, therefore, involves ‘the endless inherent necessity of repetition’ that shapes the individuals’ lives after surviving a traumatic event.
\textsuperscript{41} Sebald, Austerlitz, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{42} When the photographs are embedded and in interplay with verbal narrative rather than functioning as paratextual elements of the plot, cut off from the text.
\textsuperscript{43} I am referring here to Kibedi Varga’s ‘Criteria for Describing Word-and-Image Relations’, Poetics Today, 10, (1989), 31-53 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772554> [accessed 29 December 2009]. According to Varga, ‘interreference’ occurs when both the verbal and the visual aspects are primary and neither is subordinate to the other, when they ‘refer to each other’ (p. 31).
\textsuperscript{44} Louvel, p. 45.
[…] a phenomenological event, a visual movement produced in the viewer-reader’s mind by the passage between the two media. It is a virtual image engineered by the text and reinvented by the reader.\textsuperscript{45}

Evidently, this image will differ from the images created in the mind’s eyes of other viewer/readers, as well as from those of the narrator. As mentioned above, the ‘pictorial third’ image is reliant on each recipient’s personal reservoir of experiences and so two of these can never fully coincide. Louvel proceeds to suggest that the ‘pictorial third’ is used in the Sebaldian universe and system as a device that will, among other things, reduce ‘the free play of the imagination’\textsuperscript{46} and lead either to the recognition and identification of the photograph or to the creation of doubt concerning its origins and authenticity. I wish to suggest that in the case of trauma literature specifically, this process will also lead to the creation of associations. In other words, not only is memory resurrected from the text but it is also allowed to flow multidirectionally and, in turn, trigger more memories, of another event.

‘Multidirectional Memory’ has been described by Michael Rothberg as a ‘productive, intercultural dynamic’ that refrains from ‘privatism’, debates assertions of uniqueness, and focuses on the analogies and similarities between diverse historical traumata. For Rothberg, ‘the model of multidirectional memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites’.\textsuperscript{47} Seen under this light, both \textit{The Emigrants} and \textit{Austerlitz} constitute sites of encounter and convergence for diverse experiences of dislocation and expatriation: the sense of exile, loss and non-belonging represented by Aunt Theres who ‘really did seem to be crying most of her life. She [Aunt Fini] had never known her without a wet handkerchief in her hand’,\textsuperscript{48} could describe the feelings of any one migrating from Kosovo after the civil war, or even a refugee abandoning his homeland for political or financial reasons. Similarly, the haunting flashbacks that torture Jacques Austerlitz could be part of the life story of any child participating in a child-transfer programme in order to flee a war.\textsuperscript{49} These parallels and connections are drawn by any one whose national, collective or family memory includes similar experiences. Let us not forget, after all, that neither the four exiles in \textit{The Emigrants} nor Jacques Austerlitz have experienced the Holocaust directly; yet their lives have been shaped by the residual impact of the event. Thus, what is constructed as the main pre-occupation is the ‘history of destruction’ itself, consisting of the encompassing circumstances but also the plight of the survivors, the importance of memory and the catastrophic consequences of silencing and forgetting, regardless of the name of the event that lies at the root.

The subject matter and grainy quality of the photographs facilitates the birth of these associations. Documentary rather than ‘artistic’, whether they depict landscapes or people or everyday objects, these pictures are ordinary and banal and invite what Marianne Hirsch calls ‘affiliative looking’, the type of looking we employ when looking at family photographs: ‘we all have pictures like these in our own albums, and thus we invest them with a form of

\textsuperscript{45} Louvel, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{46} Louvel, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{47} Rothberg, \textit{Multidirectional Memory}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{48} Sebald, \textit{The Emigrants}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{49} Interviews taken from people who were forced to leave Greece during the war as part of a child-transfer programme, for instance, bear striking similarities as, in many cases, the interviewees have no recollection of their childhood prior to their transfer. It is interesting to note the case of a woman who claims to remember everything up to the age of twenty but then ‘she either decided to forget or simply did not remember any more’, or the phrase of a man who states that: ‘we were children trying to remember’. In the majority of cases, these people decided to return to their homeland and retrace their roots in their mid-years, just like Austerlitz did (source: international conference ‘Children-refugees from Greece to Eastern and Central Europe after WWII’, organized in Hungary in October 2003; minutes published as \textit{’Paidhmazoma’ i Paidonosimo? Paidia tou Emfyliou stin Anatoliki kai Kentriki Evropi}, ed, by Eirini Lagani and Maria Mpointila (Thessaloniki, Greece: Epikentro Press, 2012).
looking that is broadly shared across our culture’. The ordinariness and familiarity inherent in these photographs eliminates the possibility of failure to bear witness that can result from viewing disturbing images and instigates the viewer/reader’s involvement. Their connectibility to a number of other, similar photographs in our own albums, to pictures we might have taken or seen, establishes a relation of affect and, in turn, this affective encounter triggers the thought processes that will evoke diverse associations and forge the links between different traumatic experiences.

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Sebald talked about the ethical questions raised by the intrusiveness entailed in witnessing and documenting the life-story of an individual:

> It’s a received wisdom that it’s good to talk about traumas, but it’s not always true. Especially if you are the instigator of making people remember, talk about their pasts and so on, you are not certain whether your intrusion into someone’s life may not cause a degree of collateral damage which that person might otherwise have been spared.

Yet, the commonly acknowledged necessity to find a schema that might address and perhaps even assess and heal the traumatic impact of such historic ruptures prompts the quest for a new locus of expression. Arguably, photo-texts can provide such a context. Photography functions in ways that are similar to memory: it offers no direct access to the event and thus alters or distorts it. Or, as Austerlitz says,

> the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long.

But when engulfed in a text a new image is engineered that of the ‘pictorial third’, which is anchored both on the verbal and the visual narrative and which signals the resurrection of memory. This new image flashes like a (traumatic) memory and ‘links its apparitions together into a visual net cast upon the written text’. Hence, the interplay between the verbal and the visual narrative, the anachronistic quality photography bestows on reading by arresting the text and, accordingly, the illustration the text endows to the photograph by framing it, the bimediality – in other words – in Sebald’s novels reshapes and restores the acts of testimony and witnessing. And it does so productively, by bringing together different (traumatic) experiences and associating them in the mind of the reader.

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54 Louvel, p. 46.
Still Quiet
Katy Giebenhain

Winner of the 2013 Exegesis Creative Writing prize

In the wind colourful bedclothes
wave thoughtfully on the balcony.
Behind a pile of shirts
fragrant hemp by a spinning wheel.

from The Figure of Fulfillment by Emil Lerperger,
translated from the German by Jim Wayne Miller, 1975

In the wind colourful bedclothes
lift, extending bellies of air. Suppose
the sheets could unpin themselves. Would
they sail far? They could
but won’t. Possibility comes and goes;
in the wind colourful bedclothes

wave thoughtfully on the balcony
prayer flags far from the Himalayas, see
each pillow case spread
their damp seams fed
from sunlight strong and steady;
wave thoughtfully on the balcony.

Behind a pile of shirts,
bare feet, and more pressed skirts
the linoleum warms.
Still quiet, the old clock-arms
shift, preparing for the hour’s alerts
behind a pile of shirts

fragrant hemp by a spinning wheel
piles up its decree. She can feel
that rain is coming,
but does not mind, keeps thumbing
pegs in place. Here is today’s seal:
fragrant hemp by a spinning wheel.
I wrote to the magazine last week and this morning I went to buy the issue in which my letter would appear. Black List publishes letters of our island’s inhabitants and the editors’ responses. I skipped the reports of theft, violence and addiction, and went straight to the family section where mine would be. Some stories grabbed my attention. Here is one:

“Dear editors,

I write to inform you that a certain person, named (…) has been cheating on me, his wife, named (…), with his secretary, named (…), a crime about which I only recently found out and, of course, my first thought was to write to you. I understand such actions are unacceptable in our utopia, however I’m willing to forgive him, if the state can persuade him to repent. I wait for your advice.

