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Reading Dispositions: Negative Affect and Critical Practice

A thesis presented

by

Sianne Ngai

to

The Department of English and American Literature and Language

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

English and American Literature and Language

Harvard University
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“Reading Dispositions: Negative Affect and Critical Practice”

Professor Lawrence Buell, Professor Stanley Cavell, Professor Barbara Johnson

Abstract “Reading Dispositions” examines the role of negative emotional categories in the formation and dissemination of social and aesthetic values in American literature, film, psychoanalysis and philosophy. Focusing on how dysphoric feeling concepts inform notions of gender difference and shape strategies of textual production and reception, I approach anxiety, envy, boredom and disgust as socially formalized positioning of selves in relation to objects and other selves, rather than interior states subjectively-held. This anti-psychological approach to feeling underlies a series of readings challenging the polarization of the “social” and “personal” in contemporary cultural criticism, as well as the Enlightenment splitting of emotion and thought into separate realms of experience. Major case studies include novels by Herman Melville and Gertrude Stein; contemporary poetry by writers associated with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E tradition; psychoanalytical texts by Freud and Klein; and films such as *Vertigo* and *Single White Female*. By treating negative dispositions as social and symbolic position-takings, my thesis recuperates for critical practice a mode of responsivity traditionally considered hostile to intellectual reasoning.

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Introduction (in Four Excursuses)

1.

I am just reminded that the president, who is also a transfer-agent, of the Black Rapids Coal Company, happens to be on board here [and]... has his transfer-book with him. A month since, in a panic contrived by artful alarmists, some credulous stock-holders sold out; but, to frustrate the aim of the alarmists, the Company, previously advised of their scheme, so managed it as to get into its own hands those sacrificed shares, resolved that, since a spurious panic must be, the panic-makers should be no gainers by it. The Company, I hear, is now ready, but not anxious, to redispense of those shares, and having obtained them at their depressed value, will now sell them at par, though, prior to the panic, they were held at a handsome figure above.

—Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (1857)¹

The statement above, made causally by one of Melville's "operators" to a potential dupe, not only illustrates the sensitivity of venture capital's main arena of buying and selling to modifications in feeling as well as wholly economic factors,² but the fact that a false panic "contrived by artful alarmists," has precisely the same effects as a panic which is

¹ Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 26–27. Hereafter referred to as *CM*.

² Brian Massumi also makes this point in "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 (Fall 1995): 83–109. See p. 108. Hereafter referred to as *AA*. The relationship between financial and affective vocabularies has subsequently found its way into mainstream culture, as evinced in pop-economic terms such as "irrational exuberance," widely cited as a cause for dramatic plunges in the stock market in April 2000.

genuine. If it is only in and as effect that affect becomes analyzable, as Brian Massumi has argued, since it is “not entirely containable in knowledge” (AA 109, fn.2), then the fact that a “spurious panic” engenders economic repercussions identical to those potentially engendered by a legitimate one (“depressing” the value of stocks) renders the authenticity of feeling no longer determinable by whether it is actually felt by the individuals who are its occasion. While able to index changes in “public mood,” the stock market knows no difference between a supposititious affect and a non-supposititious one; in fact, the possibility exists that the purely conjectural feeling will produce effects in this economic realm faster than feeling which can be traced to concrete causes and verified by evidence, thus eliminating the uncertainty principle on which all acts of risk-taking depend. Clearly the simulated panic is not experienced by those who have simulated it, lambasted by the operator during another transaction as “souls who thrive, less upon depression, than the fiction of depression; professors of the wicked art of manufacturing depressions” (CM 63). Yet the panic’s artificiality or status as fiction—the fact of its having unverifiable or apocryphal origins, its non-correspondence to the source from which it emanates—does not seem to preclude its capacity to generate real and empirically verifiable effects. In either case, “panic” becomes a “self-fulfilling prophec[y] capable of reversing ‘real’ conditions” (AA 106). If there is a theory of affect as well as money at work in Melville’s own “transfer-book,” which insistently stages the overlap between vocabularies of feeling and of venture capital (*interest, depression, fidelity, trust*), it would seem to be feeling’s capacity to materialize as supposititiousness: a point which renders even the possible fictitiousness of the “panic contrived by artful alarmists” irrelevant to its capacity to move

across psychic and economic domains. The story of a counterfeit panic which escapes all counterfeit detectors while rendering them unnecessary (useless purchases, as the final purchase in the book demonstrates), neutralizing the very distinction between epistemological values such as fake and real, manufactured and natural, hypothetical and certain, is a story suggesting just how rich a subject for theoretical speculation feeling—and the art of manufacturing feeling—can be.

2.

At [one] time I spent a few years and several thousand dollars of government money in ultra-speed photography of the face. I assumed that at speeds of 10,000 frames a second, micro-analyses of the face would yield “secrets” of affect and human nature analogous to those the microscope had revealed about biological structures. Although microexpressions of the face do reveal some important information, they also create a great noise. At 10,000 frames a second the smile becomes an interminable bore, forfeiting much vital information which can be seen easily by the naked eye or by conventional slow motion photography.

—Sylvan Tomkins, “The Quest for Primary Motives”³

When the telephone rings, an intentional signal addressed to us is being produced, informing us that a communication is to be expected through our telephone at this moment. But when we are near our telephone, as we happen to hear a low buzzing sound, then we realize that the receiver is off the hook. What we are hearing is the dial tone which we use as an indicator informing us of the state of the telephone; but it is not an intentional communication directed at us.

—Rene Spitz, *No and Yes: On the Genesis of Human Communication*⁴

³ In E. Virginia Demos, ed. *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins* (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge UP and *Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme*, 1995) 27-63.

In Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), a conspicuously bored and restless photographer named Thomas takes pictures of a man and woman randomly encountered by him during a casual stroll in the park. He later enlarges the photographs at increasing levels of magnification, to a point at which the individual grains of the emulsion become visible and figure-ground distinctions within the image recede.⁵ When Thomas studies the series of enlargements pinned on the walls of his studio, panned left to right by the camera as if in allusion to reading a line of text, a sound of rustling leaves heard continuously through his stroll in the park magically returns at an increased volume. While originally a form of "background" noise heard during his act of photographing the couple, in its amplified recurrence the steady hissing accompanies, and gives the impression of facilitating, the linearization of the photographic enlargements into a narrative accurately representing the encounter: in spite of their increasing non-figurativeness, Thomas comes to believe that the

⁴ Rene Spitz, *No and Yes: On the Genesis of Human Communication* (New York: International Universities P, 1957).

⁵ Though the points we wish to emphasize are ultimately different, my reading of this film is indebted to Chris Wagstaff. See "Sexual Noise," *Sight and Sound* May 1992: 32-35. Using the same signal/noise ratio from communications theory as a figure for how sexuality (noise) disrupts the traditional love story (signal) promised but never delivered in this film, Wagstaff points to the same scenes of amplification to illustrate this connection. Lindsay Waters has also written on Antonioni's *Blow-up*, in conjunction with the Julio Cortazar story on which the film is based, as an allegory for the relationship between affect and technology. See Waters, "Walter Benjamin's Dangerous Idea," unpublished manuscript, 19-44.

serialized blowups reveal a man hiding in the bushes with a pistol, and that the woman has deliberately led her lover towards him.

Thus when the camera stops panning and cuts from a close-up of the woman looking away from the man embracing her in one enlargement, to an unusually bright spot in an enlargement of the bushes, a second occurrence of the hissing sound ensures that in spite of the potential disjunctiveness introduced by the cut, the shots remain ordered in an implicitly logical progression appearing to simultaneously indicate and signify the same thing. The woman's gaze right "points" to the bright spot in the final image (constituting it as a "there") and simultaneously predicates and semanticizes this "there" (there is . . . a killer in the bushes). The bright spot thus assumes significance simply by being indicated: producing the structure of a secret much like the "secrets of affect and human nature analogous to those the microscope had revealed about biological structures" Tomkins believed he could find by studying high-speed photographs of the face. Since it is during the cut that the hissing sound, muted and steady throughout the pan, most sharply increases in volume, the passage from indication to signification, or showing to saying, becomes an unusually immediate one primarily because of it.

In this sense, the role of the hissing contrasts with the telephone's "low buzzing sound" noted in the epigraph above, which psychoanalyst Rene Spitz invokes precisely to instate a crucial *separation* between purely demonstrative "indicators" and signifying communications—noise versus signal, "dial tone" versus "ring." This separation raises the possibility that even when transmissions indicate and communicate at the same time, they

may not be communicating what they indicate, nor indicating what they communicate.⁶

Yet the potential discontinuity Spitz's "buzzing sound" introduces between indication and signification is also suggested by a later moment in the Antonioni film, when Thomas inadvertently wanders into a Yardbirds' concert while attempting to follow the woman from the photographs he has briefly glimpsed on the street. During the performance, which is attended by a crowd of strikingly impassive young adults standing absolutely still, dissonant feedback starts to emanate from a guitarist's amplifier, growing louder and louder until it begins to drown out words and tune. While this static-like noise invites comparison to the hissing sound which inexplicably returns when Thomas scans the images in his studio (both are excesses linked to normative processes of amplification, via the lens of a darkroom enlarger or electronic audio equipment), it ends up disrupting rather than facilitating the progression of serial elements into a unified narrative, as the hissing sound does to the filmic shots of Thomas's photographs as our view cuts from one to the other. In the case of the amplifier feedback at the rock show, the "progression of serial elements" interrupted happens to be an R&B ballad called "Stroll On By." As the distortion grows, the guitarist begins to smash his instrument against the amplifier in frustration, ultimately breaking the neck of the guitar (complete with tuning pegs) and throwing it into the crowd. It is at this moment that the previously motionless audience bursts into a frenzy of excitement, yelling, screaming, and struggling to possess the disembodied neck, as if it

⁶ This point is indebted to Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the demonstrative pronouns *Da* and *diese* in Heidegger and Hegel. See *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 22.

were the victory of the interference, as unintended feedback produced by the channel of communication while carrying the intended signal (Wagstaff, 34), over the signal carried (the musical tune, an ordered and linear progression of signifying elements), or perhaps the very conflict of signal/noise dramatized by the guitarist's actions, which instigates their sudden transition from affectlessness to responsiveness.

If, like the buzzing sound of Spitz's dial tone, the amplifier feedback functions as an "indicator" directing our attention to the state of the communicative channel, rather than being an intentional communication directed towards an audience (as is the song), this deictic function seems to carry an insistence with the potential not only to disrupt, but override the signifying function one would think it would support. What is pointed out to us about the channel seems to be a structural unpredictability producing an excess of effects—a vibration "in excess of any narrative or functional line" (AA, 87). There is a redoubling of amplification during the rock concert in other words, that produces the very opposite effect the recurrence of hissing does; "a redundancy of resonance that plays up...(feeds back disconnection, enabling a different connectivity)" versus "a redundancy of signification that plays out or linearizes" (AA, 87). Yet the former also seems to initiate, in a more exaggerated way, the emergence of affective engagement. Just as the hissing sound activates Thomas's interest and involvement in the relationship between the subjects in his photographs by producing a "there," the amplifier's distortion, as intrusion of a purely indicative noise into a signifying communication, suddenly makes things *matter* to

the previously disaffected audience, recalling Heidegger's existential analysis of *Dasein* (being-there) as "care." In both situations, the continuity of "strolling on by" (itself a linear progression implying lack of engagement with one's environs), is fundamentally interrupted.

If *Blow-Up* suggests that the intrusion of noise into signal, or of indications into significations, is precisely what makes affective engagement possible—is what brings feeling and movement into the affectless world of "Swinging London," even if this feeling lacks qualification (it should be noted that the excitement which breaks loose at the Yardbirds' concert does not seem oriented towards anything in particular, but seems rather to be a form of undifferentiated arousal), it also suggests that making the world matter does not necessarily entail making the world mean, and that mattering may not be a matter of knowing. As forms of resonance running alongside and yet in possible interference with signifying transmissions more familiar to us in our daily routines (receiving and interpreting information, being objects of directed signals or intentional forms of address), Spitz's "low buzzing sound" and the static-like "noise" in Tomkins' study of affect similarly recall the primacy of "attunements" in Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of *Dasein* as care, but also the ever-present difficulty the formal question of *tonality* presents to readers of film and literature: not only to formalists, but readers engaged in the practice of social and cultural critique as well.⁷ Primarily because the "tone" of a text is never a matter of represented content (unlike plot, dialogue, character, and setting), the difficulty it poses for both kinds

⁷ As mentioned by Lawrence Buell. Conversation with the author, April 1999.

of analysis, particularly in cases involving strikingly *atonal* texts such as *The Confidence-Man*, Beckett's later prose, or Stein's *Making of Americans*, is similar to that posed by affect in general: both are liable to be viewed as categories which are entirely subjective, immaterial, or ineffable—hence assumed void of social content or even unanalyzable. In this sense, the difficulty of making tonality the *starting* point for critical inquiry into social, political, and cultural issues as well as purely literary concerns bears resemblance to the difficulty posed by what Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling,” a term used in *Marxism and Literature* to define kinds of social experience “not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating.”⁸ In other words, when talking about tonality—something never exactly signified or represented *in* a text—one always risks being accused of subjectivism and indulgent abstraction, or of merely making noise about noise.

3.

Theorists thus find it fruitful to draw a distinction between affect and emotion where emotion designates the purely subjective attribute, presupposing an individual who can be said to “have” it, while affect designates a more abstract, depersonalized mode of relation, one that does not require an interiorized consciousness or even a self-point for its

⁸ “Structures of Feeling,” 132. In Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 128-135. Hereafter referred to as *SF*.

existence. Thus while one can speak of affect without a subject—that is, as “feeling” that cannot be located in, or made to correspond with, a feeling individual, emotion implies a *necessary* tie between feeling and the presence of an agent who feels, involving what Lacan calls the “*belong to me* aspect of representations, so reminiscent of property.”⁹ As a subjective category, emotion covers the gamut of “personal” feelings, while affect could be described as transpersonal or *pre*-personal feeling, providing an objective condition for determining what the very category of the “subjective” is or means.¹⁰ An emphasis on affect in cultural criticism (as found in the work of writers including Williams, Massumi, Lawrence Grossberg, and Frederic Jameson, among others) thus performs the crucial work of dislodging feeling from the humanist discourses of sentiment and psychic interiority in which it has been historically entrenched, inaugurating a shift in its understanding from the psychological to the social.

Although this difference between affect and emotion does not neatly correspond to the difference between “affect” and “passion” in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, it finds precedence in and

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 81.

¹⁰ See Massumi, “Notes on the Translation” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), xvi.

can perhaps be illuminated by it.¹¹ Here the distinction depends on a difference Spinoza initially posits between “affect” (*affectus*) and “affection” (*affectio*), since it is precisely the interactions between affects and affections that give rise to specific passions. For Spinoza, affections are states of the affected body, implying the presence of something impinging on or modifying it, and associated with the corporeal images or traces (products of the imagination) registering the states of impingement. Affects, on the other hand, are neither states of modification or the ideas indicating these states (where “ideas” = images or imaginings), but rather changes *between* states, or ideas indicating these changes (where “ideas” = feelings). Based on this crucial separation between feeling and imagination (two categories often conflated in romanticism), Deleuze and Guattari follow Spinoza in describing affects as non-imagistic *becomings*: intensities corresponding to the passage from one experiential state to another in the affected body and “augmenting or diminishing its power to act,” hence determining its entire capacity to affect and be affected.¹² Or as Deleuze puts it in *Expressionism*, “To every idea that indicates an actual state of our body, there is necessarily linked another idea that involves the relation of this state to the earlier state,” involving an increase or decrease in the body’s whole power of acting.¹³ Thus while

¹¹ Baruch Spinoza. *The Ethics and Selected Letters*. Ed. Seymour Feldman and trans. Samuel Shirley. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982).

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), 256.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Joughin. (New York: Zone Books, 1990) 220.

affects technically constitute a subclass of affections, flowing *from* the corporeal images or ideas of the affection and changing with them, they are nonetheless, counterintuitively, *particular* kinds of affections which can determine the very conditions for an affection's emergence *in general*. Since specific passions emerge precisely from the interplay between affections which are imaginings indicating states, and those which are feelings registering fluxes between states and increasing or decreasing the body's potential for action, Spinoza's theory lays ground for the argument for approaching affect and emotions as separate categories of experience: the former subtends the other, but not vice-versa, just as the more general distinction between "affect" and "emotion" drawn at beginning of this essay (as "prepersonal" versus "personal" feeling) posits the former as enabling condition for the latter.

