



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 comingle 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'.¹ 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'.² A middle-class runaway whose exuberantly implausible narrative culminates in her captivity as an Arabian sex slave, Helen throws off bourgeois subjectivity in rituals of erotic depersonalisation. But she still feels the need to communicate her dislocation. 'I want to have what I want to say said', she writes, in the diary which frames the text as a 'found' object.³ 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'.⁴ 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.

¹ Alexander Trocchi, *Young Adam* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999), p. 132. Further references are included in the text as *Adam*.

² Alexander Trocchi, *Helen and Desire* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), p. 16.

³ Trocchi, *Helen and Desire*, p. 16.

⁴ Alexander Trocchi, *Sappho of Lesbos* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1986), p. 6.

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.

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.

⁶ 'I am a kind of funeral director of what is essentially wordless', wrote Trocchi in the work unfinished at his death, *The Long Book*. 'Each thought is a coffin for what previously lived'. Extract from *The Long Book*, in *A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi*, ed. by Allan Campbell and Tim Niel (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), pp. 194-209 (p. 199).

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.⁷ 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'.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ 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'.¹²

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'.¹³ 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

⁸ Timo Uotinen, 'The Object of Criticism: Ethics, Dialectics, and Shakespeare's Edmund', *Exegesis*, 1 (2012), pp. 33-36 (p. 35).

⁹ Uotinen, p. 35.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society', *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 211-229.

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 leavened 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 commit[ing] 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.¹⁴ *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

¹⁴ Edwin Morgan, 'Alexander Trocchi: A Survey', *A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi*, ed. by Allan Campbell and Tim Niel (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), pp. 270-81 (p. 275); Greil Marcus, 'Do You Know De Quincey?', *A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi*, ed. by Allan Campbell and Tim Niel (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), pp. 250-3.

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'.¹⁵ 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'.¹⁶ 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'.¹⁷ 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.

¹⁵ Adorno, p. 220.

¹⁶ Adorno, p. 220.

¹⁷ Adorno, p. 220.