Yours faithfully,

(…)”

That was an uncommon case, I thought, yet I had heard of a similar incident many years ago when I was a child. I had for a moment forgotten my own problems –such was my surprise – and was curious to read the magazine’s reply:

“Dear (…),

These things have a greater impact on society than you realize. Behind every madman, criminal or corrupted politician, there must be some trauma, usually from childhood or a failed relationship. One proof of the damage done is the confusion it has caused you. We appreciate your desire to forgive, but instead advise you to forget. Your husband’s name has been put in the Black List and he will be expelled from the island shortly. His secretary too. Within the next week, a psychologist will visit you, paid by the state, to help you deal with whatever trauma caused and move forward.

Yours sincerely,

Black List.”

The magazine never published the names either of the accusers or the accused in the weekly issue. The editors kept this information for themselves until, at the end of each month, they added the names of those found guilty to the monthly Black List. The names of those who had already been driven away from our society were removed so as not to occupy space, though they were archived online and in the libraries. One could find the whole list on the government’s website, for example.
Before I got to my letter, I found another that described a case equally unusual and unacceptable.

“Dear friends,

my name is (...) and I am fourteen. Lately, I’ve had doubts about the way my father is parenting me and my fears were confirmed this Christmas when he confessed that his Santa Claus story was a lie. I felt so much hatred when I found out I had been deceived all these years. Have you heard of this ‘Santa’? It’s a myth from a non-utopian country my Grandpa was from. He was involved in brainwashing me, as well. You can’t imagine how much I cried! Why would a father lie to his own kid? At school I was the only child who believed this fairy tale and all these years my father kept repeating he was right and all the other children wrong. He also asked me not to tell my teacher, afraid she would report him. She has been reading your magazine to us, as teachers must do, ever since we were ten but I’ve never read of such a thing as what happened to me in the other people’s letters. Is my father evil? I know lying is a crime but I have been taught that our parents love us, so I’m not sure what to make of this. I know I don’t want to be hurt that much again. I am poisoned with doubt and mistrust. I hope I did the right thing by reporting him. I do love my father but he’s a liar.

Have a nice week,

(…).”

That was incredible, I thought, lying to someone for years. They tell us some cultures raise their people with lies so that they develop an unstable relationship with reality and become more vulnerable to propaganda – but not here! Here that would be illegal, considering its cultural impact. Here that would be preposterous.

I found the magazine’s reply particularly helpful:

“Dear (…),

Your father has been brainwashing you into a consumer culture that is alien to our world and unacceptable. His name has been added to the Black List and will be made public in the next issue. Depending on his actions, it may or may not be removed from the List in the future. Until then, he is officially a bad influence. As for you, we don’t know whether you are in the position to recover from such a trauma but we will stand by you. Your teacher has been informed as well as your fellow students, so you will receive as much support as you can get. It is important that we live in a society where everyone can be trusted, therefore we have to spot the untrustworthy ones and make their names public so they cannot harm other people with their lies, fake promises, verbal violence. We think your father is not suitable to be a parent – the culture of such lies as Santa does not belong in a utopia. However, your father cannot be expelled as you are too young to be deprived of a father figure. His punishment will be limited to having his name on the Black List until he realizes the error of his ways. Thank you for writing to us, child, and good luck,

Black List.”

Truth is our utopia would have long collapsed were it not for the Black List Magazine. There were no corrupted politicians in the island – these were spotted as soon as they lied to a wife or a son or a friend, so they
wouldn’t get the chance to grow into professional liars. Our politicians were people who had never lied to, or cheated, or otherwise harmed, a fellow citizen. Getting blacklisted was the penalty for all crimes – from the smallest lie to a murderer, though we hadn’t had a murder for five generations – and if the crime was too serious, the criminal would be exiled to another society where his actions would be considered more or less tolerable, even acceptable in some cases.

I confess I delayed reading my letter on purpose, knowing the gravity of the subject, knowing that my future – and the future of my family – depended on the magazine’s response.

Finally, I found it. Seeing it there made my heart beat faster, made me fear. I wondered if I had made my point clear, if my writing was proper, if perhaps I could have said this or the other phrase differently. I was too worried for the impression it would make but told myself it didn’t matter. What mattered was what they would say.

“Dear Black List,

I write to report my daughter. Despite the love and education I’ve given her, she did the most outrageous thing by getting engaged to a foreigner. The outsider, named (…), who wished to join our utopia, has had his application approved by the state and is currently staying in the island as one of us. I appreciate, of course, the state’s generosity and know there’ve been successful marriages of second and third generation outsiders who were raised here according to our customs and morals. But he hasn’t been educated here and has not lived with us long enough to appreciate our culture. I tried to convince (…), my daughter, to change her mind. I understand some outsiders have developed advanced brainwashing techniques, which would explain my daughter’s stubbornness and the addictive nature of her love. Imagine that I was forced to take action and lock her in her room while awaiting your instructions – there was nothing else I could do to prevent this madness. I confess I even hit her at some point, while trying to get her in there. Please advise me on what to do to prevent this marriage, as I’m sure you know the impact these things have on society.

I am looking forward to your response,

Yours always,

(…)”

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I closed my eyes. Counted to ten. The magazine’s reply was in front of me, finally, after a long week of bad sleep and agony, of listening to my daughter curse me from behind the locked door, of trying to comfort myself that she will never end up with an outsider, that she will have a healthy, utopian life. This was the longest week of my life. Now, I was finally alone in the living room, with the Black List in my hands, with the answer to all my questions in my hands.

I opened my eyes.

“Dear (…),
We regret to inform you that you have been added to the Black List under the category Potentially Dangerous. The reason was, of course, the crime you yourself confessed in your letter to our publication. Not only have you committed violence against your own daughter and locked her in her room, but you excuse those actions, as if you don’t understand their significance. You are obviously mentally disturbed and since your daughter is an adult, we have no second thoughts about expelling you from the island. In fact, by the time you are reading this, consider yourself under arrest already. You will be given twelve hours to realize what that means and accept it before you are officially exiled. There’s no need to add that you are to release your daughter immediately. The outsider to whom she is engaged is a healthy-minded new member of our society and has been accepted by the community. Your disrespect to your fellow citizen is based on prejudice, not reason. Tomorrow, when the ship will have arrived at (destination of the ship was not revealed), you will find yourself an outsider too in a city that will be suspicious of you as well. Our publication is meant to support our society of trust, thus a good citizen of this island should trust anyone not included in the Black List. Please understand we don't hold this against you and that we hope you find happiness in your new home. But you are not a utopian, and are not mature enough to be one of us. Thank you for your understanding. Pack your things and good luck with your future,

Black List.”

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It is dark now but I can see the island from the cabin window. I am tired but cannot go to sleep. I wasn’t given twelve hours after all, I was arrested within a few minutes from the moment I dropped the magazine on the floor and ran to the kitchen to grab a knife. I hadn’t even thought what I was going to do with it, but hearing my daughter had just woken up, I went to her room and unlocked the door.

She screamed so loudly I had to do something. The magazine was right. I am dangerous.

The End
Acting

Robert Selby

I am Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers, without a horse, granted, but the budget stretched to false whiskers, red cape, breastplate, and I can deliver ‘Halt, scoundrels, and let the girl go!’ as well as any, when on I rush, leading the counterwatch from the front, and clutch Esmeralda to me as they pile in with quarterstaves. Over her shoulder I can just make out faces in the rows closest to the stage, including yours.