Thus from a point of view that maintains a rigid distinction between the two terms, emotion has been described as the subjective transpositioning or semiotic rigidification of the affective, as pure process, becoming, or flux. Yet is precisely the difficulty of sustaining a clear separation between subjective and nonsubjectified feeling, feeling anchored in and detached from the individual as its occasion, which the essays on literature, film, psychoanalysis and philosophy in this collection demonstrate: in an effort to tackle what Steve Evans has described as "the complex problem posed for analysis" by states which are objectively-generated but subjectively-held.¹⁴ For while it is critically and

¹⁴ Steve Evans, "The Dynamics of Literary Change." *The Impercipient Lecture Series* 1.1, February 1997, 1-54. See p. 8.

theoretically productive to speak of feeling not predicated on its possession by, or location in, a particular self—as a transindividual relation of betweenness rather than withinness, or a mode of becoming rather than being—the question remains as to how feeling “uncontained by identity”¹⁵ (such as the free-floating “panic” associated with economic speculation invoked by Melville’s transfer-agent in *The Confidence-Man*, the abstract “noise” Tomkins encounters in his study of the face as affective transmitter, or the radically exteriorized fear Massumi describes as “a kind of background radiation saturating existence” under capitalism in his introduction to *The Politics of Everyday Fear*¹⁶) is nevertheless lived and felt by subjects as occasioned or located within them. On an even more abstract level, if we can speak of “feeling” that not only preexists the subject, but exists prior to any sort of categorization or qualification (as Freud does by using the expression “*quota* of affect” to describe quantities of instinctual energy prior to their subjective translation into “affects” proper, or as Greimas and Fontanille do by referring to a state of undifferentiated “phoric tensivity” not yet polarized into positive and negative values),¹⁷ what relationship does this feeling, detached from value, have to the feelings

¹⁵ Brian Massumi, ed. *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 35.

¹⁶ Massumi, 24.

¹⁷ Algirdas Julien Greimas and Jacques Fontanille, *The Semiotics of Passions: From States of Affairs to States of Feelings*. Trans. Paul Perron and Frank Collins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), *passim*. Hereafter referred to as *SP*.

which *do* acquire value and become the content of specific identities, particular those already marked or qualified by gender, class or race? If we find it productive to make the distinction between undifferentiated “feeling” and specific feeling-concepts or categories (shame, anger, love, etc.), what role does the former have in the ways we formulate and speak about the latter? Thus rather than dismissing subject-oriented feeling in the interests of cultural critique simply because it is subjective, we can ask how objectively-generated states *come to be* subjectively-held, without yoking feeling back to the social versus personal binary in which it is so frequently trapped. As Williams has noted, this polarization results from a reduced understanding of the social itself as a set of fixed and explicit forms, though “all the known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion, are against the terms of the reduction” (*SF* 130). Lumped together to form the very category of “the subjective” or “personal,” the exclusion of these experienced tensions (“all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known” [128]) from social analysis and categorization fosters an equally problematic tendency, however, to turn the abstractions created in the very act of being debarred (“the ‘human imagination,’ the ‘human psyche’”) into equally fixed forms, if not transcendent entities “overriding all specific social conditions.” Hence Williams’ appeal to “structures of feeling” as a way of describing social formations which resist semanticization and therefore become difficult to recognize as social, yet “do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization

before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action” (132). The importance of such “structured formations...at the very edge of semantic availability” (134) for Williams is that they actually expand our understanding of the social beyond the “reduced senses of [it] as the institutional and formal” (131–32), while also impeding the uncritical valorization of “‘personal’ forms” (129) as ineffables ungraspable by social analysis.

In attunement with this perspective, which has initiated important methodological shifts “from the study of fixed and formal internal relations and genealogies to a more fluid, shifting social analysis,”¹⁸ and with the desire for thoughtful engagement with the kinds of social experience “prone to appear as intangibles within positivist strands of materialist analysis” (Evans, 8), this book examines the role of negative feeling concepts in the formation and dissemination of social values in American culture. Here socially codified emotional categories, such as disgust, boredom, envy and anxiety, are viewed not simply as products of interiorized consciousness, nor as affects completely disembodied from feeling subjects—I am primarily interested in the role these categories play in *constituting* particular kinds of subjects—but as sites in which both the depersonalization of subjectively-held feelings into affects and the subjective rigidification of affects into “personal” feelings are perpetually enacted. Such internal dehiscences or slippages suggest that even the most semantically rigidified emotional categories can be viewed as structures of

¹⁸ Fred Pfeil, “Postmodernism as a Structure of Feeling” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 381–403.

depersonalization as much as guarantors of authentic selfhood, as they tend to become in discourses of humanist sentiment. From this perspective, the affect versus emotion binary no longer seems pertinent, making it possible to employ both terms interchangeably.

Within this framework, my focus is on how affective constellations shape strategies of textual production and reading, including the production of aesthetic values and meanings, as well as how specific feeling concepts organize and inform constructions of gender difference. The former question is at stake in “Stuplimity” and “Raw Matter,” which examine the depersonalizing and exteriorizing aspects of shock-boredom and disgust, while the question of affect’s apportioning and dispersal across gender differences is taken up by “Jealous Schoolgirls,” and “Projectile Objects,” respectively engaged with the social formations of envy and anxiety. These chapters focus on the emotional categories as themes or diegetic content. The chapters on aesthetics, however, assume a different approach in considering ways in which reading “dispositions” the reader and the ways in which negative dispositions might be read. Here the feeling concepts evoked cannot be addressed at the level of representation or signification; the texts do not always offer us figures of boredom and disgust, nor do they thematize or represent these emotions as properties of specific characters. In other words, the feelings mobilized in these texts have no particular anchoring in—cannot be located in—a represented subject who feels, and are not elements around which narratives are constructed. Instead, they raise the more complex problem of feeling in terms of tonality: that which is indicated rather than

signified. While addressing the textuality of affect at these two discrete levels—as signified or represented content and as indication or tone, the aim in both cases is to analyze specific feeling concepts as engendering specific kinds of discursive effects; effects calling attention to various slippages within their conceptualization as well as their potential to impact on (and be impacted by) other registers of social meaning. Thus while there is much attention paid to the way states of feeling are captured by particular images in two chapters (the spatialized configurations of “anxiety” by the male intellectuals in “Projectile Objects,” the figures of women borrowing property in “Jealous Schoolgirls”), these readings of affect operate grammatically as well as figuratively—placing emphasis on matters related to syntax or position as well as to signs.¹⁹ My hope is that a shift from images of affective dispositioning, to the dis-positionings created by affective dispositioning, enables further analysis of the kinds of movement or dispersal implied by ways of “being moved.”

The “negativity” of the specific dispositions discussed in all of the following chapters could be described as obtaining at the level of form as well as structure. The feeling concepts addressed—anxiety, boredom, envy, disgust—are formally negative in the sense of entailing dysphoric (unpleasurable rather than pleasurable) position-takings, resulting in affective stances which might be described better as dyspositions. However, these affective dynamics also bear witness to a negativity which is inherently structural, involving modes of exclusion, cancellation, and refusal dependent on trajectories of

¹⁹ As Thomas Pepper describes his approach to reading de Man in “Absolute Constructions: A Reading of Paul de Man” in *Singularities: Extremes of Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 101.

repulsion rather than attraction, strivings-*away* or *against* rather than strivings-*toward*.

When approached as agonistic structures as well as formal categories of unpleasure, the kinds of oppositionality these feelings enact and make available raise the question of how negative structures of feeling might relate to and interact with (or to use Tomkins' vocabulary, co-assemble with and intensify), modes of negative agency or potentiality akin to what Herbert Marcuse has called "negative thinking."

This term appears in Marcuse's "A Note on Dialectic" (1960), a compressed overview and assessment of critical theory in the Hegelian tradition, and is used in this context to elaborate the "logic and language of contradiction" theory requires "to prepare the ground for [a] possible reunion" between thought and action, or theory itself and practice.²⁰ Significantly, Marcuse does not identify negative thinking ("this vague and unscientific formulation" [445]) wholly with Hegelian dialectics, but rather distinguishes it as the "driving power" behind dialectical thought, facilitating recognition of the degree to which that "even Hegel's most abstract and metaphysical concepts are saturated with experience" (445). This separation of "negative thinking" from dialectic proper enables Marcuse to provide a more nuanced and complex definition of the latter, extending it beyond the categories of "mental exercise" or "ideological justification" (447). In this sense, Marcuse adduces the concept of "negative thinking" with respect to dialectic for

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, "A Note on Dialectic" (1960) in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982) 444-451.

reasons very similar to those motivating Williams to adduce the concept of “structures of feeling” with respect to social experience: not in order to oppose it to the social (“not feeling against thought” [SF 132]), but as a prophylactic against the reduced sense of the social as a set of fixed and explicit forms defined by excluding all which is nonfixed and nonexplicit and subsequently labeled “personal.” In Williams, the term is strategically chosen “to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’” (SF 132), enabling “the restoration of social content in its full sense, that of a generative immediacy” (133). While similarly providing a safeguard against the conflation of dialectical thought with “‘world view or ideology’,” “negative thinking” also enables Marcuse to counteract its reduction to an analytical algorithm or method. Thus in negative thinking “determinate negation” no longer becomes merely an abstract function capable of being *performed*, but “something more vital and more desperate” capable of being *expressed* (Marcuse 449).

This capacity for expression enables Marcuse to locate negative thinking not only in philosophy and social theory, but in the arts and in poetic language in particular. In fact, it could be argued that Marcuse’s adduction of negative thinking as a dynamic not entirely collapsible into the category of dialectical thought, but rather the “more vital and more desperate” force driving or compelling it, generates the very basis for his claim for an “inner link between dialectical thought and avant-garde literature” (448). This link is described as

...the effort to break the power of facts over the word, and to speak a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce, and benefit from the facts. As the power of the given facts tends to become totalitarian, to absorb all opposition and to define the entire universe of discourse, the effort to speak the language of contradiction appears increasingly irrational, obscure, artificial. The question is not that of direct or indirect influence of Hegel on the genuine avant-garde, through this is evident in Mallarmé and Villiers de Isle-Adam, in surrealism, in Brecht. Dialectic and poetic language meet, rather, on common ground. (448)

Used to prepare us for this convergence by extending the scope of dialectic beyond analytical method or ideology, negative thinking also begins to resemble a dynamic involving vitalistic concepts of “force” or “drive,” not dissimilar to Freud’s concept of affect as psychic energy: “The power of negative thinking is the *driving power* of dialectical thought” (445), “driving Reason itself to recognize the extent to which it is still unreasonable, blind, the victim of unmastered forces” (450). Thus while never explicitly named or appealed to directly, the standard rhetoric of feeling—framed in terms of vitality, dynamism, expressiveness and experience—haunts this short essay precisely as that “vague and unscientific” register with the same capacity to “break the power of facts over the word” (447) shared by the aesthetic, recalling the background in Heideggerean phenomenology which informed much of Marcuse’s early work.

It is crucial to realize, however, that something looking and sounding like affect starts to infiltrate Marcuse’s notion of negative thinking not by being offered as a positive term capable of being superadded to the more traditional and less satisfying notions of dialectic (like adding water to revive a desiccated plant: dialectic + feeling = negative thinking), nor by being posed as the organic or irrational antithesis to intellection which can then be synthesized and expand its existing capacities. Instead, feeling enters the

picture as precisely evading the terms which would seem to invoke it as the stereotypical “other” of Reason. For the concept of negative thinking provides a corrective to a reduced sense of dialectic *not* by “substituting for Reason some extrarational standards,” or “insist[ing] on the right of the irrational versus reason, on the truth of the natural versus the intellect” (Marcuse 450) (as for Williams, restoring thought to “generative immediacy” does not mean pitting feeling *against* thought), but by isolating “negative thinking” as a dimension *within* reason with the capacity to undermine the very distinction between the irrational and rational—as reason’s “stubborn drive” revealing its self-difference or internal contradiction.²¹ Through the negation of feeling’s Enlightenment clichés (i.e. as “the natural” and “the irrational”), feeling itself becomes that which can only manifest itself negatively, through the refusal of the terms in which it is conventionally framed. Yet this itself requires that Marcuse invoke attributes typically associated with feeling if only to finally revoke them: why bring up the categories of “the natural” or “the irrational” to begin with if they have no bearing on negative thinking’s relationship to dialectical thought whatsoever? It is evident that these categories do bear on the relationship Marcuse wants to explore; but the bearing lies not in the categories themselves, but in that which escapes

²¹ See Teresa de Lauretis, “The Stubborn Drive,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Summer 1998): 851–877. Here I am alluding to de Lauretis’ argument, countering “the popular view that opposes a (Freudian) essentialist conception of sexuality to a (Foucaultian) constructionist one,” that “*Freud’s notion of drive undermines and actually undoes the opposition between constructionism and essentialism*” (858, original italics). If “drive” is understood in this sense, rather than in purely natural or biological terms, it usefully clarifies Marcuse’s notion of negative thinking as the vital/desperate element “driving” Reason without this necessarily implying that negative thinking “insists on the truth of the natural versus the intellect.”

them, or emerges solely through exposing their inadequacy. Thus “negative thinking” in Marcuse’s essay ultimately ramifies toward what Williams calls “thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132); not because the essay “unconsciously” relies on feeling vocabularies to expand the concept of dialectical thought, substituting feeling in its place or by annexing feeling as an adjunct, but as a concept whose adduction actively solicits new ways of *characterizing* feeling’s relationship to thought by conspicuously swerving away or dissociating itself from the expected ones.

The relationship between negative affectivity and negative thinking, in this sense, is theoretically explored by the essays in this collection across a range of cultural productions, from the writings of Kierkegaard and Stein to Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and avant-garde poetry, in the interest of examining how culturally specific dispositions might inform other kinds of social or critical position-taking. Another way of putting this is that I am interested in the extent to which negative feeling concepts, as languages of contradiction as well as categories of displeasure, involve something akin to what Spitz calls the “global” affect of “‘against’” (50–52).²² In *No and Yes*, which begins by invoking Freud’s famous pronouncement in “Negation” that “In analysis we never discover a “No” in the unconscious, and that a recognition of the unconscious on the part of the ego is expressed in

²² “For the beginning of the second year of life I am inclined to assume that the child distinguishes in the adult partner two affects only. I will call them the affect ‘for’ and the affect ‘against.’ In our usual terms, the child feels either that the love object loves him or the love object hates him” (Spitz 50–51).

a negative formula,”²³ this ‘against’ affect plays a central role in Spitz’s theory of how children actually acquire the capacity for saying “No.” According to Spitz, the affect facilitates the child’s identification with an aggressor (a prohibiting adult who shakes his head from side to side), which in turn “lead[s] to the formation of the abstract concept underlying the negative, the first abstract concept to appear in mentation” (52). For Spitz the process of acquiring the “No” through this identification inaugurates an important shift from passivity to activity, which, like Spinoza’s notion of affect, increases the child’s overall capacity for acting: “This affect ‘against’ together with the head-shaking gesture will be taken over in the identification with the aggressor when the child experiences unpleasure because of a demand of the adult. If on this occasion the experiencing of unpleasure and of the affect ‘against’ generates a thought process in the child, it will be *all his own*, and certainly not taken over from the aggressor” (51, my italics). Here a relationship is explicitly posed between negative affect and the symbolic “formulas” of refusal and negation, inviting further inquiry into the role of this relationship in the production of oppositional position-takings.

Since for Spinoza passions develop from what he calls inadequate ideas, meaning ideas of which we are not the cause, or “not formally explained by our power of understanding,” his passions similarly “implicate the mind in negation, reflecting our position as ‘a part of Nature which cannot be perceived clearly and distinctly through itself,

²³ Sigmund Freud, “Negation” in Philip Rief, ed., *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology* (New York: Collier, 1963) 213-217.

without the others' (*Ethics* III P3S)."²⁴ In focusing on this implication-in-negation, or how various 'no' and 'not'-effects (self-difference, disjunction, contradiction) generated by socially codified categories of feeling might relate to the "no" at the core of oppositional consciousness and agency, this book explores a spectrum of feeling-manifestations with overtly ideological bearings: considering, for example, the politics of affect in the claim to "anxiety" as the distinctive, if not exclusive, affective provenance of male intellectuals; the potential for a poetics of disgust to critically challenge the dominance of "desire" models in canonical poststructuralist theory; and how the feminization of "envy" in American culture might relate to the problem aggression between women continues to pose for contemporary feminisms. In each case, the capacity of affective categories to travel and produce effects across domains defined by other than affective relations suggests anything but feeling's opposition to the social, but rather its capacity to define and determine the categories rendering the social open to our analysis—in new and perhaps unsuspected ways.

4.

Departing from Freud, James, and other predecessors in the field by insisting on affect's autonomy from both drives and cognitions, American psychologist Silvan Tomkins' theory of affect ultimately turns on a principle he referred to as "analog amplification," not dissimilar to the principle of magnification underlying the production of

²⁴ Genieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997) 73.

excess resonance in *Blow-Up*. According to Tompkins' theory, affect is a mechanism that magnifies awareness and intensifies the effects of other psychic or bodily functions (*including* drives, memories, perceptions, and cognitive appraisals) by articulating itself to or "co-assembling" with these other vital mechanisms: "The affect amplifies by *increasing the urgency* of anything with which it is co-assembled. It is what I have called an analog amplifier" (my emphasis).²⁵ Due to its "freedom to combine with a variety of other components" (56), as is the case with linguistic intensifiers (such as the italics added to the citation above, or the all-caps used to heighten THE FORCE OF A PARTICULAR EXPRESSION), Tompkins' affect "works by virtue of three major conjoint characteristics —urgency, abstractness, and generality":

In its urgency it is insistent. It is insistent in a very abstract way — that matters are increasingly rapidly, or decreasing rapidly, or have increased too much. In its generality it is capable of very great combinational flexibility with other mechanisms that it can conjointly *imprint and be imprinted by*, thereby rendering its abstractness more particular and concrete (so that it can become an automobile that is coming too fast and too frightening rather than a more abstract awareness of something too fast). (52).