Did I, knight in shining – plastic – armour, thrill you with my gallant entry? Did it portray me in a whole new light, dashing, in the nick of time, before the footlights? Did my act of chivalry cleave your defences, pierce your heart like a lance point? As I pause, regaining breath, ready for Esmeralda to turn to me, and thank me, and want her leave, but become smitten, hypnotised forever by my handsome face,

do you imagine yourself in her place, and begin to reassess your choice, a choice your presence here suggests is not irreversible? In two days you fly to Hong Kong to be with a dying uncle, yet take time out to watch me badly act. The fracas nears its end; please, meet my eye and, with yours, tell me I did not mistake the setting sun for our aurora, that snow-lit afternoon in the long ground

when you befriended a chestnut horse and, stroking his blaze, named him after me. That when you are in Sham Shui Po, taking respite from your vigil, downtown among the fabric stalls and computer arcades, it will be me you call. Can I discern that, from your expression in the half-dark? But here is my cue, my name is asked: ‘Captain Phoebus de Châteaupers, my dear, at your service.’
During the summer between first and second year of secondary school I was wheelchair bound with fractured ankles. At the end of term I’d been climbing on the school roofs with the other lads from my year. They all made it across the gap between the gym hall and the canteen. When it came to my turn, I fell short, scraped down the side of the building and slammed into the ground feet first.

Once home from hospital, I’d sit looking out my window most nights. I’d watch the other bairns play out on the street and check to see if my little brother was behaving. If I caught him battering somebody or swearing, I would shout through to my mam and clype on him. She’d tell me not to worry about what he was up to and to just get back to my books. Not much bigger than me, she’d struggle to push my chair across the thick blue carpet away from the window.

I soon became distracted by the Andersons’ troubles. The first of it had been Mannie Anderson drunk-driving into the dyke on the corner of the street. I don’t know why we called him Mannie: they were usually fat and old with moustaches, but he was small and wiry. I guess it’s because we never knew his name. Nobody ever told us.

My mam thought about phoning the police that night, but before she got round to picking up the phone, Valerie Anderson had moved the car and parked it outside their house. She’d grutten to the folk at the end of the road, the pinpoint glow of her fag shaking in her hand. I’d had to lean out over the side of my chair and open my window to see the conversation. I couldn’t hear them, but they seemed to understand and to be okay about their dyke from their faces.

A few nights later there was further trouble across the road. The Anderson loon, David, came flying out the house in his pyjamas, greetin loudly. He was only wee – about eight or nine – with spiky strawberry-blonde hair. He ran as far as the gate at the bottom of their pathie and clung onto it.

I wheeled myself over to my bedroom door and shouted bain to my mam. By the time she came and pushed me back over to my window, all four of the Andersons were out in their front garden. David was being shielded by his sister Kylie, wrapped up underneath her dressing gown. Mannie Anderson lay drunk on the ground with Valerie on top of him, battering at his chest with her fists.

My mam pushed my chair away from the window and shut the curtains. Through a tiny gap she spied on the family.

Fit’s gan on?
Wheesht would ye, she whispered through her teeth.
I itched to walk over to the window and look out. I listened to the shouts and screams as best I could and tried to read my mam’s expressions, but her face was hard-set in the orange glow of the lamppost outside our house.

For a minute or so there was silence. My mam pulled away from the curtain and made sure it was fully closed.

Fit were they saying?
She sighed through her nose.
He’s been interfichering wie them bairnies. She had a cloot in her hand that had mascara smudged into it.
She started wiping at her face again with one hand and pulled back the duvet on my bed with the other.
Should we dee something aboot it?
She shrugged her shoulders.
It’s best nae to interfere wie the likes o that, she said, before helping me up out of my chair and into bed.
Alone, I lay in the darkness, listening. All that could be heard the rest of the night was cars passing by at the end of the road.

* 

There were more noises the next morning: the scraichs of seagulls perched on my roof. Throughout summer, they always made a din around five in the morning. I placed a pillow over my head, but it did little to drown out the noise. I just had to lay there and wait until my mam woke up.

At breakfast I looked out the kitchen window onto our backie. The sun was out and a breeze stirred the overgrown branches of the hedge. I hacked into my egg with a knife and bits of shell sank into the yoke. It made me think about the fractured bones in my ankles and how they must have looked.

I asked my mam if she would take me for a walk, not that I could. She agreed, but only if I tried to wheel myself more this time.

Fit a scunner, she huffed as my wheels jammed in the chuckies at the front of the house. Slowly, but surely, they made two grooves in the stones all the way from our door out onto the pavement.

On our way down to the park the streets were empty. It had rained through the night and my wheels crackled with the little stones that stuck to the mud as they ground into the tarmac. Mam left me to wheel myself across long stretches of pavement. I managed most of the way there except for the kerbs and when I rolled through dog’s dirt; she had to push me through a patch of grass to wipe it off.

By the time we got to the park, my shoulders ached. There was only an auld wifie out walking her golden retriever on the football pitches. The dog’s fur darkened with dubs as it bounded across the thin grass near the goal posts.

Can we get a dog fan I can walk again? I asked.

I’ve enough adee wie you twa, never mind bloody dogs, she said. She stopped by a bench and sat down to have a fag. Her legs dangled above the ground and she swung them like a bairn. Her puffs of smoke quickly vanished in the breeze. It reminded me of the fags I’d been pinching out of her packets since the start of the year for my chums; she was yet to catch me.

I hope them bairnies are ah right, she said, staring up at the sky in a dwam.

I wanted to ask her more about the night before – what exactly she meant by interfichering – but I kept quiet.

Fag finished, she stubbed it out on the bench and flicked the tabbie onto the grass. My shoulders pulsed with pain so I asked if she could push me now. Sighing, she wandered round behind my chair and it began to trundle onwards. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the gentle rumble from the bumpy path beneath me and the warm breeze ruffling my hair.

I was near enough asleep when we got back to our driveway. The chair struggled across the chuckies and I was jolted awake.

I’m fed up o this. I hope ye’ve learnt yer lesson. Nae mair acting the goat.

In the house, she left me to wheel myself about. I headed bain into the living room and picked up a book of tales my dyde had given me a lend of. I flicked through and read bits at random. The only thing that held my attention was about a mermaid. One of its verses clings to my mind still:

But I am sick, and very sick,
Wie a passion strange and new,
For ae kiss o thy rosy cheek
And lips o the coral hue.

When my mam headed to her work at the chippy, I wheeled over to the window and watched her drive off. At the same time, a police car turned down our street and parked outside the Andersons’. Two policemen got
out and knocked on their door. Valerie answered. She was wearing red silk pyjamas that made her skinny figure seem to waiver in the wind. After a few minutes of talking to them on the doorstep, she let them inside. I tried to focus in on their living room, but the light from their fish tank glared the rest of the room into darkness.

I went back to reading but, with every page turn, I glanced back up at the house. Eventually the door opened and the police stepped out. The Andersons followed after. Valerie smiled as Mannie Anderson put his arm round her waist. They both waved the police off and then went inside. I looked up above their front door and saw Kylie looking down from her bedroom. From under her thick black fringe, her eyes met mine. I wheeled away from the window and stayed out of sight of it the rest of the day.

When my mam got back from the chippy she helped me wash. We'd gotten into the routine of getting me undressed then lowering me into the bath with my cast-sheathed legs hung over the side. She held the rubber shower attachment over me while I shampoowed my head and reached all the places with a foaming sponge. That night, my brother did his usual of knocking on the bathroom door and shouting abuse.

Mam, can ye see his wee beastie? he said before running away laughing. My mam laughed like every other time, and I did that night too, just at his sheer persistence.

The worst thing about the showers was not being able to wash below my knees. With my pyjamas on, the skin felt extra itchy underneath the casts. My mam gave me a knitting needle and I spent a while poking down into the gap between my skin and the hardened plaster of Paris. The itchiness stopped and was replaced by a faint stinging. I put the needle in my bedside cabinet and took out a pen. I spent the rest of the night writing down secrets on the casts. I read through them a few times and then carefully changed each letter into a random symbol by connecting up its ends or adding extra lines. When I finished, each cast was an Egyptian mummy covered in hieroglyphics that only I could decode.

* 

My mam was late for work the next day. She'd been up past midnight on the phone to her lad and had overslept. In a frap, she got me dressed, helped me down the stairs and into my chair as quickly as she could before heading out. She asked my brother if he'd take me out for a walk. He agreed, but as soon as she left, he was rushing out the door to play with his chums. I shouted after him, pleading for him to at least push me round the block. The door slammed shut and footsteps crunched across the chuckies. I beat my hand against the living room window.

He gave me the finger and smirked. The 6 on the back of his football top became smaller with each step up our street. I turned my chair round and wheeled over to the cabinet. I picked his new football magazine off the top of it and ripped it up. The scraps flew all around the room and I laughed at the thought of what his reaction would be when he got home.

Once I'd calmed down, I went over to the cabinet to get a book. An idea came to me. I pulled out some of my mam's novels: big, thick ones about sex and gangsters written by auld, rich wifes in America. I made sure to select ones that were well worn – pages coming away from the cracked spine. I wheeled through and opened the front door. Out on the porch, I managed to shut the door behind me before carefully throwing a couple of the tomes down on each step. It meant I had a makeshift ramp to roll down, rather than the two big drops that would surely tip my chair over.

I closed my eyes and rattled down the concrete and paper. When I opened them again, I was out in the glare and heat of the sun.

The next task was getting across the chuckies. I found the grooves my wheels had made the day before and lined up the chair with them. Like a train on a track, I wheeled in a straight line through the stones onto the smooth tarmac at the other side.

Heading along the pavement, the hope that I might see somebody from my class faded as soon as it came; young mams with buggies were all that passed once I'd turned onto West Road. I kept getting the balance of the force on each wheel wrong and the chair swerved from side to side, but I was adamant that I wouldn't chicken out and head home.
Further along, the back of my neck began to burn in the heat. I turned off at the next junction onto the more shaded Alexandra Terrace. I’d forgotten it had a steep dip until I was confronted by it. It looked like I’d make it across and up the other side if I built up enough momentum wheeling down the slope. I rolled back a few metres and then sped forward full pelt. I was flying; the wheels spun faster than they ever had. But halfway down, one wheel bumped over a stone and the chair veered to the side. It tipped over the kerb and I was thrown out onto the road. My head bounced off the concrete before settling back down onto its mosaic of stones and glass. My left arm had hit the ground first and pains shot through it before it slowly turned numb. Ignoring the agony, I managed to peel myself off the ground and sit up. I brushed the grit off my face with my right hand. Lines of blood were smeared across it: more scrapes to explain to my mam.

A car turned onto the street. I tried to wave at the driver from where I had landed between two parked cars. She was speaking on a phone and remained oblivious to me. I took deep breaths to stop myself crying and to clear my fuzzy head.

After a few minutes of this, I heard a voice behind me, but couldn’t make out what it said. Two arms slotted in under my oxters and I was plucked up off the ground. I could smell lager and sweat. A stubbly chin brushed through my hair. I peered up: it was Mannie Anderson. A tingle spread out from where he held me to the rest of my body.

He pushed me back towards our street and spoke to me. I didn’t understand the garble of words; it was as though I was drifting underwater all the way back to the house.

When we got there, he pushed me bain into my living room where sunlight glinted on the glass table. It was hot and stuffy; breathing became a struggle. He opened the windows and left the room. The breeze that drifted in from outside revived me a little while I sat alone.

He came back in with my mam’s books and placed them on the table. He stood scratching his head. A noise came out my mouth but I stopped myself before it formed any word.

Eh? he asked.

I bid still.

He noticed a strip of magazine lying at his feet. Down on his hands and knees, he picked up all the scraps around the room.

I hope ye’r ah right, he said. He left the room with the bundle of paper in his hand as though removing the evidence of a crime.

At the end of the summer holidays, the doctors said I needed crutches for the one ankle that still hadn’t healed properly. I took an extra calcium tablet each day and drank milk with every meal to speed up the process. I couldn’t bear the crutches: the hard pressure against my oxters reminded me of Mannie Anderson’s grip that day. Every time I went from class to class I felt him.

Something had changed over the summer and the other loons were different at school. They’d spent the six weeks off going on trips together and hanging out with quines. Every conversation in the playground seemed to be about how far they’d gone with their blonds and what they’d heard about the older quines, what we had to look forward to in a couple of years’ time. I stood on the edge of the group and laughed when everyone else did and made jokes that nobody found funny. Over time, I resorted to silence and scuffed my shoes across the tiny bits of stone and glass in our corner of the courtyard. It was only a matter of weeks before they found some other place to meet. I wasn’t told where.

By the time the tattie holidays came round I was crutchless and friendless. The street was dark with rain the whole of the first week but, in the second, things finally dried up. On the Wednesday, I sat outside on the porch and read a book about a teenager who worked for MI6. It excited me to think that was what being a teenager would be like and I rushed to read it all before I turned thirteen the next day.
I had just come to a cliffhanger when David Anderson ran out of his house laughing. Kylie came out after him, red faced.

Come back here ye little bastard! she bawled.

That's enough! Valerie slammed the front door behind her. David you sit in the back o the car ahin my seat and Kylie you gang in the front. I dinna want to hear a word oot the pair o ye till we're back hame.

They all got into the red Ford Fiesta. The bonnet still had a dent from where it had hit the dyke on the corner of the road. The dyke had been fixed since.

After a few rattles, the car came to life and they headed out of the street.

I read through another chapter; the clouds overhead grew dark. I stood up to go back inside and Mannie Anderson came out his house. He headed round the side and entered the shed in their backie. Usually he'd shut its small wooden door. That day, he left it open, swinging in the wind.

I posted the book through my letterbox and it landed with a soft thud behind the door. I crossed the road and slowly walked up the path into the Andersons' backie: a plot of muck with weeds flowering across it.

My footsteps made no sound as I headed across the hard, dry muck towards the shed. Mannie Anderson was sawing a piece of wood into blocks and didn't notice me for a good while. I liked the sound of the metal forcing its way through the wood; when he slowed down it sounded like something was being unzipped.

There was sweat across his brow when he looked up. He wiped it away and squinted at me as though he couldn't remember who I was.

Fit? was all he said.

I said nothing and stepped into the shed. It smelt of pine and him. Instead of a floor, there was just muck like the rest of the garden but without the weeds. I was trembling as I knelt down beside him. He turned and looked down at me, still expectin an answer.

Fitiver, he muttered and started sawing again. Blue veins bulged in his forearm. The saw made a sharper, more violent sound as it chewed through the wood.

Rain started to drum on the roof of the shed. He stopped sawing and looked up. We both sat still and listened to the sound. My heart squirmed in my chest. I reached out a quivering hand and stroked my fingers down his warm, damp torso. He looked down at my arm in confusion before batting it away. He shoved his hand hard against my shoulder and I tumbled backwards onto the cold earth. A shock ran down through my legs and throbbed in my ankles. I lay still, part of me longing for him to come and pick me up like the last time, part of me terrified. He leaned away, his back pressing hard against the wooden slats, his small mouth hanging open.

I sprang up and dashed out of the shed. Rain drenched me as I sprinted across the street into my house. I kicked off my shoes and ran up the stairs to my room. With dripping-wet clothes, I dove onto my bed and hid under the sheets.