Just as *italics* and ALL-CAPS, as devices created purely for insistence or emphasis, do not have the capacity to concretely manifest themselves apart from the effects they produce—

²⁵ Silvan Tompkins, "The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autobiography of an Idea," 53. In E. Virginia Demos, ed., *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tompkins* (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge UP and Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1995) 27-63.

the marks they assume of the shape of, or which they conjointly imprint and are imprinted by (it is difficult to imagine “italics” apart from words *italicized*), affect’s autonomy paradoxically resides in the fact that its distinctive function is to impact on and be impacted by other mechanisms. In other words, it is precisely that fact that affect manifests only in inextricable linkage *with* other psychic phenomena that renders its function distinctive *from* these other phenomena, which do not perform the work of coassembling other mechanisms.²⁶ More specifically, for Tomkins affect “amplifies” (heightens awareness and the effects of the drives/cognitions with which it combines) through the mimesis of measurable levels or quantities: by providing “urgent analogs” of both the speeds and slownesses of its “activator” or stimulus, as well as of the rates and durations of the bodily responses the stimulus sets into play.²⁷ While it seems tempting to conflate the affect *with* these responses (after all, both are mobilized by the same stimulus), Tomkins describes the former as a separate mechanism *connecting* the activator *to* its responses, “imprinting the latter with the same amplification it exerts on its own activator” (“Modifications” 95). This amplification results from affect’s capacity for “simulating” the abstract patterns of “neural firing” Tomkins isolates as innate activators (with positive affects activated by rapid or gradual decreases in firing, negative affects by continuous, high levels of firing, and neutral affects like “interest” and “surprise” by rapid or sudden increases in firing,

²⁶ My thanks to Jonathan Flatley for emphasizing this point.

²⁷ Tomkins, “Modifications in the Theory-1978,” *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins* 86-96. See p. 95.

respectively.) Tomkins invokes the latter as an example of how affect amplifies its activator by mimetically reproducing its “profile” of quantifiable movements and speeds: “Just as a pistol shot is a stimulus which is very sudden in onset, very brief in duration, and equally sudden in decay, so its amplifying affective analog, the startle response, *mimics* the pistol shot by being equally sudden in onset, brief in duration, and equally sudden in decay. Affect, therefore, by being analogous...in its profile of activation, maintenance, and decay, amplifies and extends the duration and impact of whatever triggers the affect

Enjoyment amplifies by simulating decreasing gradients of neural stimulation. Interest, fear, and surprise amplifying by simulating increasing gradients of neural stimulation. Distress and anger amplify by simulating maintained levels of stimulation” (“Modifications” 88–89).

Affect thus plays the syntactic role initially assumed by Thomas’s photographic enlarger, linking activator and responses together by intensifying them at equal levels. Without it, Tomkins’ theory implies, we might never understand how the act of seeing a bear and the desire to run,²⁸ or a cut in the hand and a pain in the hand, could be related or

²⁸ William James’s famous example from *Principles of Psychology* (Chapter 25), used to counteract “our natural way of thinking about emotions,” where “the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression.” In contrast, James argues that “*the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*” (1065, original italics.) Thus it is not that “we meet a bear, are frightened and run,” but rather that we encounter the bear, run, and become frightened. See William James, “The Emotions,” *The Principles of Psychology Volume II* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 1058–1097.

connected phenomenon. As such, he notes, we'd be more likely to let the cut "go until next week" rather than take care of it (88). The pain in the hand cannot be recognized as *being a response* to the cut in the hand without the affect induced by the cut. The affect is not the pain itself, but the mechanism (fear) *connecting* the pain to the stimulus (the cut) activating *both* fear and pain. Thus if affect is an abstraction, or a relation between forces rather a self-identical entity (the fact that its distinctiveness and independence as a function resides in simulating other patterns makes clear that it is never fully adequate to "itself"), it is an abstraction that paradoxically *concretizes* the material world, making its materiality *matter* to us as such—not unlike the role played by the amplifier feedback in *Blow Up*.

Tomkins stresses, however, that the amplifying co-assemblages affect fosters between itself and other mechanisms do not assume or depend on absolute correspondence or adequation; in fact, that affect's combinatory function frequently hinges on an *imperfect* "fit"—a disjunctive alignment or inexact precision. What results is a kind of "looseness" or "play" *as a governing principle* in affect's role as co-assembler. While Tomkins admits that the affect system still demands "sufficient limitation of mismatch" to carry out its functions ("Quest" 51), his desire to safeguard the principle of self-difference or nonadequation remains much stronger in the text, leading him to finally propose that "Affect is a *loosely matched* mechanism evolved to play a number of parts in a continually changing assemblies of mechanisms. It is in some respects like a letter of the alphabet in a language, changing in

significance as it is assembled with varying other letters to form different words, sentences, paragraphs” (51).

It would seem that this comparison, in conjunction with the numerous other linguistic, textual, and mechanistic metaphors in Tomkins’ theory of affect, immediately invites a definition of affect as discursive system. Yet the comparison might as easily invite inquiry into what it could potentially *mean* to describe affect as “discursive”—a maneuver which has become fairly routine and, as Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank have noted, automatized in contemporary academic writing, more frequently used to claim the status of theory than to make room for the real work (or risk) of theoretical speculation.²⁹ As the authors point out, the “rather minimal specification” that one’s object of analysis is “‘discursively constructed’ rather than natural” has become a convenient way of “constituting *anything* as theory” (16). But while Sedgwick and Frank’s dismissal of this habit of argumentation *as* habit is intended to critique an unquestioning and self-righteous antibiologism in contemporary theory (resulting in “theory [becoming] almost simply coextensive with the claim...*it’s not natural*” [16]), the discursivity of qualified affects can as easily provide the starting point for analysis rather than being offered as one of its conclusions. If, as Massumi notes, “saying that [affect] is discursively constructed is not necessarily the same as saying that [affect] is *in* discourse” (*AA* 100), can affect be fully assimilated to any signifying or symbolic economy? And if not, what is the extent of the

²⁹ Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” 1–28, in Sedgwick and Frank, eds. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995).

relationship between them? Why, for instance, can we say that particular *texts* are boring without this necessarily meaning that we *feel* bored by them? The texts discussed in “Stuplimity” engender this situation, as do the poems animated by disgust in “Raw Matter,” which strike this reader as fascinating and compelling rather than repulsive. What does it mean, in other words, that we can say that a text seems to enact or be “about” disgust, when the affect is neither *described* nor *present as the content of a particular identity* within the text, nor wholly identifiable with the text’s affective impact on the reader? (“Where” is the disgust, if it is neither represented in the text nor something I feel?) Or when we can say a poem mobilizes or activates sadness without providing specific “images” of sadness? (“Where” is the sadness then?) There is clearly an asymmetry to all these affective tonalities (what is being indicated is not the same as what is being signified), as well as a remainder. In each of these cases, the “feeling-tone” of the text could be described as something which by definition escapes, as Massumi has argued, the particular forms or perceptions in which it can be “captured,” while at the same time existing alongside them (AA 96)—much like the excess resonance produced by the amplification devices in *Blow-Up*, or the “noise” inadvertently generated by Tomkins’ photographs of facial expressions. For Massumi, the phenomenon of “affective escape” by no means implies that the analysis of feeling is impossible, but possible “as long as a vocabulary can be found for that which is imperceptible but whose escape from perception cannot but be perceived” (AA 97).

The tactic utilized for this purpose in *The Confidence-Man*, usefully characterized by Alexander Gelley as a novel of “parasitic talk” (invoking Heidegger’s notion of idle talk [*Gerede*] as well as Michel Serres’ concept of *parasite*, which in French “also means static, the noise or interference in an electronic transmission”³⁰), is a vocabulary of affective *transaction*—subtended by financial transactions in which values are generated by the very act of exchange. Monetary value itself, after all, is precisely that which “escapes” the particular forms and embodiments in which it is captured (dollars, “golden eagles,” shares in the Black Rapids Coal Company), and whose flight from perception is not only constantly perceived by characters within the novel, but traced and registered by specific systems. These include the aforementioned stock market, and the Coal Company representative’s transfer-book, toted from one encounter to the next much like a prop-like synecdoche for the novel itself, which consists less of a teleological progression than a series of recorded interactions or exchanges. Fiduciary money in particular, which underwrites the modern checking account and credit system by “resting not on the value of the material composing it (paper, bronze, aluminum) but on *trust* in those who issue it,”³¹ not only points to the arbitrary relationship between value and the tokens used to reckon, represent, or capture it, but how “The very materiality of the token can be dispensed with:

³⁰ See Alexander Gelley, “Parasitic Talk” in *Narrative Crossings: Theory and Pragmatics of Prose Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 79-100.

³¹ Jean-Joseph Goux, “Monetary Economy and Idealist Philosophy” in *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*. Trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) 106.

a simple trace, a mark reduced to the very minimum will suffice. Is it not ‘the greatest help and spur to commerce, that property can be so readily conveyed and so well secured by a *Compte en Banc*, that is, by only writing one man’s name for another’s in the bank-book?’ Marks in a book, a simple arbitrary language, a transparent relation between two people...” (Goux 107, quoting George Berkeley from *The Querist*; original ellipsis, my italics).

It is precisely this conveyance and securing of fiduciary property, affective as well as commercial, through the replacement of one man’s name for another’s with which Melville’s own transfer-book seems mainly preoccupied. *Fiducia*, in fact, names the very site where affective and monetary values converge (as mutually subtended by each other, and as equally speculative and speculatable-with), just as the steamboat *Fidèle* provides the stage or zone of possibility for the chromatic series of exchanges between the operator and his dupes to unfold. Greimas and Fontanille similarly describe “intersubjective fiducia” as a backdrop-like state of fusion, providing the necessary precondition for signification as well as the emergence of value itself. According to their complex schema, “fiducia,” as a mode of being deferring differentiation, names the minimal and “ephemeral link...that sustains discursive veridiction” (“Introduction” xxvi), preexisting acts of judgment and valuation but enabling them to take place. Defined as a set of valencies (presentiments or “shadows” of value rather than values proper [5]), “the minimal cohabitation of *fiducia*, the very center of human conviviality” enables Greimas and Fontanille to inquire into “the very conditions

under which communication can occur.”³² Fiducia thus assumes the role of a zero-degree affect in their semiotics of passions, generated by the very first articulation of “phoria” as a general orientation of psychic tension,³³ and supplying the very horizon or backdrop against which specific passions later become qualified or defined.

Interestingly, the concept of “analog amplifier” quite accurately describes the role of the self-described “broker” of the fiduciary transactions taking place on the *Fidèle*, who seems evolved, much like Tomkins’ “co-assembler” or Serres’ noisy *parasite*, to play multiple parts in continually shifting configurations of human interaction and exchange. Melville’s novel itself takes the form of a series of “loosely matched” or roughly analogous encounters, gradually increasing in length and narrative complexity as the novel progresses, and whose correspondence intensifies as the discrete encounters accumulate. What ultimately serializes or links these episodes together is simply the reappearance of the transfer-agent,³⁴ who in his incarnation as deputy of the Philosophical Intelligence Office (“the man with the brass plate”), explicitly announces “analogy” as being the “quiet

³² Paul Perron and Paolo Fabbri, Foreword, *The Semiotics of Passions*, xiv.

³³ Recalling the notion of affect as excess vibration or feedback produced during amplification (“a redundancy that plays up,” according to Massumi), Greimas and Fontanille also describe “phoria” as a “disturbing doubling”: a redundancy between “the ‘representational’ character of all passional manifestation” and the body’s own “figurative power,” or role as “center of reference of the entire passional staging” (Introduction, xxv).

³⁴ His role in linearizing or sequentializing these discrete encounters thus resembles the function of the hissing sound, which initially organizes Thomas’ blow-ups into a serial progression of events.

theory” or “strictly philosophical [principle]...upon which [his] office is founded” (*CM* 160). In his encounter with the Missourian, who initially denies having “slave sentiments” and boasts of being the citizen of a “free” state, this “doctrine of analogies” (173) enables the PIO fiduciary to sell him a child laborer, using a steady accrual of substitutional schemas involving images of unactualized potentiality, in which boys are compared to lily buds (“points at present invisible, with beauties at present dormant” [162]), baby teeth (“so much the more reason to look for their speedy substitution by the...sound, even, beautiful and permanent ones” [164]), and caterpillars (“do they not bury themselves over and over again in the endless resurrection of better and better?” [166]). While the Missourian on whom he tests this “quiet theory” challenges its effectiveness (“But is analogy argument? You are a punster.” [165]), the Missourian later notes, during an attempt to analyze his own encounter with the brass-plated fiduciary after their transaction has been completed, that “the doctrine of analogies recurs”:

He revolves the crafty process of sociable chat, by which, as he fancies, the man with the brass plate wormed into him, and made such a fool of him as insensibly to waive, in his exceptional case, that general law of distrust systematically applied to the race. He resolves, but cannot comprehend, the operator, less the operation. Was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dollars the motive to so many nice wiles? Fain, in his disfavour, would he make out a logical case. The doctrine of analogies recurs. Fallacious enough doctrine when wielded against one’s prejudices, but in corroboration of cherished suspicions not without likelihood. Analogically he couples the slanting cut of the equivocator’s coat-tails with the sinister case in his eye; he weighs the slyboots’ sleek speech in the light imparted by the oblique import of the smooth slope of his boot-heels; the insinuator’s undulating flunkeyisms dovetail into those of the flunkey beast that windeth his way on his belly. (173-74)

The Missourian's afterthought not only demonstrates how the analogical relation, as a general principle of "coupling," intensifies or amplifies through the accumulation of individual analogies (to a point at which it redoubles and "feeds back," enabling the Missourian to detect a dissonance or redundancy of resonance in the resonations already produced), but that the transaction between himself and the "analog amplifier" could not have been motivated by money alone.³⁵

For while the fiducia representative (or fiducia fiduciary) overtly claims analogic coupling as the philosophical principle of his office, "[leading] me and my associates, in our small, quiet way, to a careful analytical study of man" (160), this office, in the sense of designated capacity or function, does not solely involve brokering financial exchanges, but

³⁵ That the CM's function as feeling broker assumes primacy over his role in facilitating exchanges of money for goods, is also illustrated by the fact that his interaction with the Missourian, though ostensibly about his purchase of labor, culminates with the Missourian more visibly eager and anxious about the possibility of acquiring affect instead (raising the question of whether if "even I, I myself, *really ha[ve]* this sort of...confidence"). Significantly, the Missourian does not seek verification from this agent that the transfer of the commodity has genuinely taken place (unlike the miser, he makes no demand for a bill of sale, voucher, or receipt), but does nervously appeal to him for reassurance about his potential to subjectively "hold" the feeling ("Do you think, candidly, that—I say candidly—candidly—could I have some limited,—some faint, conditional degree of confidence...? Candidly now?" [170]). The fact that the CM is appealed to on this basis alone (his capacity to verify whether or not the feeling has been transferred into the Missourian's possession), suggests that the only thing "special" about the CM, distinguishing him from any other ante-bellum capitalist brokering sales of human property, is his ability to broker deals in feeling. The CM's "office" thus involves insuring that the possibility of the Missourian's "really having" the affect will end up *mattering more* to him than the possibility of possessing *or* not-possessing the boy, and yet that the very fact of its assuming priority for him will directly facilitate and enable the sale of the boy as property.

persuading the passengers of the *Fidèle*, in a time of political conflict and general unrest over national cohesion and slavery (the novel is set in 1850, and explores a range of attitudes toward race and acts of human property-exchange constantly invoking this system of ownership), that the range of negative affective stances or “sets toward” the world he encounters in them are not genuine dispositions in their own right, but rather effects of the *deprivation* of a positive affect he calls “confidence” which he can uniquely offer and provide. Part of the persuasion thus involves transforming the affect into a commodity, but to do so involves convincing those with whom he “assembles” that the feeling he invokes is both fungible and *possessable*. In this sense, the CM’s role as operator involves the subjective transpositioning of objective “affect” discussed above, turning feeling uncontained by and preexisting the subject into something his dupes experience as belonging to them or as personally held. This conversion of feeling into subjective property enables the CM to switch its polarity from negative to positive, phobic to philic, a reversal overtly politicized by the text’s overall indictments of philic orientations including Christian sentimentalism (particularly its appeal to “benevolence” and “charity”), liberal empathy, cosmopolitan “conviviality” and, of course, “confidence.” These feeling concepts are posed as the ideological-affective underpinnings of ante-bellum capitalism and its traffic in human property: “Confidence is the indispensable basis of all sorts of business transactions. Without it, commerce between man and man, as between country and country, would, like a watch, run down and stop” (171).