It took a while for my mam to come and find me after she got back from work.

Ye okay mannie? I heard her ask softly from the foot of my bed. When I didn't reply she gently peeled back the covers and leaned over me. I kept my eyes focused on my tear-soaked pillow.

Fit's wrang? Her tone became more serious. She stood up straight. Have you been up to mischief again? I grut louder, making incomprehensible noises.

She knelt down again and wiped the tears from my face.

Come on mannie. Ye can tell me. She ran her fingers through my hair. My sobs became small yawns.

Come on, fit's wrang? My mouth was dry, but the words poured out anyway: I told her that Mannie Anderson had done a bad thing to me in the summer, that he'd interfered with me.

Come on, fit's wrang? My mouth was dry, but the words poured out anyway: I told her that Mannie Anderson had done a bad thing to me in the summer, that he'd interfered with me. Her hand stopped stroking my hair and pulled away. Shaking, she asked me more. I answered with a few words each time.

She left the room and I heard the house phone bleep. I pulled the sheets over my head and felt a kind of safety in the darkness.
Nowadays, I try my best to forget about that year, but my dreams rarely let me. The one that recurs the most is the memory of what happened that night, after I’d given my statement to the police. I get up out of bed and wander across my room. It’s cold and I can see my breath, even in the low light. I open my curtains and look out onto the street. Up in her room, Kylie is sat on her windowsill. We stare at one another. Gradually, her breath steams up her window and she disappears behind it. I close my curtains and lay back down in bed. I writhe around under the sheets trying to shake the cold from my body. It’s still there when I wake.
Outside Elizabeth Greenwood's

Robert Selby

It's the time of the copper sky at even, when the shrieking of baby house martins under the eaves foretells fledging.
The long days are receding so I needn't be out late to watch you, Lizzy, through your well-lit kitchen window, as the bats and the martins flit around and above me in my shady vantage, crepuscular animals trigger foliage in the pine forest at my back.

To the east the village that thinks you witch dances to public house viols, or stokes hearths into flaming up before their cold cold eyes. They see your chin and think it pointed, they see your red cloak and think it scarlet, they never see you in their – our – church, and so they judge your womanly intuition satanic. But when those with troubled conscience come to you, it's not by spell you ease them, but by sitting them at your kitchen table as you pare potatoes, and letting them talk.

I do not have their confidence, by which I mean they do not come to me, nor I to you. As a man in my position, I must baulk at you! Mere excuse. I am owner of a white flower for a heart, owner of a tongue that you before me, your back to me, the splash of pared potatoes into the water bucket, the momentary glimpse of bare wrist, your long hair down over your mauve dress, allowing only a flash of nape… I am owner of a tongue that would be tied, and by it you would know my distress.

So I watch you from here, crocheting by candlelight. Look, tonight you wear your lemon shawl; a fair vision in the box of light, bearing a beautiful frown of concentration that should be enough for anyone. Man or nation.
I should step forth, and halloo, and perhaps
you would welcome me in for hot tea,
or perhaps the moonlight would reveal my collar,
and you would step back, your gaze grown cold.

No, Lizzy, I will not be so bold.
But tomorrow, tomorrow I will rail for you,
rail against petty tongues and superstitions
to their owners, that unbecoming lot, and God
can judge them if they should guess
whom I defend, and think us in scandal.
Forgive me, Lord, but would they were right!
It has grown cold. Bless you, Lizzy, bless you. Goodnight.
Mobius Strips of Yarn
Susan Gray

This is my confession.

I guess you’re surprised. You most likely think that my mind is addled. How can I live through an eternal backlash, a strained severity of all the secrets that I had stashed away? Some people used to believe in an afterlife, after all.

That’s where I’ll be headed, maybe. Mystery and death are often partners in hand.

I’ll be off the nano-techs, that’s all.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not uncomfortable. If this ever were a tomb, it’s a rather colourful, playful and personal one. After all, I chose to be this way – being trapped within my own words gives me a security that no sense of freedom can compare to. It’s just that because the market has exploded, the answers to the questions have provided so much scope that it’s in risk of becoming completely barren. It’s up to us, the artists, to provide the focus. After so many years of failing, my chalk marks slipping through the particles of eternal trappings, I’ve decided to take a risk – a rather life threatening one – to finally reach my goal. I’m going to step out of the loop.

Procrastination is the recent hedonism. Time no longer rattles the bones in the same anthemic procession like it used to in those days. It was our best friend and worst enemy, but now it’s become like a distant neighbour, something that only takes to your mind when it dwindles. It’s brilliant, in a way. Which is why I’ve chosen, elected myself if you will, to revert to old ways.

I publish everything. It’s in my nature, my lifeblood to sell every drop of soul. So many little conflicts, people I’ve live with and drifted apart, like ripples in an ocean just to mark out how times have changed. How we will always gravitate towards old comforts, and then spring into new beginnings. Clichés can settle people nowadays. They used to be such a big faux pas, but people like to know with such multiplicity, there is a comfort in some sense of belonging, of some uniformity. I’ve written all kinds of fabulation—the old fashioned yarn spinning of lands where romance weaves its Mobius strip over waning human life. I long to let people know how we can be nostalgic for this sort of whimsy, but with the comfort in our own longevity. For me, it’s far too late—it’s a ride where it can be so hard to let go. Not ever, until your say so. This volume will be my last chance, my attempt to be remembered. I’ve made the decision for that to actually happen.

That’s how it was in those days. Writers have to fight off their own backs for recognition, and we know how some of those turned out. Some never get the adulation that they feel they deserve when there is no death, no posthumous invisible clap on the back: no matter how many times you reinvent yourself as new. There are lead linings to every silver cloud. Subverting a cliché still leads you to another one, after all.

It won’t be the most straightforward procedure, I’m sure – carving those beautiful jewels out of my system never to return. Art in this contained world always was in risk of stagnancy, even for this universe. I want to experience the atavistic, the ancient drive of adrenaline for survival. The drug is so short lived, incompatible, for those who are immortal.

Don’t worry, I won’t slip away into the aether as soon as I dot my last sentence. It’s just my choice to age, of course. There have been others. I hear their clamours and cries throughout these wards – the new plague, the new virulent growth to combat that cultivates in the mind. Thoughts of some people pull me away from the option. My first love is still alive with the same genetically engineered spark in her eyes, skin as gossamer as a mortal twenty year old. Gossamer being luminescent, transparent, beautiful and fragile – sorry, I can’t help but explain myself. Metaphor isn’t bandied around much these days. It’s hard to stay rooted in the present when so many I hope will be reading for this for millennia to come. All of my lovers, harbouring whatever feelings they have of
me – many will have forgotten me, I’m sure – some have roamed these halls, ready to either springboard out of life or to visit those about to. I wonder if she’ll visit me.

I’ll always remember her. We re-enacted Griffiths’ honeymoon in space (the eternal romantic) when those oxygen patches came out – wonderful little contraptions those were – we made it our emotional pilgrimage before it became clichéd. I would say it’s more of the fact that we did it than more of the experience, I’m sorry to say. I’m sure you’ve been traipsing around, gazing at the rings of Saturn, the angst ridden Mars, the majesty of Jupiter and so on after they were colonised, of course. What I’m describing is a little old fashioned, I know. We’ve visited the once barren wastelands of savage plains, now teeming with the creatures which live and die to a different clock, those who study us with the same awe and intensity as we do them, drawing out the nutrients of our hospitable hosts in a much less elegant manner than us. There’s nothing like a change of context to bring our planetary interactions into a whole new light. Do forgive me. To paraphrase an old sentiment – we did it before it was cool.

I hope she will read this – she has eternity to do so – but with temporality comes nostalgia, an urge and a need to renew what’s been past. Any grudges were short lived and I would hate for it to end on a bad note. Bang into life and dwindle, dawdle out of it, winding and distorting. That’s exactly how I want it. Drifting and entering each other’s orbits has been exciting and eventful but there’s a limit to this personal freefall.

This is my last encounter, if you understand me – what is it like to be old? Where do the boundaries of age form in our new lives? I confess to all those who may read this now and evoke those feelings of grief that have been previously denied to us that... I don’t know any other way. I know a person will be borne in my place – and I feel better that this will being another life in this utopia of sensation. It’ll be the closest I have to bearing children, another novelty that people cannot easily envisage. I hope to be creating art manifold in my passing.

If you’re reading this now, I’ll hope you follow my reasoning. You’re in a constant continuum of being, so I address you as whatever and whoever you are when you find this. How I’ll finish the piece for now would maybe be considered as pretentious, but situations write the past anew. I wanted to add a quotation, by a poet of all people. I know things like this used to annoy you, but I think now it makes more sense to me now than ever before. The name Keats and the title Ode to a Grecian Urn might not mean anything to you but I don’t want to assume – you might be seeing a poet right now. It’s just that these lines resonate so much more in the context of mortality, as I can envisage my mind stripping and unwinding gracefully like a sorrowful pirouette:

“When old age this generation waste/Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe...”

I feel that in accepting this path, that I can finally create art. The uncanny sensation of seeing your mortality in the birth of your own child is one that I can finally feel. I am sure it’s worth the labour pains – the risk of death, so I can produce a work of art that finally teems with vitality. I can finally call myself an artist.
Unspeakable
Natalie Woodward

Oświęcim, like other towns, has a history,
but one which stops before its time.

Townsfolk are talking in old tongues
and laughter is on their lips.
Their young are growing older.

Their old are growing older.

I wonder if they know their town
is a tree burnt from the roots up.

Brzezinka was translated into trees
planted to block out shadows.
Wooden tongues take hold in soil
And stick, wordless, to bits of bone and teeth,

ovenscattered.

Each bone, light as ash, testifies only
to a haunting absence.
Past the trees, they land silently,
touching the ground like lips brushing against an ear,
as stories of the uncounted left
are left uncounted.
Approaching the limits of language

Kim Patrick


Warning against the seductive metaphor of text as artefact, Nanian asserts that the literary work lives. Moved by the desire to articulate his own reading experiences, Nanian seeks to detect poetic energies within the works of poets including Coleridge, Poe, and Eliot. Adopting the Greek-derived terms *plerosis*/*kenosis*, he devises extremes which support him in quantifying the extent to which a poem may force the reader in the direction of order and logic (*kenotic*) or disorder (*plerotic*).

Occupied by boundaries and limits, *Plerosis/Kenosis: Poetic Language and its Energies* considers the capacity of language. However, it is the capacity of language to fail. Nanian isolates such failures and finds that they may force the poet towards an inevitable silence or, in the case of Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’, stimulate innovation.

Nanian’s initial overview of reader-response theory proves a brisk resource. Yet, for a critic resurrecting the text as artefact, he has quite the killer instinct in his survey of historical, philosophical, and critical contexts. From Iser to Kant, Nanian attacks to the verge of negating purpose. At best a curmudgeon, at times simply irreverent, his manner and seemingly endless dissatisfaction can be an unsettling distraction.

The introduction of Elizabeth Sewell’s diagram of her spectrum perfect order/perfect disorder from *The Structure of Poetry* (1952) rewards perseverance and its appropriation marks the much anticipated introduction of Nanian’s own *plerosis*/*kenosis* spectrum. An essential and elegant shift into *plerosis*/*kenosis* in practice offers a broad and ambitious application. Consideration of the Romantics dominates: Nanian’s close reading of Keats’s ‘Lamia’ and work on the sublime are of particular note. A tool for close readings that may offer new points of departure – especially to scholars of the Romantics – this work will prove, as Nanian intends, most useful in application.

Driven by a need to measure and determine, Nanian is himself seduced by mathematics, binaries, and polar terms. Overly manufactured and mechanical, his distance from the literary work itself is often vast and his sense of a ‘reader’ absent. Nanian’s terms and intent are all too inviting. *Plerosis/Kenosis: Poetic Language and its Energies* does not, as might be expected, further our understanding of what it is to read, to encounter, or indeed experience poetry. However, Nanian does make a welcome and solid contribution to shifting our perceptions from what language *is* to what language is *doing* in poetry.
Tongues of Fire: passionate voices amidst the Blitz

Eleanor Bass

ISBN 9781408830444 (£25)

I am a biased and partisan reviewer. Of that there can be no doubt. Lara Feigel is my PhD supervisor. Worse still (in terms of my reliability as a critic) she is a friend. We work on the same historical period and share an interest in the personalities and texts around which her new book, *The Love-Charm of Bombs*, revolves. Despite this I feel confident in my appraisal: this is an excellent book.

The project is an ambitious one – the group biography of five writers who all lived in London during the period of the Blitz (1940-41). Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene both trod the blacked-out streets as ARP wardens; Henry Yorke (better known by his penname Henry Green) chose to do his bit as a volunteer fire fighter, whilst Rose Macaulay careered through London as an ambulance driver. Meanwhile, Austrian refugee writer Hilde Spiel spent her war years cooped up in the suburbs with her aging parents and young children. Spiel was tormented by the glittering Viennese society that she had lost, and, unlike the other four writers, teetered only on the sidelines of the London literary world.

The contents page of Feigel’s book is unusually tantalising, attesting both to a creative flair and an attention to the fabric of language that pervades the work throughout. Part I inventively interrogates a single night in the lives of the five writers, divided according to time and the progress of a raid (thus 7 p.m. is Blackout, 10 p.m. Fire, 1 a.m. Rescue and 6 a.m. All Clear). The following chapter headings are all quotations, some provocative (‘War, she thought, was sex’), some sad (‘Only at night I cry’), many lyrical (‘The world my wilderness, its caves my home’) and all deeply suggestive.

The book is indeed heavy with atmosphere. It conjures the extraordinary tenor of life in besieged London as experienced by these writers turned war workers: the stumbling dark of the black out; the headiness of literary gatherings amidst the raids; the spectacular and ghastly lighting effects of flares and fires; the intensity of amorous relationships under the strain of imminent death, and the peculiar temporal suspension that Feigel describes as a ‘float[ing] on a futureless present [...] an abnormal pocket of time.’ Feigel illustrates how Bowen, Greene and Yorke were somehow temperamentally suited to life during the Blitz; all three find their hair-raising experiences variously enlivening, meaningful and imaginatively potent. Meanwhile, Rose Macaulay had a sad war full of personal tragedy and the account of her ambulance driving brings home the gruesome and tragic dimensions of the raids. So too, Spiel acts as a counterpoint to wartime vitality: her experience was of frightened children, fish queues, financial hardship and displacement from the home she loved.

That Feigel manages to weave these separate lives together so seamlessly is one of the major achievements of this book. Although there are occasional direct intersections between the characters’ lives they are by no means

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2 Lara Feigel, *The Love-charm of Bombs*, chapter 5 ‘War, she thought, was sex’ p. 85; chapter 11 ‘Only at night I cry’ p.200; chapter 23 ‘The world my wilderness, its caves my home’ p.433.
3 Lara Feigel, *The Love-charm of Bombs*, p.4.
frequent enough to drive the narrative. Rather, Feigel achieves coherence through a continual, delicate shifting of focus. Accounts of military and political events slide effortlessly into the movement of individual lives; thoughts expressed through letters or diaries intermingle with a sensitive consideration of literary works.