It thus comes as no surprise that these conversions of feeling into psychic property are directly facilitated by transfers of ostensibly less ineffable commodities, such as shares of stock (though in a potentially non-existent company), or vials of herbal medicine (which may only be colored water). The text repeatedly foregrounds the codependency of both transactions; in fact, the CM's role as fiduciary seems to involve deliberately inducing confusion over whether his interactions with the passengers involve the exchange of affect or goods. For instance, when the sick man asks "How much?," referring to the medicine sold by the herb-doctor, the CM replies, "As much as you can evoke from your heart and soul." When the sick man asks in bewilderment, "how?—the price of this medicine?," the CM's response ("I thought it was confidence you meant; how much confidence you should have. The medicine,—*that* is half a dollar a vial" [107, my italics]) deliberately calls the identity of the purchase into question, demonstrating the ease with which the affect and money are confused.

Thus while the encounter with the Missourian demonstrates that the exchange of goods for money ultimately becomes secondary in importance to the affective transaction it subtends, in other episodes this monetary transfer is nevertheless posited as the only way of guaranteeing that the affective transaction has actually taken place. It is in this overlap that the question of language comes explicitly to the fore, since the CM reconfigures money as being the "voucher," "documentary proof," or "receipt" — terms of written verification appearing continuously through the novel — of the feeling transaction assuming priority. We see this paradoxical logic distilled in the encounter between the transfer agent described by Black Guinea as the "ge'mman wid a big book" and the

coughing miser. This particular crucial encounter stands out among the numerous others in the novel, since as a hoarder unwilling to place tokens of value into circulation, the miser assumes the role of a narrative element blocking exchange whose actantial position posits a serious threat to the structure of the novel as a whole.³⁶ Thus the encounter between them unfolds as follows: (1) the CM suggests affect as a viable substitution for money the miser denies having, capable of being tendered in lieu of it to neutralize the debt between them (he has provided the miser with the water he requests); (2) the miser agrees to this replacement, and when asked directly by the CM to give him “confidence,” claims to do so ; (3) the CM verbally acknowledges that this transfer has taken place, but then demands money in order to verify it. The affect thus comes to acquire a monetary value precisely by being initially offered as the money’s *replacement*, while money acquires the function of a written voucher potentially confirming the felicity of the miser’s speech act:

Revived at last [by the water], [the miser] inclined toward his ministrant, and, in a voice disastrous with a cough, said : ‘I am old an miserable, a poor beggar, not worth a shoe-string—how can I repay you?’

‘By giving me your confidence.

‘Confidence!’ he squeaked, with changed manner, while the pallet swung; ‘little left at my age, but take the stale remains, and welcome.’

‘Such as it is, though, you give it. Very good. Now give me a hundred dollars.’

Upon this the miser was all panic. His hands groped toward his waist, then suddenly flew upward beneath the moleskin pillow, and there lay clutching something

³⁶ “Actant” in Greimasian narrative semiotics describes a general position defined by specific types of agency (buying, selling, lending, borrowing; knowing, wanting, having, needing; hero, villain, damsel, monster, etc.), usually grouped in sets of four. These sites on Greimas’s “semiotic square” can be occupied by more than one actor or character, just as one character can occupy more than one actantial position at the same time.

out of sight. Meanwhile, to himself he incoherently mumbled: ‘Confidence? Cant, gammon! Confidence? hum, bubble!—Confidence? fetch, gouge!—Hundred dollars?—hundred devils!’ (95–96)

Significantly, a demand for the affective transaction’s *verification* in other than affective terms precipitates what seems to be a disfiguring or desemanticization of language, marked by the loss of normative syntax (noun phrase followed by verb phrase) and subject-object distinctions in the miser’s response. The words comprising his response not only refer to this desemanticization specifically (the meaningless words of “cant”), but enact it in the form of onomatopoeia, linguistic forms which do not so much mean as are (“hum” and “bubble” as pure sound or noise, much like the miser’s cough [“ugh, ugh”]). There is a redoubling of the dissonance the CM has introduced in the miser’s language, in other words (“a redundancy of resonance that plays up...[feeds back disconnection, enabling a different connectivity]”) within the very verbal bursts which register it. More significantly, however, in response to the demand that some token be exchanged in order to confirm that the passing of affect from one individual to the other *has really taken place* (that confidence was truly “given” to the fiduciary by the miser in his act of saying it), the miser’s language becomes *anaphoric*, a repetitive rather than substitutional schema itself repeated throughout the novel. It is at this moment, marking the failure of affect’s epistemological verification, which introduces a gap or a lack of closure in a circuit of social commerce or exchange, and the miser’s subsequent transformation into “all panic,” that anaphora begins to *drown out* analogy, however dominant this *logos* appears to have been in

organizing the totality of fiduciary transactions by establishing correspondences between them. For just as the linguistic eruptions coming from the miser,

Confidence? Cant, gammon!
Confidence? hum, bubble!
Confidence? fetch, gouge!

form a pattern of grammatical rather than figurative or ideational substitutions deferring syntactic closure as well as undermining the autonomy of the individual sentence, recalling the overall pattern of the inscriptions displayed on the deaf-mute's slate with which the novel begins

'Charity thinketh no evil.'
'Charity suffereth long, and is kind.'
'Charity endureth all things.'
'Charity believeth all things.'
'Charity never faileth.'

with "The word charity, as originally traced, remain[ing] throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank" (3), this display of anaphora at the local and formal level (parallel repetition of beginning words or phrases in succeeding lines or verses) recalls that the entire novel is also globally anaphoric in *structure*, consisting of a series of exchanges involving one term which remains constant while the elements co-assembled to it rotate and change:

CM and crowd

CM and merchant
CM and young scholar
CM and clergyman
CM and miser
CM and sick man
CM and soldier of fortune
CM and cripple
CM and Missourian, etc.

and yet even *this* repeated constant, the actantial position of “fiduciary” (in the sense of company representative or deputy, as well as the affective-economic relation of “trust”), is pluralized through an anaphoric structure, involving (among others):

The man with the brass plate
The man with the big book
The man with a weed
The man in the snuff-colored surtout
The man with the gold sleeve-buttons
The man in a gray coat and white tie
The man with the hook nose, etc.

and is itself part of an larger anaphoric system

Fiduciary
Fiducia
Fidelity
Fidèle

organized by the struggle between the structural principles of

Analogy
Anaphora

themselves. For in a redoubling of *ana-* (suggesting the movements of “up,” “back” or “again”), analogy is gradually subsumed or overtaken by anaphora through the very process of being repeated, initiating a shift from *logos* to *pherein*, ratiocination to “bearing,” and producing an increase in resonance or vibration: a global “stutter” whose disruption of signifying communications at the local level are marked by the presence of “hum” or “bubble” in speech. At this moment, the text splits open to reveal a rhythmic space newly foregrounding sound as an independent value and suspending predication or syntactic closure.³⁷ The dissolution of autonomy at the level of the sentence in favor of sonorous patterning increases throughout the novel, so that while we begin with anaphora at a macro level, involving completely predicated lines of text, or noun phrase + verb phrase formations (“Charity thinketh no evil,” etc.) this anaphorization eventually extends to the level of isolated noun phrases or single words (“Confidence!...), syllables (the “fid-” of *Fidèle*, fidelity, fiduciary), initials or letters,³⁸ and even absent or unwritten entities: “A

³⁷ Both of these points are indebted to Tenney Nathanson’s observations about Whitman’s catalog constructions vis-à-vis Kristeva’s notion of *chora*, as a “matrix of enunciation [which] is in fact *anaphoric* since it designates an elsewhere” (141). See Julie Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 100. Cited in Tenney Nathanson, *Whitman’s Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in Leaves of Grass* (New York: NYU P, 1992) 141.

³⁸ As Elizabeth Renker observes, in a reading providing an interesting analysis of the role of the letter “P” in the novel in particular. See Renker, “‘A —!’: Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 114–134.

_____! ... / A _____ ...” (*CM* 256).³⁹ In the case of the *CM* and the miser, our entry into this zone of “rhythmic structuring” (Nathanson 140) occurs at the very moment we are directed to an impossibility of the “deal” between them being properly closed or sutured without excess or remainder — the hundred dollars demanded in surplus of the affect already accepted as money’s viable replacement. Opening a zone of reverberation in which the splinters of a ruptured syntax (cant, gammon!...hum, bubble!) repeatedly point back to the term “Confidence,” the lines insist on feeling as their primary subject-matter while foregrounding the speaker’s transformation into an embodiment of feeling itself (“all panic”). Thus while the transactions in feeling supervised by the novel’s “analog amplifier” depend on his ability to intensify correspondences between affect, money, and language, anaphora’s subsumption of analogy marks the moment in which these correspondences dissolve in a structure of repetition foregrounding difference and displacement rather than equivalence and substitution, reconfiguring feeling in excess of the terms in which it has initially been transacted.

Versions of this anaphoric stutter abound in the novel locally (“Charity...Charity...Charity”; Confidence!...Confidence!...Confidence”) as well as globally, subjecting the feeling terms or concepts typically placed at the beginning of each cadence to a grammatical insistence, one “amplifying” or turning the volume up on these terms not so much to accentuate their semantic self-consistency, but to defamiliarize them.

³⁹ The use of “_____.” here recalls the current stylistic practice used for citing texts in bibliographic lists by an author already cited, in which _____ is used in lieu of the author’s name once it has already been mentioned.

In the case of the miser, for instance, the linguistic murmur sets the positive affect of “confidence” at odds with itself by simply allowing it to reverberate or oscillate,⁴⁰ resulting in a chromatic display of small differences signaling the paradoxical breakdown of larger correspondences between affect, money and language once the isomorphism between these value systems is directly appealed to as basis for verifying that the transfer of feeling has actually taken place. We see this situation between CM and the miser reenacted (through with a reversal of roles) in his interaction with the barber, when the barber demands money as a “material pledge,” an external corroboration or guarantee on top of the written contract he has already managed to secure from the fiduciary, that his “having confidence” will be justified. The CM himself has already prepared the grounds for this demand (which clearly presupposes a correspondence between affect and other systems of value) by suggesting that the barber’s affective stance of “having confidence” can be verified in his willingness to extend credit to customers, effectively equating the two situations. When the CM suddenly poses a challenge to the very equivalence he has worked to foster, however, by questioning whether money or language can actually play the role of verifying the transaction in feeling, the barber’s language falls into the pattern of desemanticizing repetition similar to the miser’s stutter. Once the barber refuses to sign the contract unless the CM “down[s] with the cash,” their encounter progresses as follows:

⁴⁰ See Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered” for a fascinating commentary on linguistic reverberations in Beckett. In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 107-114.

‘Cash again! What do you mean?’
 ‘Why, in this paper here, you engage, sire, to insure me against a certain loss, and—’
 ‘Certain? Is it so *certain* you are going to lose?’
 ‘Why, that way of taking the word may not be amiss, but I didn’t mean it so. I meant a *certain* loss; you understand, a CERTAIN loss; that is to say, a certain loss. Now then, sir, what use your mere writing and saying you will insure me, unless beforehand you place in my hands a money-pledge, sufficient to that end?’
 ‘I see; the material pledge.’
 ‘Yes, and I will put it low; say fifty dollars.’
 ‘Now what sort of beginning is this? You, barber, for a given time engage to trust man, to put confidence in men, and, for your first step, make a demand implying no confidence in the very man you engage with.’ (315)

The emergence of anaphoric speech (“*certain* loss ... CERTAIN loss ... *certain* loss”) thus marks the moment when feeling breaks out of the analogical correspondence previously enabling its transaction, instigated by a refusal to accept monetary or linguistic tokens as a viable way of confirming this exchange though an equivalence between these value systems has been previously emphasized. In an echo of “Confidence? ... Confidence? ... Confidence?,” the miser’s response to the CM’s demand for money as a voucher for the affect the miser claims to have given him, the barber’s “*certain* loss ... CERTAIN loss ... *certain* loss,” while uttered in response to the CM’s sudden reversal in challenging money’s ability to serve in this capacity, not only culminates in an amplification desemanticizing the word repeated rather than verifying its value or meaning (a redundancy or emphasis creating dissonance rather than clarification), but in tautology as well: “a repetition that does not add new information because it tells us only what we’ve been told,” and whose “mirror effect...suspends language at the level of its own materiality—that is, of itself as

language—refusing to penetrate its surface in order to ‘mean’ something” (Renker 121).

In this sense, both ana/epiphora and tautology could also be described as modes of stuttering or murmuring, principles of “sameness” introducing dissonance into the telos on which argumentation depends.

Thus by intensifying the very affective value at stake through its repetition (a repetition which throws this value even further into question instead of confirming it), the anaphorization of speech following the miser’s transformation into “all panic” introduces a disruption in the instrumental relaying of information at the exact moment the impossibility of epistemologically capturing or verifying affect is hinted at or revealed, dissolving the very distinction between authentic and inauthentic feeling similarly undermined by the panic “contrived by artful alarmists” (26). This stutter marks the breakdown of correspondences between affect, money, and language at the very moment the interchangeability the CM has established between them is relied on to verify that the affective transactions have actually taken place. In other words, the emergence of anaphora in analogy’s stead *marks the defeat of a substitutive schema based on equivalences by a schema based on repetition*. Anaphora’s engulfment of analogical structures is accompanied, moreover, by the engulfment of anaphora by larger anaphoric structures in turn. As a parallel repetition of terms occupying the same syntactical position in a series or succession (one perhaps already containing a series in which beginning terms are repeated, just as the anaphoric set of interactions between CM and his dupes contains the anaphoric set of the CM’s separate identities [The man with X, The man with Y, etc.]), anaphora produces “a vibration in excess” of any individual line which not only causes the very formal

equivalences between affect, money, and language enabling the CM to broker his transactions in feeling to dissolve in a proliferation of modal differences, but a circumvention of narrative telos and closure: the novel ends in echolalia or a murmur of feedback captured in a final oscillation between “Apocrypha” and “Apocalypse.”

More importantly, the novel’s generally anaphoric organization (which we are made aware of solely through the material accrual of individual episodes) enables Melville’s text to reconfigure feeling in terms of narrative structure rather than a state of consciousness embodied in a particular individual. For it is the CM’s *office* (the function of brokering affective exchanges) which remains constant while refracted across a multitude of individual agents, “remain[ing] throughout uneffaced” like the word “Charity” inscribed on the deaf-mute’s slate while its predicates change, making it clear that the role of feeling in transaction assumes precedence over feeling as the content of a specific or unitary identity. CM is not a figure or character allegorically representing another figure or character (he is “not Satan, nor Christ, nor a trickster God, nor Vishnu, nor some mythic folk figure,”⁴¹), but rather a general position of agency through which multiple characters traverse. Yet this actantial structure itself is by no means stable, but placed in oscillation each and every time the function is passed through or crossed, producing a zone of continuous self-variance within the larger narrative in which feeling is ultimately located.

⁴¹ William B. Dillingham, *Melville’s Later Novels* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1986) 306. Cited in Gelley, “Melville’s Talking Man,” *Re-reading Texts/Rethinking Critical Presuppositions: Essays in Honour of H.M. Daleski*, ed. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Leona Toker, and Shuli Barzilai (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997) 257 fn. 10.

Like a citation which loses self-consistency with every instance of iteration, not only in being constantly deported into multiple contexts but by having its content changed slightly each time, the anaphoric space CM designates and creates in this text reconfigures the “feeling” he brokers and represents (as its deputy or agent) into a transpersonal and collective organization subverting its capacity for being captured in any particular image, or “held” by any particular individual.

Feeling thus emerges as neither authentic nor inauthentic, true nor false, yet all the more “citable” because of its unidentifiable origins and “ability to come second-hand” (AA 107)—much like the status of the apocrypha repeatedly quoted by the barber during his interrogation by the CM and held in the old man’s hands in the novel’s final episode. Here apocrypha takes the form of a word whose explication itself seems to initiate a desemanticizing repetition that disrupts linear reasoning:

‘Apocrypha?’

‘Yes; and there’s the word in black and white,’ pointing to it. ‘And what says the word? It says as much as ‘not warranted,’ for what do college men say of anything of that sort? They say it is apocryphal . . . So if your disturbance be raised from aught in this apocrypha,’ again taking up the pages, ‘... think no more of it, for it’s apocrypha.’

‘What’s that about the Apocalypse?’ ... came [a voice] from the berth. (324)

Due to the old man’s tautological commentary (“apocrypha” means “not warranted” because the “not warranted” is apocryphal), the promise of a passage from indication to signification in this explication is never fulfilled. “Apocrypha” remains that which can only be gestured at rather than decoded to yield a specific meaning, recalling the function “certain loss” assumes through its insistence or amplification in the barber’s epiphoric

speech. Instead of clarifying the sense of the words repeated, this insistence offers itself *as* insistence: “pointing” to itself, as it were, and undercutting the barber’s attempts to yoke it in the service of semantic emphasis as the material accumulation of “*certain* loss... CERTAIN loss...certain loss” causes the noun phrase to assume precedence over the propositions of knowing and intention (“I meant”; “you understand”; “that is to say”) to which it is attached. Through the anaphoric organization which its repetition forms, “certainty,” like “confidence,” becomes less the object of any epistemological predication, than an index of “bearing” or orientation, cued to a particular position in syntax rather than a value formed by replacement or substitution. Like the miser’s lines, which make feeling their definitive theme by relaying their fragments back to the single word “Confidence,” and using this deferral of syntactic closure to mirror the absence of closure suddenly introduced into the circuits of social exchange which affect has previously enabled, the new emphasis on positionality created by the barber’s anaphoric litany (recalling once again the shift from *logos* to *pherein*, knowledge to “bearing”), distances “certainty” from its instrumentalized role in Cartesian philosophy as an epistemological value by reconfiguring it in terms of orientation or stance. In other words, feeling as *dispositionality* (bearing, attitude, set-toward) comes to override feeling as meaning.

The stylized disruptions of purely communicative language in the novel are thus far from incidental to its overall preoccupation with affect and affective transaction, which remain central to the text precisely in their elision from epistemological verification. These dissonant patterns, generated by failed attempts to authenticate the subjective ownership of feeling by appealing to values produced by parallel systems of circulation and exchange, call

attention to feeling's paradoxical ability to introduce disruptions in the very circuits of commerce and communication we have seen it enable. In a chromatic multiplication of the very affective concepts conscripted by Descartes into his ratiocinative procedure, ("certainty" and "doubt," which the text refracts into vicissitudes such as confidence and fiducia, suspicion and distrust), Melville's text dramatizes how these emotional categories ultimately evade confinement in the epistemological roles assigned to them, simply by being amplified or made to "insist" to a point of dissonance. While for Descartes, distrust and certainty obtain less as felt intensities than ratiocinative tools ("suspicion" in particular, in the form of systematic doubt, becoming a form of "mental exercise" or purely methodical step in a philosophical program or procedure), the CM restores their affective dimensions—not by rendering them ephemeral or ineffable, but grammatical.

Thus while *The Confidence-Man* illustrates feeling's capacity for being "functionalized and nationalized" (AA 103) by foregrounding its role in capitalist processes of circulation and exchange (including sales of human property), it also illustrates feeling's potential to suspend the closure of these exchanges, warning us from the temptation of making blanket homologues, or of conflating affect *with* the symbolic economies it traverses and in which it intervenes. For while the text shows the potential of affect to generate effects across political and commercial domains (in the case of the stock market panic, "produc[ing] economic effect[s] more swiftly and surely than economics itself" [AA 105]),⁴² as well as its ability to intensify or increase the urgency of the effects it produces,

⁴² This "infrastructural" and "transversal" aspect of feeling, noted by Massumi (AA 106-7), manifests in numerous ways. For instance, political analysts continue to use the

its anaphoric organization (or global “stutter”) points to the impossibility of sustaining relations of absolute substitutability between these value systems. None of the “deals” involving feeling can be properly sutured, in other words, without producing a redundancy (“Confidence! ... Confidence! ... Confidence!”) registering its “escape”—which, far from implying affect’s ineffability, materializes it in insistence or as discursive *effect* — and as an effect of position and syntax in particular. It is in such effects that the following essays pursue questions of affect as starting points for inquiry into social as well as aesthetic concerns, tracking the role of formalized emotional categories in organizing and amplifying values produced in other cultural domains, without underestimating this amplification’s capacity to lead to dissonance or noise. In this sense, affect is approached as a literal “dispositioning” between social and psychic space, an autonomous zone of reverberation located precisely where the two registers converge.

“Misery Index,” a term coined by Jimmy Carter to define the percentage derived by adding the nation’s employment rate to its rate of inflation, to predict the outcome of presidential elections; with the key exception of times of war, a low Misery quotient historically indicates that the incumbent or member of the incumbent’s party will win; high Misery that he will be replaced by a candidate from the opposing party. The MI thus shows how an affective concept can not only traverse but bridge entirely different realms of social life: enabling a synthesis of purely economic indicators to serve as political forecasting device. Here Misery no longer signifies a feeling located in a particular self who feels; in fact, its operant function does not seem to reside in signification at all, but solely in its power to indicate—and in doing so, potentially affecting outcomes in politics as well as predicting them.

Chapter 1

Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics

There is stupid being in every one. There is stupid being in every one in their living. Stupid being in one is often not stupid thinking or stupid acting. It very often is hard to know it in knowing any one. Sometimes one has to know of some one the whole history in them, the whole history of their living to know the stupid being of them.

—Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (1906–08)¹

Sorry. Sorry. I'm sorry. I regret it. Please accept my apology. I'm extremely sorry. I regret my mistake. Pardon me. Pardon me. I hope you'll forgive me. I'm deeply apologetic. Do forgive me. Pardon me. Accept my apology. Do forgive me. I'm deeply apologetic. Excuse me. Excuse me. It was my own fault. Do forgive me. I'm so sorry...

—Janet Zweig, *Her Recursive Apology* (sculpture), 1993²

“Thick” Language

“Gertrude and I are just the contrary,” writes Leo Stein in *Journey Into The Self*.

“She's basically stupid and I'm basically intelligent.”³ What Leo perceived “stupid” about

¹ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995). Hereafter referred to as *Making*.

² Janet Zweig, *Her Recursive Apology*. 1993. Collection of the artist, Brooklyn, New York. Paper, 4,386,375 apologies, 2' x 9' x 9'.

³ Cited in Neil Schmitz, *Of Huck and Alice: Humorous Writing in American Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 100.

Gertrude and the non-linear writing of hers he abhorred is perhaps analogous to what the character Tod finds “thick” about Homer Simpson’s use of words in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939).⁴ When Tod coaxes a sluggish, almost comatose Homer to relate his experience of abandonment following the departure of Faye, Homer’s speech at first seems incomprehensible to him. “Language leaped out of Homer in a muddy, twisting torrent. [...] The lake behind the dam replenished itself too fast. The more he talked the greater the pressure grew because the flood was circular and ran back behind the dam again” (West 143–4). Yet as Tod discovers, Homer’s “muddy, twisting torrent” in its negative insistence conveys a logic of its own—which, when acknowledged, enables his interpretation:

[A] lot of it wasn’t jumbled so much as timeless. The words went behind each other instead of after. What he had taken for long strings were really one thick word and not a sentence. In the same way sentences were simultaneous and not a paragraph. Using this key he was able to arrange a part of what he had heard so that it made the usual kind of sense. (144)

In the case of Homer, the shock of sudden loss produces its own dense or “thickening” rhetoric—one that deceptively simulates an inability to respond or speak at all, by eroding formal distinctions between word, sentence, and paragraph: the structural units of conventional syntax. To borrow terms Deleuze adduces from philosopher Duns Scotus

⁴ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 169–247.

(whose name gives rise to current usage of the word “dunce”), these formal differences are exchanged for modal differences that are based on intense variations or individuating degrees rather than distinct attributes or qualitative forms.⁵ Modal differences, in this sense, could be described as moody ones: temperamental, unqualified, or constantly shifting. In West's example, the encounter with language based on such differences involves a transfer of affectivity: Tod finds himself temporarily stupefied by the language generated by Homer's stupor. Which is to say that he discovers that it challenges his own capacity to read, interpret, or critically respond to it in conventional ways.

Radically altering the temporal order dictated by normative syntax (“the words went behind each other instead of after”), and blurring the distinction between its building blocks (sentence and paragraph), West's description of “thick” or grammatically moody language strikingly coincides with the signifying logic at work in Stein's dense *Making of Americans* (1906–8), where words are deliberately presented in “long strings” rather than conventional sentences, and the repetition of particular words or clauses produces a layered or simultaneous effect—Stein's characteristic “continuous present.” As Stein puts it in “Poetry and Grammar,”⁶

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 39.

⁶ In *Writings and Lectures 1909-1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974).

Sentences and paragraphs. Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are.... When I wrote the *Making of Americans* I tried to break down this essential combination by making enormously long sentences that would be as long as the longest paragraph and so to see if there was really and truly this essential difference between paragraphs and sentences, if one went far enough with this thing with making the sentences long enough to be as long as any paragraph and so producing in them the balance of a paragraph not a balance of a sentence, because of course the balance of a paragraph is not the same balance as the balance of a sentence. (*Writings and Lectures* 142)

The deliberate making of sentences “simultaneous and not a paragraph” in *The Making of Americans* poses a grammatical challenge to the ideology of “essential difference” and the symbolic laws it sustains, a tactics of resistance to dominant systems of sense-making continued throughout Stein's career. The sense of urgency connected to this local struggle becomes amplified in *How To Write* (1928), whose opening piece, “Saving the Sentence,” bears a title suggesting that language, like an occupied territory in time of war, is in need of rescue (7-32).⁷ For *The Making of Americans*, the strategy Stein chooses is primarily an agglutinative one, where the material build-up of language itself is invested with the potential for dissimulation, attaining the “balance” of larger forms through the accumulation of smaller ones.

In “Sentences,” Stein makes a similar attempt to readjust this sense of balance when she writes, “What is the difference between words and a sentence and a sentence and sentences” (*HTW* 181, my emphasis). We can read this as Stein posing a question about the attribute distinguishing two formal structures (words versus a sentence), or singular and

⁷ Gertrude Stein, *How To Write* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Books, 1995). Hereafter referred to as *HTW*.

plural instances of a particular structure (sentence versus sentences); we can also read it as a statement defining the term “what” as precisely this distinction. Here Stein seems to highlight the fact that “what” can function as an interrogative pronoun or adjective, as well as a relative pronoun equally substitutable for plural and singular objects. When constituting a full sentence on its own, “what” also has the potential to function as a demand for repetition in itself (“What?” [did you just say?]), or as an expletive conveying a negative emotion such as disbelief, anger, or incomprehension (“What!”). In the latter instance, “what” paradoxically expresses a state of inexpressiveness. Here the term's sense-making agency resides in its impotentiality, or inability to refer and represent, since what it expresses is precisely a situation in which whatever “what!” is being uttered in response to appears to defy expression. Thus in locating the difference between words and a sentence in “what,” Stein suggests that the status of such difference might resemble that of the various roles the term “what” assumes—in other words, that the difference is at once relative, interrogative, and potentially stupefying in its affective force. Like the relationship between sentences and paragraphs in *The Making of Americans*, or “one thick word” and a sentence in Homer's speech, difference as “what” could be described as a difference without fixed or determinate value, or as “difference without a concept”—one of the ways Deleuze defines repetition in *Difference and Repetition*.

The fact that in its expletive and interrogative roles, “what(!?)” also functions as a demand for repetition, also recalls Deleuze's counterintuitive thesis that repetition is what lies between two differences. Configured as a what, “the difference between words and sentences or a sentence and sentences” could thus be described as a demand for repetition

which places us in a relation of indeterminacy, raising a question rather than providing an answer: “What is a sentence. A sentence is something that is or is not followed” (*HTW* 213). As Stein notes here, “what” becomes a sentence not only when it raises a question but also when it becomes one—when it actively solicits but may or may not be followed by a reply. “Now the whole question of questions and not answer is very interesting” (*HTW* 32, my italics). The response difference-as-what solicits, as in the case of Tod’s response to Homer’s speech, seems likely to take the form of an obstruction of response: when the ability to “answer” is frustrated or delayed. In both cases, the negative experience of “stupefaction” (in which this relationship to language is given a specific emotional value) raises the significant question of how we might respond to what we recognize as “the different” prior to its qualification or categorization (as “sexual” or “racial” for instance), precisely by pointing to the limits of our ability to do so. We are used to encountering and recognizing differences assigned formal values; Stein’s writing asks us to ask how we negotiate our encounters when these qualifications have not yet been made.

Thus in attempting to “break down the essential combination” of sentences and paragraphs, or claiming that “what is the difference between words and a sentence,” Stein’s agenda is not to be confused with an attempt to level or neutralize difference by repetition, but rather to radically reconfigure one’s relationship to difference through repetition and grammatical play. If a particular kind of negative emotion inevitably accompanies or is produced by this new relation, it becomes important to understand how this affective dynamic might organize and inform strategies of reading made possible by it. Throughout Stein’s career, but beginning particularly around 1906 when, as Marianne deKoven argues,

she started to develop her “insistent” style based on repetition,⁸ fixed or “essential” distinctions are replaced with unqualified ones to generate new frameworks of sense-making: forms of continuity, order, and “balance” alternative to the symbolic status quo (deKoven 50). What this requires from the writer, Stein suggests, as well as from her readers, is an experiment in duration—or, more precisely, an experiment in the temporality of endurance, testing whether one can go “far enough with this thing.” As any reader of *The Making of Americans* in its entirety can attest, the stakes of this astonishing 922-page narrative are the exhaustion it inevitably induces, as well as its narrative themes of familial and historical survival. Stein’s interest in how astonishment and fatigue, oddly in tandem, come to organize and inform a particular kind of relationship between subjects and language (or between subjects and difference, via language), can be further explored by examining how this peculiar syncretism of affects comes to bear on our contemporary engagements with radically “different” forms in American poetry.

Poetic Fatigue and Hermeneutic Stupor

It comes as no surprise that what Leo Stein, journeying into the self, considered “stupid” language is language that, in undermining conventional patterns of grammar, syntax, and sense, threatens the limits of self by challenging its capacity for response,

⁸ Marianne deKoven, *A Different Language: Gertude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1983). See in particular Chapter 3, “Insistence,” 46–62.

temporarily immobilizing the addressee as in situations of extreme shock or boredom. In the case of Homer's muddy and twisting rhetoric, the subject no longer seems to be the agent producing or controlling his speech; rather, language "leaps out" with its own peculiar force. Yet as West's scene of interpretation demonstrates, Homer's emotional speech is readable, once the interpreter recognizes that it simultaneously constitutes its own frame of sense-making. Like the affectively charged, insistent language Gertrude Stein uses to create her vast combinatorial of "bottom natures" in *Making of Americans*, Homer's "thick" speech demands to be encountered on its own terms. The critical trajectory or journey it invites is not one into the self, but into the more complex problem of a particular kind of self's relationship to language, where the latter is what radically externalizes the former, pointing to its own incommensurabilities.

"The words went behind each other instead of after. What he had taken for long strings were really one thick word and not a sentence. In the same way sentences were simultaneous and not a paragraph" (West 14). Deviating from conventional syntax and its standard organizations of temporality, Homer's gush, like Stein's prose, produces a kind of linguistic overlapping or simultaneity—one that recalls the source of the cryptanalyst Legrand's own experience of stupefaction in Poe's "The Gold-Bug" (1843).⁹ In both stagings of hermeneutic perplexity, the obstacle posed to the reader is attributed to a "thickness" or superimposition of forms:

⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Gold-Bug," *The Fall of The House of Usher and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 283-319.

Presently I took a candle, and... proceeded to scrutinize the parchment more closely. Upon turning it over, I saw my own sketch upon the reverse, just as I had made it. My first idea, now, was mere surprise at the really remarkable similarity of outline—at the singular coincidence involved in the fact, that unknown to me, there should have been a skull upon the other side of the parchment, immediately beneath my figure of the scarabaeus, and that this skull, not only in outline, but in size, should so closely resemble my drawing. I say the singularity of this coincidence absolutely stupified [sic] me for a time. This is the usual effect of such coincidences. *The mind struggles to establish a connection--a sequence of cause and effect--and, being unable to do so, suffers a species of temporary paralysis.* But, when I recovered from the stupor, there dawned upon me gradually a conviction which startled me even far more than the coincidence. (Poe 305, my emphasis)

In the scenes of analytical stupor staged by both West and Poe, the discourse initially stumping the interpreter is based on a logic of vertical stacking or piling rather than a horizontally progressive trajectory in time. Legrand's glyphs, like Homer's words, are placed behind each other instead of after, creating a layered simultaneity of signs. In West's narrative, the “thickening” of Homer's language is explicitly figured as an effect of behindness—that of discursive flow “[running] back behind the dam again” (144), recalling Heidegger's description of poetry as “the water that at times flows backward toward the source.”¹⁰ The anteriorizing slippage dramatized in Tod's description of Homer's language is both a convention of Stein's prose, where narration is consequently forced to “begin again,” and a stylistic dynamic utilized in Beckett's later writing. In “Stirrings Still”

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 11.

(1988),¹¹ for instance, a prose poem that deals specifically with a subject's experience of stupefying loss, the overlapping accretion of phrases and word clusters within the boundaries of a severely limited diction results in a language that is paradoxically both ascetic and congested, "thickening" even as it progresses into a narrative of not-progressing:

One night or day then as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go. First rise and stand clinging to the table. Then sit again. Then rise again and stand clinging to the table. Then go. Start to go. On unseen feet start to go. So slow that only change of place to show he went. As when he disappeared only to reappear later at another place. Then disappeared again only to reappear again later at another place again. So again and again disappeared again only to reappear again later at another place again. Another place in the place where he sat at his table head on hands. (259-60)

The familiar theme of "endurance" is conveyed here through a drastic slowing down of language, or a rhetorical enactment of its fatigue in which the duration of relatively simple actions is uncomfortably prolonged through a proliferation of precise inexactitudes. This process occurs not only through repetition, but a series of constative exhaustions staged through the corrective dynamics of retraction and restatement, of statements partially undoing the completion of preceding statements by breaking the movements they describe into smaller intervals. The undoing paradoxically relies on a process of material build-up, where words are slowly added rather than subtracted. Thus the finitude of a simple action such as "he saw himself rise and go" becomes disrupted by being rendered increasingly

¹¹ "Stirrings Still," *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995) 259-265.

specific in degree. "He saw himself rise and go." Well actually, no: first he rose and stood—then sat—then rose. Then, he went. Actually, no: then he started to go. No again: then on unseen feet he started to go. The logic of progression from statement to statement is paradoxically propelled by a series of invisible objections continually jerking us backwards, resulting in writing that continually calls attention to itself as lacking even as it steadily accumulates. Because units of meaning are constantly shifting behind one another, Beckett's use of language performs a stacking of multiple temporalities, an overlapping of instaneities and durations, rather than a linear progression in time.