The book’s lightness of touch, its convincing evocation of time, place and personality, is in large part due to the generous use of quotation throughout. The voices of these writers, in their many modulations, permeate the pages. It is a pleasure (and surprise) to read, for example, the clipped and polished prose of Bowen alongside her ardently romantic missives to her lover Charles. Feigel’s deft handling of direct speech is matched by her relaxed literary analysis: the narrative slips from an account of Yorke’s wartime affairs to the engorged text of Caught, from Macaulay’s grief over the imminent death of her life-long partner to her fictive evocation of lost possessions, and from the snarled and impassioned romances of Bowen and Greene to their novelistic elegising and admonishing of their lovers.

In the latter part of the book Feigel follows her writers into the 50s, keen to gauge the nature of their post war lives. Amongst a flurry of positive reviews, it has been suggested that Love Charm may have benefitted from a speedier conclusion. Yet it would surely have been an act of biographical treachery not to follow Spiel back to Vienna and then to Berlin, to miss her metamorphosing into the glamorous literary hostess that was her true calling. So too, it would have been heartless to part from Macaulay at her lowest ebb, homeless and broken by grief, instead of charting her gradual rehabilitation into a sun-loving, ‘ruin-googling’ eccentric.

Lara expressed to me once that, despite the relatively small time period she was looking at, it was necessary to get to know her writers from birth to death. I think that her commitment to getting to know her protagonists is palpable within this book. The research is clearly extensive, the writing is crisp and engaging, but what I find perhaps the most impressive aspect of this work is the subtle sketching of the internal workings of these individuals, the contours of character, the texture of emotions and the vertices of relationships that accrue with the turn of every page.
‘We have seen a lot of things that are not ideal’
Robert Selby


Before I continue I must declare a personal interest: Sir Andrew Motion is my PhD supervisor. However, I don’t believe this should preclude me from voicing my opinion that his latest collection, The Customs House, was the best new poetry collection of 2012. Nor should it preclude me voicing agreement with Michael Longley that the collection’s omission from last year’s T.S. Eliot shortlist was (to say the least) regrettable. Still, what do prizes mean in the great scheme of things, especially to one so decorated as Motion already is?

Although a Creative Writing PhD student, I write this as a lay reader, a reader who would like to be excited by contemporary British poetry but is often disappointed and, sometimes, depressed by it. That is not the same response I have to, say, contemporary British novels. The authors of these, like their predecessors, tend not to forget the reader when writing – they tend to want to bring the reader on their journey, to entertain them, to communicate to them, to stir a notion or emotion within them…

When I finished The Customs House I felt invigorated. To begin with I couldn’t think why. Then it struck me: I had just read a contemporary poetry collection containing no irony or overwrought simile. In their place were simple language, clarity, understatement, and seriousness. Through the clarity came the power. As Motion himself has said: ‘Poems should look like a glass of water but taste of gin.’

In ‘Whale Music’, a sequence inspired by Philip Hoare’s acclaimed book Leviathan, the whale describes how, at the same moment as it decided that it was a creature and not a country, it discovered its unmistakeable voice. With this collection, Motion has certainly found a new strength in his own voice. It is perhaps too much to say his poetic talents have finally found their subjects, for that would be belittling what has gone before. But the gradual distillation of his work into the two major themes in this collection, love and war (a process that began in his previous collection, The Cinder Path), has certainly lent his poetry greater power.

Motion turned sixty last year and there is a feeling of making up for lost time. This new urgency manifests itself in conveying the terrible effects of war – inspired by his father’s participation in World War II and subsequent service in the Territorial Army – after a lifetime spent not showing:

the appetite to know
how much of his own self
he shattered on my behalf 1

It also manifests itself in addressing his new wife, Kyeong-Soo, a Korean linguist who has lived in America, to whom the book is dedicated. In ‘Gaisford Street’ he declares:

In your third country now you are still travelling
and I am quite content to ride in your slip-stream
although you insist I am what you came to discover.2

In ‘Holy Island’ he wonders…

How many years are there left to cross over
and show you things themselves, not my idea
of things? Thirty, if I live to the age of my father.
I cannot explain why I have left it as late as this. (*The Cinder Path*, p. 43)

There is a coming to terms with the inevitably of death in the graceful ‘Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak’ (the name of Black Hawk, 1767-1831, a leader of the Sauk American Indian tribe). The last stanza is particularly pertinent to a poet:

Death is nothing;
the earth is not mine,
my hand’s work
the shadow of cloud. (*The Customs House*, p. 51)

The first section of the collection, ‘Laurels and Donkeys’, draws on the experiences of men to whom we all owe a debt, from those of Siegfried Sassoon’s generation right up to those who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. The most arresting in terms of imaginative rendering is ‘The Death of Harry Patch’, the ‘Last Fighting Tommy’ of World War I who died aged 111 in 2009. In this stunning poem, a ‘young Captain climbs onto the fire step’ and blows the whistle for the commencement of the attack – ‘but today nothing that happens next happens/according to plan’. Instead, the thousands of dead lying in no-man’s land rise up, straighten their tunics, and fall in, leaving a space:

…for the last recruit of all to join them: Harry Patch,
one hundred and eleven years old, but this is him

now, running quick-sharp along the duckboards. (*The Customs House*, p. 11)

When he has fallen in, the regimental padre walks down the formed lines, slipping ‘a wafer of dry mud’ onto the tongue of each man.

Motion’s always keen sense of the understated is a perfect fit with the bygone British love of the ‘stiff upper lip’, feats of which we particularly associate with the world wars. In ‘Matinee Idol’, a serviceman is recording a filmed message to his mother, which will be screened in cinemas to boost morale at home: ‘Tell them not to worry about me. I am well as you see/and will be home quite soon with everything forgotten’ (*The Customs House*, p. 14). But the understated is deployed at its best in the found poem ‘The Vallon Men’, where Motion leaves its end to words spoken by Gavin Taylor of 40 Commando after the battalion’s tour of Afghanistan: ‘We have lost a lot of friends./And we have seen a lot of things that are not ideal’ (*The Customs House*, p. 30).

The timelessness of conflict – which of course is one of its most terrible characteristics – is struck home by how much this poem echoes ‘London Scottish’, a poem by the late Mick Imlah about the dire death toll in World War I. Like the 15 survivors of the 60-strong London Scottish rugby squad in Imlah’s poem, Taylor and his fellow soldiers no doubt raise a glass to the memories of fallen comrades – and it is ‘neither a humorous nor an idle toast’.³

The collection’s third and final section includes ‘The Visit’, Motion’s elegy for Imlah, who – like the fallen of no man’s land, and Motion’s own father in The Cinder Path’s most moving poem, ‘The Mower’ – comes back to visit as an apparition. In this poem, Motion describes how, in his friend’s company, he would be transported from the temperament that has helped produce the kind of poems included in The Customs House, into the temperament for sport and horseplay:

I understood there was life, and within life
there were games, which mattered because
they did not matter. It was your gift, Mick,
to know that from the start, and to keep faith
with the difficult but clever course it gave you. (The Customs House, p. 76)

Motion has kept faith with his own course – the simple language and narrative – that has characterised his poetry career. It somewhat flies in the face of fashion, which is why The Customs House is so refreshing. Eleven collections in, British poetry needs Motion’s work more than ever. It is becoming more and more important.
Delacroix Meets Daguerre
Kelly Bushnell


In 1840 Edgar Allan Poe wrote of the newly-invented Daguerreotype: ‘The instrument itself must undoubtedly be regarded as the most important, and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science,’1 and it would not be long before Daguerre’s invention was not just an instrument of science but art. The National Gallery has recently concluded their first major exhibition of the 150-year history of the photographic medium, set against (or perhaps more appropriately adjacent to) the painting of the Old Masters in the Sainsbury Wing at Trafalgar Square. With nearly ninety photographs, including pieces by Julia Margaret Cameron, Gustave Le Gray, and Richard Billingham, the exhibition promised a ‘provocative look at how photographers use fine art traditions, including Old Master painting, to explore and justify the possibilities of their art.’2 I unreservedly say it delivered, but subtly, generally preferring to pose questions rather than answers and bringing to public consciousness a debate in which practitioners and critics have long engaged.