Like Stein's style in the period of *Making of Americans*, "Stirrings Still" becomes syntactically dense or complex while remaining minimalist in diction. As in the case of Homer's "timeless" language, its language is marked by the absence of a "sequence of cause and effect," producing the effect of delay, fatigue, or "temporary paralysis." This discontinuity is generated within the speech or text itself, as well as experienced by its interpreter as an interruption of understanding. What Poe, West, and Beckett suggest in different ways is that when language "thickens" it suffers a "retardation by weak links"¹²: it slows down or performs a temporal delay through the absence of causal connectives. It is this change in temporal organization that in turn slows down the interpreter—as if the loss

¹² See Jean-François Lyotard, *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*, trans. Ian McLeod (Venice: Lapis Press, 1990), a study of Duchamp's *Large Glass*. Lyotard's analysis of Duchamp's aesthetics as underwritten by a logic of "inexact precision" and "intelligent stupidity" seems very much in attunement with the poetics of Stein and contemporary Steinians.

of “strong links” within the original text or narrative paradoxically strengthens the link between it and the reader, enabling the transfer of the former's emotional value.

To acknowledge and attempt to understand one's own experience of “stupefaction” by a text or language, as Legrand and Tod do (which gives them endurance and enables them to go on as interpreters in spite of “temporary paralysis”), is not the same as projecting stupidity onto the text instigating this relation—as Leo Stein does, turning his emotional response to Stein's writing into an attribute of the writing in itself. Attempting to analyze the linguistic factors informing this dynamic, rather than dismiss the objects involved as senseless, both interpreters identify: (1) a breakdown of formal differences and a proliferation of modal ones; (2) a “thickness” or simultaneous layering of elements in place of linear sequencing; resulting in (3) the disruption of normative syntax and its patterns of temporal organization. A similar logic presides in contemporary writer Dan Farrell's prose poem *366, 1996* (1997),¹³ which bears some stylistic allegiance to the “thick” uses of language in Beckett and Stein:

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday,
Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, going into the woods, Sunday,
Monday, typical trees, Tuesday, typical grass traces, Wednesday, Thursday, typical
excitations, Friday, typical regional sounds, Saturday, Sunday, why slow rather than
slowest, Monday, clouded height, Tuesday, some same ground, Wednesday, Thursday,
Friday, Saturday, left and possible, Sunday, right and possible, Monday, Tuesday, could
what there is not to be believed be asked, Wednesday, Thursday... (57)

¹³ Dan Farrell, *366, 1996* (New York: Iced Ink Press, 1997).

Consider also this passage from Kenneth's Goldsmith FIDGET, a poem/conceptual art piece performed at the New York Whitney Museum in 1997:

Tongue and saliva roll in mouth. Swallow. Tongue emerges through teeth and lips. Tongue lies on lower lip. Teeth click tongue. Lower jaw drops away from upper. Flesh folds beneath chin. Repeats. Upper lip sucks. Rubs against lower. Swallow. Saliva gathers under tongue. Teeth tuck inside jaw. Gather saliva. Swallow. Left hand, grasping with three fingers, moves toward mouth. Swallow. Arm drops. Arm lifts. Swallow. Arm drops. Swallow. Arm lifts. Arm drops. Eyes move to left. Left hand hits. Arm lifts. Swallow. Arm drops. Right leg crosses left...

Just as Beckett's poem stylistically enacts a form of discursive exhaustion or fatigue, Farrell and Goldsmith's deliberately stupefying poems relentlessly focus on the tedium of the ordinary: the monotony of daily routines organized by calendar headings, the movements of a body not doing anything in particular. Simultaneously astonishing and boring, the experiment in "duration" is taken in each to a structural extreme: Farrell's poem incorporates every single calendar date of the year named in its title (366); Goldsmith's documents the writer's impossible project of recording every single bodily movement made in a twenty-four hour period (Bloomsday).¹⁴ Using a similar conceptual framework, Judith Goldman's poem "dicktee" (1997),¹⁵ described by the author as "a study in the

¹⁴ Quotations are taken from the FIDGET website, which is sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art, Printed Matter, and Stadium, and is available at <<http://stadiumweb.com/fidget/>>. FIDGET was originally commissioned by the Whitney Museum and was performed in collaboration with vocalist Theo Bleckmann on June 16, 1998 at the Whitney. A book and compact disc were issued by the Maryland Institute of Art in 1998.

¹⁵ Judith Goldman, *Unpublished manuscript*, 1997. N. pag.

logic of paranoia” and its strategies of negation, is composed of every single word in Melville's *Moby Dick* that begins with the prefix un-, in the exact order in which they appear:

under, unite, unless, unpleasant, universal, uncomfortable, unaccountable, under, unbiased, undeliverable, under, underneath, universe, unequal, understanding, unaccountable, unwarranted, unimaginable, unnatural, unoccupied, undress, unobserved, unknown, unwarrantable, unknown, unaccountable, understand, uncomfortable, unsay, unaccountable, uncommonly, undressed, unearthly, undressing, unnatural, unceremoniously, uncomfortableness, unmethodically, undressed, unendurable, unimaginable, unlock, unbecomingness, understand, under, unusual, unrecorded, unceasing, unhealing, unbidden, universal, unstirring, unspeakable, unnecessary, unseen, unassuming, unheeded, unknown, until, uncheered, unreluctantly, unto, unwelcome, unto, unearthly, uncouthness, unbiddenly, unite, unite,...

In a dramatization of modal differences usurping formal ones, the poet converts *Moby Dick* into moby dictation, producing a hyperbolic version of the collage of quotations compiled by the Sub-Sub-Librarian in Melville's novel. If for Melville the Sub-Sub is always already a small subject encompassed by a big and relentless system (hence in many ways a “postmodern” subject), Goldman comically positions herself as an even smaller one. The exaggeration of language's citability and iterability (for Goldman, against conventional poetic lyricism) is similarly enacted in Goldsmith's encyclopedic *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* (1997),¹⁶ a collection of linguistic materials compiled over the period of three years

¹⁶ As Raphael Rubinstein notes in his blurb for this volume, “Goldsmith's epic litanies and lists bring to the textual tradition of conceptual art not only an exploded frame of reference, but a hitherto absent sense of hypnotic beat. Under its deceptively bland title, *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* attempts no less than a complete reordering of the things of the world.”

(including lists, phrases, conversations, found passages, and entire pieces of fiction) that all end on the sonority of the schwa (rhyme) and then are laboriously ordered by syllable count, from a series of one-syllable entries to a piece containing precisely 7228 (meter). Taking a more traditional versifier's attention to prosodic constraints to an extreme, Goldsmith's Sub-Subish work also results in what Raphael Rubinstein blurbs as "a weirdly constructed Baedeker to late 20th Century American society." In MDCLXXXVI, whose title reflects the number of syllables determining its order in the volume, constative fatigue is hilariously performed through an overdetermined self-referentiality and use of "literary devices" as clichés. Or, in persistently subsuming content to the ruthless demands of its self-imposed, unusual rhyming pattern and metrical structure, does a text which self-referentially appropriates a prototypically postmodernist text in its own parody of postmodern appropriation and self-referentiality exhaust the parodying of these devices as well as the devices themselves?¹⁷

¹⁷ For those curious about the text claiming to appropriate the Declaration of Independence which Goldsmith appropriates and edits for incorporation into his own conceptual framework, the self-referential story is written by mathematician David Moser and cited by Douglas Hofstadter in *Metamagical Themas*, 37–41. What ultimately determines this text's positioning between MDCLXXXV and MDCLXXXVII in Goldsmith's poem? encyclopedia? Baedeker? is the fact that it contains the appropriate number of syllables, and, like the other rhymed "verses," ends with a sound related to the sound "R": "Harder harder" (568). Yet the point is not simply to dramatize a privileging of form over content, since the heterogeneous assortment of works chosen to build this aggressively prosodic text pointedly direct us to the untotallizable linguistic world of the late twentieth century.

This is the first sentence of the story. This is the second sentence. This is the title of the story which is also found several times in the story itself. This sentence is questioning the intrinsic value of the first two sentences. This sentence is to inform you in case you haven't already realized it that this is a self-referential story containing sentences that refer to their own structure and function. This is a sentence that provides an ending to the first paragraph. This is the first sentence of a new paragraph in a self-referential story. This sentence comments on the awkward nature of the self-narrative form while recognizing the strange and playful detachment it affords the writer. Introduces in this paragraph the device of sentence fragments. A sentence fragment. Another. Good device. Will be used more later. This is actually the last sentence of the story but has been placed here by mistake. This sentence overrides the preceding sentence by informing the reader... that this piece of literature is actually the Declaration of Independence but that the author in a show of extreme negligence (if not malicious sabotage) has so far failed to include even ONE SINGLE SENTENCE from that stirring document although he has condescended to use a small sentence FRAGMENT namely "When in the course of human events" embedded in quotation marks near the end of the sentence... (Goldsmith 565-66)

In extremely different ways, the conceptual work of Farrell, Goldsmith, and Goldman continues a tradition of poetic experimentalism grounded in the work of Stein—including her interest in affectively reorganizing the subject's relationship to language through stylistic innovation. Though such diverse texts should not be reduced to a common equation, each could be described as simultaneously astonishing and (deliberately) fatiguing; much like the signifying logics at work in Beckett's late fiction, or the experience of reading *The Making of Americans*. Through hyperbolic uses of repetition, reflexivity, citation, and clichés, the poems perform a doubling-over of language which, as in the case of Legrand's confrontation with a layered configuration, actively interferes with the temporal organization dictated by conventional syntax. When words or glyphs are placed "behind" each other, instead of after, "The mind struggles to establish a connection—a sequence of cause and effect—and, being unable to do so, suffers a species of temporary

paralysis” (Poe 305). Yet “temporary paralysis” is not merely a state of passivity; rather, it bears some resemblance to what Stein calls “open feeling,” a condition of utter receptivity in which difference is felt rather than qualified or assigned a particular value. The next section examines ways in which contemporary artists engender this affective dynamic through their work.

From Stupefaction to Stuplime Poetics

Words are too crude. And words are also too busy—inviting a hyperactivity of consciousness that is not only dysfunctional, in terms of human capacities of feeling and acting, but actively deadens the mind and senses.

—Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence”¹⁸

quaqua on all sides then in me bits and scraps try and hear a
few scraps two or three each time per day and night string
them together make phrases more phrases

—Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*¹⁹

The sudden excitation of “shock,” and the desensitization we associate with “boredom,” though diametrically opposed and seemingly mutually exclusive, are both

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) 3-34. See p. 22.

¹⁹ Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964). Hereafter referred to as *How*.

responses that confront us with the limitations of our capacity for responding in general.²⁰ Both affects are thus frequently invoked in responses to radical art usually dismissed as unsophisticated; few savvy, postmodern readers are likely to admit to being “bored” by *The Making of Americans* and perhaps even less likely to being “shocked” by Jeff Koons or Cindy Sherman. By pointing to what obstructs critical response, however, astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us, and under what conditions. As “dispositions” which result in a fundamental displacement from secure critical positions, the shocking and the boring usefully prompt us to look for new strategies of engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible. The phenomenon of the intersection of these affective dynamics, in innovative artistic and literary production, will thus be explored here as a way of expanding our notion of the aesthetic in general.

As Stein acknowledges, “Listening to repeating is often irritating, listening to repeating can be dulling” (*Making* 302). Yet in the taxonomy or system for the making of human “kinds” that is *The Making of Americans*, repeating is also the dynamic force by which new beginnings, histories, genres, and genera are produced and organized. As Lacan

²⁰ Frederic Jameson makes this point about boredom alone in “Surrealism and the Unconscious,” his chapter on video in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: “Boredom becomes interesting as a reaction to situations of paralysis and also, no doubt, as defense mechanism or avoidance behavior” (71-72). See *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), hereafter referred to as *PM*. Deleuze suggests similar possibilities in noting that “fatigue is a real component of contemplation” (77).

similarly suggests, “repetition demands the new,”²¹ including new ways of understanding its dulling and irritating effects. It thus comes as no surprise that many of the most “shocking,” innovative, and/or transformative cultural productions in history have also been deliberately tedious ones. In the twentieth century, systematically recursive works by Warhol, Ryman, Johns, Cage and Glass bear witness to the prominence of tedium as aesthetic strategy in avant-garde practices; one also thinks of the “fatiguing repetitiveness of Sade’s books”²² and the permutative logics at work in the writings of Beckett, Roussel, Perec, Cage, Mac Low, and of course, Stein. This partnership between tedium and shock in the invention of new genres is not limited, however, to avantgardisms. The same intersection of affects can be found in the modern horror film, which in its repetitive use of a limited number of trademark motifs replicates the serial logics of its serial killers, and the pulsating, highly enervated, yet exhaustively durational electronic music known as techno or house which completely transformed musical subcultures in the 1980s.

Though repetition, permutation, and seriality figure prominently as devices in aesthetic uses of tedium, practitioners have achieved the same effect through a strategy of what I call agglutination; quite simply, the mass adhesion or coagulation of data particles or signifying units. Here tedium resides not so much in the syntactic overdetermination of

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981) 61.

²² Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” *Styles of Radical Will* 35–73. The quotation appears on p. 62.

minimalist dictions (as in Ryman's white paintings), but in the stupendous proliferation of discrete quanta held together by a fairly simple syntax or organizing principle. This logic, less mosaic than congealaic, is frequently emphasized by sculptor Ann Hamilton in her installations, which have included 16,000 teeth arranged on an examination table, 750,000 pennies immobilized in honey, 800 men's shirts pressed into a wedge, and floors covered by vast spreads of linotype pieces and animal hair.²³ A similar effect is achieved by Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* (1997), which confronts the spectator with 643 sheets of over 7,000 snapshots, newspaper cuttings, sketches and color fields, each arranged on white rectangular panels.²⁴ While here the organization of material is primarily taxonomic rather than compressive in its grammar, the accumulation of visual "data" induces a similar strain on the observer's capacities for conceptually synthesizing or metabolizing information. In this manner, the fatigue of the responsivity *Atlas* solicits approaches the kind of exhaustion involved in the attempt to read a dictionary.

This mode of tedium is specifically foregrounded in Janet Zweig's computer/printer installations, where rhetorical bits and scraps are automatically produced in enormous quantities, then stacked, piled, enumerated, weighed in balances, or otherwise "quantified." To make *Her Recursive Apology* (1993), for example, four computers, each hooked to a dot-matrix printer, were programmed to randomly generate apologies "in the smallest possible

²³ Neville Wakefield, "Ann Hamilton: Between Words and Things," *Ann Hamilton, Mneme* (Liverpool: Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1994) 10.

²⁴ Gerhard Richter, *Atlas* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1997).

type” on continuously-fed paper. As Zweig notes, “The printer apologized for two weeks, day and night. Whenever a box of paper ran out, the computer displayed the number of times it had apologized. Because the apologies were randomly chosen by the computer, no two sheets of paper are alike. I arranged the pages in a recursive spiral structure, each stack one sheet larger than the next.”²⁵ Pushing the boundary between the emotive and the mechanical, and ironically commenting on the feminization of apologetic speech acts, *Her Recursive Apology* stages the convergence of gendered subject and machine not via fashionable cyborg, but through a surprisingly “flat” or boring display of text, its materiality and iterability foregrounded by the piles of its consolidation. Zweig’s work points to the Lacanian notion that language is precisely the site where subject and system intersect, as Stein similarly demonstrates through her own vast combinatorial of human types—a text in which new “kinds” or models of humans are made through the rhetorically staged acts of enumerating, “grouping,” “mixing,” and above all repeating. For both Stein and Zweig, where system and subject converge is more specifically where language piles up and becomes dense.

Like the massive *Making of Americans*, the large-scale installations of Zweig, Hamilton, and Richter register as at once exciting and deenergizing, astonishing yet tedious. Inviting further comparison with Stein’s taxonomy is the fact that each of these installations functions as an information processing system—a way of classifying, ordering,

²⁵ Janet Zweig, *Chain: Special Topic: Documentary*. 2 (1995): 248–49.

and metabolizing seemingly banal “bits” of data: newspaper clippings, snapshots, teeth, words and phrases, repetitions. To encounter the vastness of Stein's system is to encounter the vast combinatory of language, where particulars “thicken” to produce new individualities. As an ordering of visual data on a similar scale, what Richter's *Atlas* calls attention to through its staggering agglomeration of material it is not so much information's sublimity, but the sublimity of its ability to condense.

Yet “sublime” seems an inappropriate term to use here, even in spite of its critical voguishness today, which marks the persistence of an older aesthetic tradition where it was typically invoked in response to things overwhelmingly vast or massive and large (mountains, seas, the infinite, and so forth)—things that threaten to crush the subjectivity out of us, as the works of Stein or de Sade similarly do, and point to the limits of our psychological and cognitive faculties. In this sense, the term seems fully applicable. But while the sublime encompasses the feeling of awe or astonishment *The Making of Americans* solicits from its reader, it fails to circumscribe the concomitantly solicited effect of boredom. This response, invoked in tandem with the feeling of awe, is absolutely central to Stein's quasi-scientific experiment in narrative, which deliberately forces the reader to participate in its accumulation, enumeration, organization, and interpretation of human “data.” Though useful as an index of the general value of affectivity in the negotiation of aesthetic experiences, sublimity becomes a profoundly unsatisfactory way of characterizing the particular kind of affective relationship configured by twentieth-century agglutinations

such as *Atlas* or *Americans*, since here the experience of being aesthetically overwhelmed involves not so much fear, terror, or even euphoria, but something much closer to an ordinary fatigue. In this relationship, a similarly negative emotivity is summoned, one in which the self is made aware of his or her own powerlessness or impotence, but one conspicuously less romantic, or auratic. How the observer encounters a work like *Atlas* thus approaches the experience of reading Stein and Joyce, whose postmodernisms *avant le lettre* similarly seems to call for a rethinking of what it means to be aesthetically overpowered: a new way of theorizing the negatively affective relationship to stupefying objects previously designated by the older aesthetic notion of the sublime. One way of calling attention to the affinity between exhaustion and the astonishment particular to the sublime, invoking the latter while detaching it from its previous romantic affiliations, is to refer to the aesthetic experience I am talking about—one in which astonishment is paradoxically united with boredom as the stuplime. Though criticism continually relies on and returns to older aesthetic categories, even in its engagement with radically different forms of cultural production, these often call for new terms for describing our responses to innovative works, new dictions to be used in the work of critically commenting on them. An encounter with *The Making of Americans* does seem to approach the experience of the sublime, yet also very much not. Upon first encounter it astonishes and awes, yet like the “bottom natures” it inventories, draws us down into the agglutinative domain of language and its dulling and irritating iterability. The same could be said for the scatological sludge in *How It Is*, in which the subject is literally pulled face down. Hamilton's vast spreads of hair or typographical rubble seem to deliberately invite yet ultimately veer away from their

characterization as such. What constitutes the stuplime will become increasingly clear below, but for now I will briefly describe it as a syncretism of boredom and astonishment, of what “dulls” with what “irritates” or agitates, of excessive excitation with extreme desensitization or fatigue. Whereas the former traditionally finds a home in the lyrical or tragic, the latter could be said to more properly belong to the artificial, the dirtier environments of what Stein calls “bottom humor.”

Like the Kantian sublime, the stuplime points to the limits of our representational capabilities, not through the limitlessness or infinity of concepts, but through a no less exhaustive confrontation with the discrete and finite in repetition. The “bits and scraps” of what surrounds the self on all sides is what Beckett calls “quaqua,” the discursive logic of a larger symbolic system. As such, “it expresses a power peculiar to the existent, a stubbornness of the existent in intuition, which resists every specification by concepts no matter how far this is taken,” (Deleuze 13) a characterization mirroring a claim made in Kierkegaard's comic discourse on repetition: “Every general esthetic category runs aground on farce.”²⁶ Unlike the sublime, the stuplime paradoxically forces the reader to go on in spite of its equal enticement to surrender, inducing a series of comic fatigues or tirednesses rather than a single, earthshattering blow to one's conceptual apparatus, thus pushing the reader to constantly formulate and reformulate new tactics for reading. Confrontations with the stuplime bear more resemblance to the repetitive exhaustions performed by

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 159.

Kierkegaard's Beckmann, Buster Keaton, or Pee-Wee Herman than the instantaneous breakdown dramatized in encounters with elemental forces. In the stuplimity of slapstick comedy, which frequently stages the confrontation of small subjects with the large Systems encompassing them, one is made to fall down (typically in an exaggerated expression of inexpressiveness) only so as to get up again, counteracting tragic failure with an accumulation of comic fatigues. Significantly, Deleuze's prime example of this blockage of the sublime and the surrender it induces is words, as these "possess a comprehension which is necessarily finite, since they are by nature the objects of a merely nominal definition. We have here a reason why the comprehension of the concept cannot extend to infinity: we define a word by only a finite number of words. Nevertheless, speech and writing, from which words are inseparable, give them an existence *hic et nunc*; a genus thereby passes into existence as such; and here again extension is made up for in dispersion, in discreteness, under the sign of a repetition which forms the real power of language in speech and writing" (Deleuze 13).

In this manner, stuplimity pulls us downward into the denseness of language rather than lifting us upwards toward unrepresentable divines—a realm much like the mud in *How It Is*, where bits and scraps accumulate in being transmitted through a narrator who only quotes what he receives from an external yet infiltrating source: "I say it as I hear it." This mud is both the site enabling the series of arrivals and separations that comprise the basic movements in the narrative, and yet an inertial drag or resistance that renders them exhaustingly difficult or slow: each act of "journeying" and "abandoning" thus involves a

laborious and (as William Hutchings notes) peristaltic crawl,²⁷ leading us through “vast tracts of time” (Beckett, *How* 39). Stein's writing operates through a similarly anal dynamic, Lisa Ruddick argues, of “pressing” and “straining.”²⁸ While Beckett's mud obstructs or slows the physical movements of individual characters toward and away from one another, it also seems to enable a process of cohesion, by which the discrete extensions of Pims, Boms and Bems, “one and all from the unthinkable first to the no less unthinkable last” come to be “glued together in a vast imbrication of flesh without breach or fissure” (Beckett, *How* 140). The social community it creates is thus one of discursive condensation, as visually suggested through the absence of punctuation.

Here, finitely large numbers substitute for the infinities we associate with the sublime, yet the effect of these enumerations is to similarly call attention to representational or conceptual fatigues, if not destructions. Such tiredness results even when the narrator subdivides the enormity of what we are asked to imagine into more manageable increments: “a million then if a million strong a million Pims now motionless agglutinated two by two in the interests of torment too strong five hundred thousand little heaps color of mud and a thousand thousand nameless solitaires half abandoned half abandoning” (Beckett, *How* 115-116). Though the narrator often resorts to such

²⁷ William Hutchings, “‘Shat into Grace’ Or, A tale of a Turd: Why It is *How It Is* in Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*,” *Papers on Language and Literature*. 21 (1985): 67-87, 65.

²⁸ Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) 81. Ruddick's account of Stein's “anal voice” is developed in the chapter titled “*The Making Americans: Modernism and Patricide*,” 55-136.

calculations to negotiate his relationship to this mud, and to facilitate understanding of the “natural order” or organizing principle of the system he lives in (one legislated by its “justice” or the disembodied, external “voice of us all” from which he receives the words of his narration), these acts of enumerating, grouping and subdividing only produce further fatigues; thus the double meaning of the narrator's comment “I always loved arithmetic it has paid me back in full” (Beckett 37). Attempting to make sense of his situation by finding smaller, more easily manipulable systems of ordering within the larger one, the narrator finds these micrologics ultimately subsumed and thwarted by what encompasses them. We see this in his attempt to describe how information is exchanged in the world he inhabits: to understand the ordering principle behind this we are asked to take twenty consecutive numbers, “no matter which no matter which it is irrelevant”

814326 to 814345

number 814327 may speak misnomer the tormentors being mute as we have seen part two may speak of number 814326 to number 814328 who may speak to him to number 814329 who may speak of him to number 814330 and so on to number 814345 who in this way may know number 814326 by repute

similarly number 814326 may know by repute number 814345 number 814344 having spoken of him to number 814343 and this last to number 814342 and this last to number 814341 and so back to number 814326 who in this way may know number 814345 by repute

...

but question to what purpose

for when number 814336 describes number 814337 to number 814335 and number 814335 to number 814337 for example he is merely in fact describing himself to two lifelong acquaintances so to what purpose (*How It Is* 119-120)

As in the case of the repeated pratfalls of the slapstick comedian, stuplimity emerges in the performance of such fatigue-inducing strategies, in which the gradual accumulation of error often leads to the repetition of a refrain: “too strong”; or “something wrong there.” In this manner, every attempt to account for or explain the “natural order” or “logic” of the encompassing system (and the acts of movement, information exchange, narration, and violence it determines) by means of a smaller logic paradoxically culminates in the understanding of the wider principle being blocked. There is a multiplicity of such attempts, ranging from Euclidean geometry describing the trajectory of subjects (based on a circle and its division into chords “AB” and “BA”), to simple arithmetic describing the durations, distances, and velocities involved:

allowing then I quote twenty years for the journey and knowing furthermore from having heard so that the four phases and knowing furthermore from having heard so that the four phases through which we pass the two kinds of solitude the two kinds of company through which tormentors abandoned victims travelers we all pass and pass again being regulated thus are of equal duration knowing furthermore by the same courtesy that the journey is accomplished in stages ten yards fifteen yards at the rate of say its reasonable to say one stage per month this word these words months years I murmur them (*How It Is* 125)

We are thus brought to a series of calculations which in this case lead to a finite solution—if our fatigue permits us to follow them. In spite of its empirical faultlessness, however, on the page the accumulation of figures visually suggests babble:

four by twenty eighty twelve and half by twelve one hundred and fifty by twenty three thousand divided by eighty thirty-seven and a half thirty-seven to thirty-eight say forty yards a year we advance (125)

The linguistic environment of *How It Is* thus provides a model for better understanding stuplimity as an aesthetic strategy in contemporary practice, insofar as it entails an affective reorganization of one's relationship to language, as well as a veering away from the older category of the sublime. Unlike the instantaneous or sudden defeat of comprehension instigated by the latter, the stuplime belongs to a different temporal and emotional register, involving not an abrupt climax of excitation in terror, but rather an extended duration of consecutive fatigues. What facilitates this relationship is an encounter with the finite (though vast) operations of a symbolic order, the artificial system or "justice" encompassing the subject who confronts it, rather than an encounter with radically external and uncontrollable forces of Nature. In experiencing the sublime one confronts the infinite and elemental; in stuplimity one confronts the machine or system, the taxonomy or vast combinatory, of which one is a part. Recalling Stein's fascination with "mushy masses" in *The Making of Americans*, *How It Is* also suggests features specific to the anti-romantic environment of the stuplime text: linguistic bits and scraps, discarded "cultural" waste (torn sacks, empty food tins, dropped can openers), and the dross or mud in which all acts of socialization and communication occur and subjects find themselves partially submerged. The discursive economy supported by this mud, the basis for all relationships and social organization, is one of rhetorical "incoherencies" (gasps and pants, babble or quaquas), enumerations, repetitions, permutations, retractions and emendations,

agglutinations, measurements and taxonomic classifications, and rudimentary arithmetical and algebraic operations (grouping, subdividing, multiplying).

Since the forms of exhaustion described above are related to tedium in a highly particular way, Beckett's example indicates that there are different kinds or uses of tedium in general, necessitating some differentiation between them. What stuplimity does not seem to involve is the kind of spiritualistic, mesmerizing tedium aimed at the achievement of "higher" states of consciousness or selfhood, as engendered by metaphysical plays of absence against presence in the work of Meredith Monk, Brice Marsden, or Donald Judd. In this case, tedium assumes a seriousness and a transcendence more proper to the sublime than the stuplime, to an absorptive rather than anti-absorptive agenda. Stuplimity also evades the kind of wholly anti-absorptive, cynical tedium used to reflect the flattening effects of cultural simulacra, as in the work of Warhol and Koons. Here tediousness is frequently adopted as aesthetic self-stylization or mannerism, which often registers as smugness or self-satisfied irony. Whereas the first type of tedium is auratic or hypnotic, the effect produced by works utilizing tedium in this manner could be described as euphoric.

What stuplime productions do rely on is an anti-auratic, anti-euphoric tedium which at times deliberately risks seeming obtuse, rather than insist upon its capacity for intellectual or spiritual transcendence and/or clever irony. Rather than being centered around grandiose questions of being or the proliferation of larger-than-life iconography, this boredom resides in relentless attention to the abject and the small, the bits and scraps

floating in what Ben Watson has called the “common muck” of language.²⁹ The stuplime resides in the synecdochal relationship between these minute materials and a vast ecology of repetition and agglutination, the system ensuring that parapraxes, portmanteaus, and clichés (rotting metaphors) continue to be made. As Beckett writes, “What more vigorous fillip could be given to the wallows of one bogged in the big world than the example of life to all appearances inalienably realised in the little?” (Beckett, *Murphy* 181). Absurdity and black humor play significant roles in this aesthetic use of tedium to facilitate linguistic questioning, even when such inquiry leads to direct confrontations with questions of violence and suffering, as evinced in much post-WW II writing. The particular use of “obtuse” boredom as means of engaging in linguistic inquiry is also demonstrated in the following anecdote, told by Lacan in his 1959 seminar to introduce a definition of *das Ding* as “that which in the real suffers from the signifier”³⁰:

During that great period of penitence that our country went through under Pétain, in the time of “Work, Family, Homeland” and of belt-tightening, I once went to visit my friend Jacques Prévert in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. And I saw there a collection of match boxes. Why the image has suddenly resurfaced in my memory, I cannot tell. It was the kind of collection that it was easy to afford at that time; it was perhaps the only kind of collection possible. Only the match boxes appeared as follows: they were all the same and were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each being so close to the one next to it that the little drawer was slightly displaced. As a result, they were all threaded together so as to form a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantelpiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and climbed down again next to a door. I

²⁹ Ben Watson, *Art, Class and Cleavage* (London: Quartet Books, 1998) 223.

³⁰ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

don't say that it went on to infinity, but it was extremely satisfying from an ornamental point of view. Yet I don't think that that was the be all and end all of what was surprising in the collectionism, nor the source of the satisfaction that the collector himself found there. I believe that the shock of novelty of the effect realized by this collection of empty match boxes—and this is the essential point—was to reveal something that we do not perhaps pay enough attention to, namely, that a box of matches is not simply an object, but that, in the form of an *Erscheinung*, as it appeared in its truly imposing multiplicity, it may be a Thing. In other words, this arrangement demonstrated that a match box isn't simply something that has a certain utility, that it isn't even a type in the Platonic sense, an abstract match box, that the match box all by itself is a thing with all its coherence of being. The wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous, and quasi absurd character of this collection pointed to its thingness as match box. Thus the collector found his motive in this form of apprehension that concerns less the match box than the Thing that subsists in a match box. (*Seminar* 113–14)

Lacan uses this “fable” as illustration of his formula for sublimation (“[the raising] of an object to the dignity of the Thing” [112]), but it works equally well as an example of stuplimation, as the concatenation of awe (inspired by “the truly imposing”) with what refuses awe (the “wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous and quasi absurd”). The description of the array of matchboxes and their internal voids seems meant playfully to recall an earlier moment in the seminar, where Lacan claims that the Thing, *das Ding*, “has to be identified with the *Wieder zu finden*, the impulse to find again that for Freud establishes the orientation of the human subject to [a lost/absent] object” (*Seminar* 58). The impulse to find again is an impulse towards repetition, one centered around and organized by negativity. In the fable above, the repetition which Lacan finds simultaneously imposing and ridiculous, threatening and non-threatening, leads him straight to this Thing, enabling “the sudden elevation of the match box to a dignity that it did not possess before” (*Seminar* 118). Yet this elevation is paradoxically achieved through

a lowering or abjection, an emphasis on the undignified or “wholly gratuitous... superfluous and quasi absurd” status of the collection through the proliferation of bits and scraps. As the producer of “multiplicities,” repetition seems to do opposite things simultaneously in this anecdote: elevate and absurdify. In conjoining these divergent dynamics (raising and lowering, trajectory upwards and trajectory downwards), the repetition in the fable recalls a similar conjunction of rising and falling in the stuplime, through its syncretism of excitation and enervation, extreme “selected attentiveness” and deficit of the same. Lacan's stuplime array also recalls the structure of a typical sentence from *The Making of Americans*, in which the tension created by slightly overlapping phrases performs the functions of both disjunction (that which calls attention to the spaces between signifying units, figured in the image of “the little drawer” exposed) and what Peter Brooks calls the “binding” action of repetition (the agglutination expressed in “threaded together”).³¹ And as in the case of Stein, its particular kind of tedium also seems willing to risk a certain degree of shock value, unlike metaphysical boredom, which risks none, and cynical boredom, which demands more than we are often willing to give.

The aesthetic differences between sublimity and stuplimity call attention to the fact that not all repetitions are alike, a point also foregrounded in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*. When the young man on a quest for “real repetition” in Kierkegaard's narrative euphorically (and erroneously) believes he has found it in the final outcome of his

³¹ Peter Brooks, “Freud's Masterplot,” *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984) 101.

unconsummated love, “[His] perhaps disturbing enthusiasm is expressed in terms that only a little earlier in aesthetic history were standard when describing the sublime: ‘spume with elemental fury,’ ‘waves that hide me in the abyss... that fling me up above the stars’.”³² Significantly, these prototypical invocations of sublimity involve the image of elevation, situating the young man’s relationship to the “ocean providing his ‘vortex of the infinite’” as an experience of verticality and depth (Kierkegaard 222). In contrast, having chosen to pursue repetition in a comic/materialist rather than tragic/romantic arena, Constantin Constantius’s description of farce as a “frothing foam of words that sound without resonance” (Kierkegaard 156) ironically references this sublime imagery only to flatten or deflate it, reconfiguring the experience of genuine repetition as one of a superficial and almost abject horizontality.