The display of painting and photograph side-by-side was intended to create what the Gallery termed ‘resonant exchanges’ between individual artists, collective movements, and, perhaps most significantly, traditionally disparate media. ‘Above all,’ hoped the curators, ‘the displays reveal[ed] how certain themes shared by painting and photography endure across generations of artists.’3 Enduring themes is hardly a revolutionary thesis, but it proved an approachable point of embarkation that allowed the visitor to calibrate their own level of engagement with the show.

A photograph by Richard Learoyd provided the public figurehead of the collection; the nude form of his remarkable ‘Man with Octopus Tattoo II, 2011’ graced every means of London public transport for months. In the exhibition, the piece was flanked by nineteenth-century Master painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ ‘Angelica Saved by Ruggiero’ (1819-39) and by a gold-toned albumen print of the Vatican’s Laocoön Group attributed to James Anderson (1855-65). All three depict vaguely serpentine or tentacle sea monsters grasping for and enveloping the portraits’ subjects. Learoyd’s ‘Man’ is different, however, as his encirclement by the monster suggests it is no monster at all. In deliberately enfolding himself in the tattooed clutches of the beast he is not its victim but its steward. (And the jest of tattooing oneself with an octopus, whose primary defense is ink, lent a sort of primordial-but-present lightness to the centerpiece of this odd triptych.)

Ori Gersht’s Blow Up series (2007) also showed particularly well in this space as a beautifully, disturbingly playful rearticulation of the still life genre alongside a nineteenth-century flower painting by Henry Fantin-Latour. (Gersht freezes flower arrangements with liquid nitrogen before blowing them up and photographing the moment

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of explosion imperceptible to the human eye—what Walter Benjamin calls the ‘optical unconscious’ in his essay ‘A Short History of Photography’.)

Reviews were mixed. Brian Sewell was characteristically distressed by the Gallery’s choice to depart from painting, prints, drawing, and sculpture (‘When the photographer pretends that he is an artist, he is a trespasser’), while Richard Dorment, I think, had the right idea, that each photograph in the collection was chosen ‘to illuminate a different facet of the same proposition: that photographs aren’t “taken”, they are created.’

And this, the idea of photography as creation (whether artistically on par with painting or not) is a concept with which I think the exhibit was genuinely successful. It proved an exercise in exposing and exploring the pertinacity of the major themes of Western visual art and, contiguously, the photographic medium as an opportunity to renew, rework, and revise these themes (or, perhaps most stirringly, not to). And though most of us would argue that the Old Masters scarcely need reviving, anything that can introduce or reinforce their relevance to a new audience can hardly be a failed thing.

As I prepared to exit through the gift shop, I was most surprised by my own response to the similar subject matters presented side-by-side in different media. I found myself confronted by the awareness that there is a certain abstractness even to realist painting that somehow makes a photograph of a subject (Jeff Wall’s 1978 Cibachrome Destroyed Room in light of Delacroix’s Death of Sandanapalus, for instance, or practically any of the nudes) more visceral, more distressing. (In his essay quoted earlier, Poe asserts that ‘the Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely… more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands.’)

It was this tension between the rendered and the real (and the consequent blurring of the boundary between the two) that made this art so ‘seductive.’ The show was successful in offering a photographic perspective that could indeed have a relevant dialogue with ‘historical painting’, though I left feeling that this dialogue yielded more questions than answers. Once back on the Northern Line, however, sitting beneath an abbreviated ‘Man with Octopus Tattoo’ advert, I realised that that sense of tension, and the lingering questions, are what the very capable curators intended all along.

The Seduced by Art exhibition catalogue is published by Yale University Press.

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Small town, epic lives

Natasha Periyan


Like many of the reviewers in these pages, I have a confession to make. Port is a play about my hometown: Stockport. Its scenes and settings are deeply familiar to me. The hospital in which I was born and the suburb in which I grew up both feature. Inherent in my response is this sense of familiarity, of weighted nostalgia with which I viewed the play. Port beautifully captures the spirit of this town and its people. Its strengths lie in the affection and humour with which it grasps this place; its troublemakers, oddballs and heroes.

Port is a play about leaving, being left and growing up. It follows the indefatigable Racheal from a bouncing eleven year old in 1988, to a sage 24 year old in 2002. We first meet her as she seeks refuge from her abusive father in an old banger with her brother, Billy, and her mum as they sit in the forecourt outside their council flat. The play takes us from hospital canteens to countryside hotels and pub patios. In scene-changes the music of Manchester bands The Stone Roses, Oasis, and Elbow provide the throbbing pulse of the play. Meanwhile, Racheal dons jackets, rolls up skirts, and lets down her hair, metamorphosing each time into a slightly older self.

Kate O’Flynn as Racheal wonderfully portrays a life bursting at the seams of its own existence. Her movements on stage, masterfully choreographed by Scott Graham, reflect this. When other characters remain stationary, Racheal jigs from foot to foot. She is a jack in the box desperate to spring. The boundaries of small town life fence her in, frustrating her potential.

Racheal’s relationship with Stockport provides the dramatic impetus to the play. This is the town she struggles to leave. The shopping centre’s Mersey Clock-tower seemed a skyscraper as a child, but, with the perspective of adulthood it is a poxy pretender to the skyscrapers of New York. But the play is also an elegy for this town’s glorious industrial past. Danny, Racheal’s one-time boyfriend, provides an advocacy for its ambitious heritage. The town’s damp weather provided, he says, the perfect conditions for cotton production, and the endless arches of the Stockport viaduct layclaim to being the world’s largest all brick structure.

Playwright Simon Stephens and director Marianne Elliott know this town well. Both were brought up in its environs. Even, they realised later, standing at the same bus stop to go to school. They bring an intimacy to the town’s portrayal, giving a magnitude to settings familiar only to an insider. Stockport Bus Shelter is, for instance, rendered an iconic image of frustrated youth. It provides the arena for Racheal’s flirtation with the swaggering Chris, and the stadium for Billy’s corruption with his first foray into petty crime. There is also an authenticity to the dialect of Port’s inhabitants: Billy ‘will nick ’owt’, the town’s local prostitute seems ‘dead glamorous’ to Racheal’s young eyes. In later life, her husband Kevin, played by Jack Deam, who doubles up roles playing both abusive father and husband – giving Racheal’s life a sense of inevitable circularity – calls her ‘a manky old slag’. The play’s deft dialogue has a poignancy and energy to it that creates momentum. Despite Port’s often dark subject matter, its humour is affectionate and endearing. It may be grim up north, but it’s also funny too.

On first sight, Port provides grist to the mill for David Cameron’s ‘broken Britain’ of grey high rises, petty crime, violence and fractured families. But Stephens frustrates Cameron’s nihilistic take on society’s underclass. He has commented that ‘faith in people is a radical position under conservative governments’. Indeed, the complexity of
the characters – Billy’s inarticulate vulnerability, Danny’s decency, and Racheal’s dad’s concern for his daughter – humanises a sector of society demonised by politicians and the press. The National’s decision to stage this modern play about small-town lives at the Lyttelton, its main stage, is also deeply political. This gesture gives the characters’ fate an epic stature that they would have been denied in the smaller spaces of the Cottesloe or Olivier.

*Port* ends as it starts, in a clapped out car, in the shadow of a tower block. But as Racheal’s face is upturned towards the breaking dawn, optimism prevails.