Thus did I lie in my theater box, discarded like a swimmer’s clothing, stretched out by the stream of laughter and unrestraint and applause that ceaselessly foamed by me. I could see nothing but the expanse of theater, hear nothing but the noise in which I resided. Only at intervals did I rise up, look at Beckmann, and laugh so hard that I sank back again in exhaustion alongside the foaming stream. (Kierkegaard 166)

In a satirical twist of the young man’s invocation of the sublime, Constantin’s description of his stuplime encounter with farce places him not in the elemental fury of a vast and abyssal sea, but rather horizontally alongside a mild and insipidly picturesque stream; it depicts him not as a mortal body engulfed, but as a pile of garments discarded by an absent body.

³² Arne Melberg, “Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term).” *Diacritics* 20.3 (1990): 71–87, 76.

Instead of the roaring or crashing of oceanic waves in which one becomes lost, we have “plaintive purling” of a small brook on the site of the family farm (166). As a “frothing foam of words that sound without resonance,” farce finds its structural counterpart in the mode of its reception: laughter. This laughter foams and flows by a self with no substantive content or body. Much like the “mushy mass,” “flabby mass,” or “lax condition” Stein attributes to “the being all independent dependent being in possibility of formation” in *The Making of Americans* (386), the self who experiences farce is described as a body's outline gone flaccid, one having lost its original form. In laughter, the self becomes “stretched out” like the Steinian sentence itself, which would seem to generate a linguistic foam of its own through the cumulative build-up of repeated phrases and the repeated abutment and overlapping of clauses against others.

Unlike the upheaval of waves that fling the young man towards the sky, linguistic “foam” would seem to cling by cohesion to the ground, often in accumulated lumps. It is the “vast sea” slaver or waste product: the dross of the sublime. Since to froth is to produce foam and foam is what froths, Constantin Constantius's phrase “frothing foam” is itself a repetition (like his own name); one accordingly used by him to characterize the form of comedy he finds most repetition-friendly. One seeks repetition in what foams or bubbles; thus the comic genius Beckmann is described as a “yeasty ingredient” (Kierkegaard 165). The littoral environment of farce in which Constantin pursues repetition might here recall the importance of “foaming” language to Stein's comic taxonomy of human “types” in *The Making of Americans*, as exemplified in this description of “bottom nature”--where bottom is literally “ground” in the sense of dirt:

The way I feel nature in men and women is this way then. To begin then with one general kind of them, this a resisting earthy slow kind of them, anything entering into them as a sensation must emerge again from through the slow resisting bottom of them to be an emotion in them. This is a kind of them. This bottom in them then in some can be solid, in some frozen, in some dried and cracked, in some muddy and engulfing, in some thicker, in some thinner, slimier, drier, very dry and not so dry and in some a stimulation entering into the surface that is them to make an emotion does not get into it, the mass then that is them, to be swallowed up in it to be emerging, in some it is swallowed up and never then is emerging. (343)

If Constantin seeks repetition not in the vast sea, but on a ground covered by its dross, Stein pursues it in the “slow resisting bottom” of language: a relentlessly materialist environment of words which similarly summons, yet ultimately deflates, the traditional romanticism of the sublime.

Since for Stein, as for Deleuze, all repetition is repetition with an internal difference (“a feeling for all changing” [*Making* 301]), for “getting completed understanding [one] must have in them an open feeling, a sense for all the slightest variations in repeating, must never lose themselves so in the solid steadiness of all repeating that they do not hear the slightest variation” (294, my emphasis). In contrast to the sublime’s dramatic awes and terrors, “open feeling” is also described as an emotion of indeterminate emotivity, a state of utter receptivity that actually slows or impedes reactivity, as both astonishment and fatigue are wont to do:

Resisting being then as I was saying is to me a kind of being, one kind of men and women have it as being that emotion is not poignant in them as sensation. This is my meaning, this is resisting being. Generally speaking them resisting being is a kind of being where, taking bottom nature to be a substance like earth to someone’s feeling, this needs time for penetrating to get reaction. Generally speaking those having resisting being in them have a slow way of responding, they may be nervous and quick

and all that but it is in them, nervousness is in them as the effect of slow-moving going too fast... (*Making* 347-48, my emphasis)

The “open feeling” of resisting being is thus an undifferentiated emotional state, one which lacks the punctuating “point” of “poignancy.” Skepticism is to be expected here: how can an affective state exist prior to the making of affective distinctions or values? Since, as Greimas and Fontanille point out, we tend to automatically assume and “reiterate uncritically the notion that living beings are structures of attractions and repulsions,” it becomes quite difficult to imagine how “phoria [might be] thought of prior to the euphoria/dysphoria split” (*SP* 3). Yet stuplimity as “open feeling” could serve as an example of the phoria or “not-yet-polarized tensive horizon” Greimas and Fontanille ask us to imagine; a realm of “gluey” emotivity [Stein] which could perhaps be described as “the individual's possibility [wandering] about in its own possibility” (Kierkegaard 155).³³ It is important to note here that Stein describes the kind of subject with “open feeling” as “that kind of being that has resisting as its natural way of fighting rather than... that kind of being that has attacking as its natural way of fighting” (*Making* 296, my emphasis). As a mode of “open feeling” engendered by the syncretism of shock and boredom (that is,

³³ This description by Constantin of farce and its effect on spectators suggests that its “frothing foam of words” is yet another modulation of nonpolarized “phoric tension”: “Seeing a farce can produce the most unpredictable mood, and therefore a person can never be sure whether he has conducted himself in the theater as a worthy member of society who has laughed and cried at the appropriate places” (Kierkegaard 160); thus farce enables the viewer to “maintain himself in the state in which not a single mood is present but the possibility of all” (161). Farce obstructs the “unanimity” of emotional impressions “and, strangely enough, it may so happen that the one time it made the least impression it was performed best” (160).

engendered by an encounter with difference prior to its conceptualization), stupidity also functions as state of receptivity that paradoxically enables this tactics of “resistance” as a form of critical agency; one which the next section attempts to elaborate.

Linguistic “Heaps”

In one of his most influential and much-discussed essays, Frederic Jameson describes postmodernism as an “aesthetic situation engendered by the absence of the historical referent,” or as an ongoing process of simulacral spatialization disabling our capacity for temporal organization and hence relationship to “real historical time” (25). The here and now becomes the *erewhon* of the simulacrum, which “endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy image” (21). As Jameson continues,

Yet this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our living possibility to experience history in some active way. It cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but rather merely to demonstrate, through these inner contradictions, the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience. (21)

The subject is described as impotent in this regard, having lost the ability to “organize [his or her] past and future into *coherent* experience” (Jameson 25, my emphasis).

Since coherent representations of current experience are what Jameson (in 1984) finds most lacking in postmodernism as an “aesthetic situation engendered by the absence of the historical referent,” we might take a closer look at how these breakdowns in reference and coherence are described, and what types of production they are said to result in (25). A good place to do so is where Jameson begins to delineate a common feature of postmodern textuality, or the “schizophrenic” writing he later associates with Cage, Beckett, and Language poetry:

If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but “heaps of fragments” and in practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory. These are, however, very precisely some of the privileged terms in which postmodernist cultural production has been analyzed (and even defended, by its own apologists). They are, however, still *privative* features... (25, my emphasis)

The language of this passage clarifies what Jameson understands and expects coherence to be, and what forms he assumes it can take. In the movement from “heaps of fragments” to “the fragmentary,” used to relate a specific kind of production back to the practice engendering it, what gets eclipsed from the sentence (and the theory) is the heap.

Effaced perhaps in the desire to emphasize fragmentation in general (as privation) over its potential effects, this heap disappears from the critique of postmodernity just as the historical referent is said to do within the aesthetic situation it engenders. According to the logic of the paragraph, then, “heaping” does not appear to be a valid means of cohering, nor a proper form of organization. Yet insofar as for something to cohere is for it “to hold

together firmly as parts of the same mass; broadly: STICK, ADHERE,"³⁴ a heap does seem to be a coherence of some sort. The difference seems to be the degree of "firmness" involved in the act of sticking, though this is only a difference of degree; a less than firm consolidation of parts would still be a proper coherence. We might think here of the "slowly wobbling," "flabby mass of independent dependent being" that is Stein's Martha Hersland, or the "slimy, gelatinous, gluey" substance that is "attacking being" disguised as "resisting being" (*Making* 349). As Stein insists, "[s]ome are always whole ones though the being in them is all a mushy mass." Thus Jameson seems to have a more specific, dictionary definition of "coherence" in mind when he excludes from it acts of holding-together in general. Insofar as it does not seem to cover particular forms of adhesion perceived as loose, limp, or unstable (such as heaps or mushy masses), what constitutes a legitimate form of coherence here would seem to be the process of making "(parts or components) fit or stick together in a suitable or orderly way," implying "systematic connection," especially in "logical discourse" (*Webster's*, my italics). In its orientation toward (phallo)logical firmness, this definition would seem to disavow limpnesses or flaccidities as equally viable organizations of matter.

An obvious point that must be stressed here is that what constitutes "logical consistency" or "logical discourse" is always a standard imposed by the cultural status quo. Might not unpredicted and seemingly "accidental" ways of cohering, then—even those resulting in unsightly heaps, lumps, and flabby masses—point to the possibility of new

³⁴ "Cohere" and "Coherence." *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. 1977.

systems, enabling us to critique traditional assumptions about what “systematic connection” should look like?

Thus if we follow the logic of Jameson's passage, “coherence” appears to be something that can only be imposed from without, an abstract concept rather than active manifestation, a stabilizing, fixed idea of order dictating in advance how particles might be molded or organized, rather than a particular activity or becoming by which things are brought together, made, into some order. Yet if coherence must imply suitability and orderliness as well as adhesion, then how does one describe the way hair, teeth, and linotype pieces come to accumulate in Hamilton's installations, or words and phrases in the poetry of Kenneth Goldsmith? As a noun rather than a verb, the radical potentiality of “coherence” to generate new forms and new theories of formation becomes limited, restricted to the safe domain of the suitable, the orderly, and the aesthetically consistent.

Both Jameson's and Stein's notions of coherence are informed by and diverge precisely around this question of “consistency.” Whereas for Jameson the term would seem to imply regularity or conformity to a particular ideal, an absence of variations or contradictions, consistency for Stein is a matter of irregularity and constant flux, as well as a matter of matter:

There must now then be more description of the way each one is made of a substance common to their kind of them, thicker, thinner, harder, softer, all of one consistency, all of one lump, or little lumps stuck together to make a whole one cemented together sometimes by the same kind of being sometimes by the other kind of being in them, some with a lump hard at the centre liquid at the surface, some with the lump

vegetablisth or wooden or metallic in them. Always then the kind of substance, the kind of way when it is a mediumly fluid solid fructifying reacting substance, the way it acts makes one kind of them of the resisting kind of them, the way another substance acts makes another kind of them the attacking way of them. It and the state it is in each kind of them, the mixing of it with the other way of being that makes many kinds of these two kinds of them, sometime all this will have meaning. (*Making* 345, my emphasis)

Hilarious and stuplime, this description usefully elucidates the main differences between the two notions of coherence. For Stein, coherence is a mode of substantiation—a material process of making rather than a value or ideal imposed on things made. As such, it involves an active potentiality or becoming—pointing not just to the creation of new “kinds,” but of futural meanings. Secondly, coherence structurally complexifies, as a process diverse and varied in the ways in which it can occur, and the forms in which it may appear. Thirdly, coherence functions as a vast combinatory, in which new consistencies are produced through the “mixing” or hybridization of others.

We can also see that different kinds of material consistency are emphasized in the two notions of coherence: firmly constituted versus mushy or gelatinous; graspable versus slimy. Generally speaking, Jameson's notion of coherence seems a lot less messy than Stein's—free of heaps, masses, and lumps. In the passage above, the disappearance of the “heap” seems related to the fact that Jameson very much wants to see the heaping of fragments as indicative of privation rather than accrual—perhaps because the accrual implied is so, well, unsightly. Yet as those with agricultural, laundry, postal, or waste disposal experience might attest, a heap is an organization, though perhaps a not particularly organized-looking one.

This coming together in them to be a whole one is a strange thing in men and women. Sometimes some one is very interesting to some one, very, very interesting to some one and then that one comes together to be a whole one and then that one is not any more, at all, interesting to the one knowing the one. (Stein, *Making* 382)

This passage suggests that how things cohere or come together is of intellectual interest to Stein, perhaps more so than the actual entities produced through this process. Following her lead we might similarly ask, how do the fragments in Jameson's "heap of fragments" get heaped? "Practices of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory" would seem to account for the fragments themselves, but leaves the question of their particular accumulation unexplained. To further elucidate this characterization of late twentieth-century experimental writing, Jameson refers to what he calls Lacan's "schizophrenic" theory of language, as a "linguistic malfunction" or breakdown of the relationships between signifiers in the signifying chain that ultimately results in "the form of a rubble" (27). While this reference to Lacan seems to elaborate causes for the fragmentation discussed above, it nevertheless continues to evade, or withhold acknowledgment of, the particular structure or organization these fragments assume. Just as the heap in "heap of fragments" disappears from critical scrutiny, so does the form in "form of rubble." One wants a less reductive or dismissive analysis of "breakdown" here, as well as less narrow definition of "coherence." Are there not, as Stein suggests, multiple and various ways of heaping and cohering?—as well as different kinds of linguistic or semiotic rubble? An isolated fragment may be an "inert passivity" (Jameson 31), but a

heap of fragments is more accurately described as a constituent passivity, or “passive synthesis”—a term Deleuze applies to the work of repetition for itself (72).

Significantly, Jameson finds the waning of historicity endemic to postmodernism (as reflected in its textualities) concomitant with “a waning of affect” and negative affect in particular. Thus “concepts such as anxiety and alienation... are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern” (14); rather, Jameson sees them displaced by euphoria, which he describes as a “joyous” or “hallucinatory exhilaration” (33), an ecstasy or high. Yet anxiety and alienation in their most hyperbolic manifestations—shock and boredom—converge in attempts to negotiate historicity by Beckett and Stein, writers Jameson himself considers “outright postmodernists” (4). For Stein, the work of “telling” or “making” history is inseparable from the labor of making of subjects (“kinds of men and women”), which itself entails the tedious labor of enumerating, differentiating, describing, dividing and sorting, and mixing within the chosen limits of a particular system. Such making does have its moments of exhilaration, but more generally takes place as a painstakingly slow, tiring, and seemingly endless “puzzling” over differences and resemblances. Temporal and taxonomic “organization” becomes marked by a series of fatigues rather than of euphoric highs. Stein accordingly acknowledges the number of failures occurring in this struggle for coherence (also described as “learning” or “studying” of a new discursive system), as well the alienation and anxiety it induces: “Mostly every one dislikes to hear it” (*Making* 289). With this projection of a less than receptive audience, writing becomes a seemingly isolating enterprise for the taxonomist-poet, who finds herself forced to announce “I am writing for myself and strangers. This is the only way I can do it” (289). This address can

be read as a more inclusive formulation of audience, however, rather than a restriction of one, if we perceive Stein's writing itself as a process of "strangering," of forming community based on something other than the satisfactory fulfillment of membership conditions.

Reflecting an essentially constructivist world view, everyone for Stein is a "kind of," and thus strangered. Yet the alienating effects of this subjection are themselves perceived as valuable subjects for study: "Mostly always then when any one tells it to any one there is much discussing often very much irritation. This is then very interesting" (*Making* 338). Thus the narrator finds herself able to continue even at moments where she finds herself "all unhappy in this writing... nervous and driving and unhappy" (348). For above all, the making of "completed history" that is the self-consciously impossible (and thus unhappy) fantasy of *The Making of Americans*, which even more impossibly depends on the consolidation of the completed history of every single subject, is absolutely synonymous with repeating:

Often as I was saying repeating is very irritating to listen to from them and then slowly it settles into a completed history of them... Sometimes it takes many years of knowing some one before the repeating in that one comes to be a clear history of such a one. Sometimes many years of knowing some one pass before repeating of all being in such a one comes out clearly from them... This is now more description of the way repeating slowly comes to make in each one a completed history of them. (292)

Stein's comment that "sometimes many years pass" before repeating slowly comes to make a "completed history" finds contemporary realization in On Kawara's *One Million Years (Past)* (1970–1972), a series of ten black, official-looking ledgers, each containing

2000 pages listing 500 years per page, from 998031 B.C. to 1969 A.D.³⁵ The sublimity of such a vast amount of time is trumped by its organization into bureaucratic blandness; comprehension of one million years is rendered manageable, if also tedious, when consolidated in a set of ring binders bearing some resemblance to the complete Starr Report. Yet this tedium turns back into astonishment when we come to realize the amount of time and labor it took (two years worth) to make such a severely minimal product. Dedicated to “All those who have lived and died,” what this piece records is not so much a completed “history,” though it certainly speaks to the fantasy of or desire for this, but the time spent in the attempt to organize one even in the most stark and reductive way. The *hic et nunc* postmodernism of Kawara may be very different from Stein’s *avant le lettre* variety, yet the comparison points to how *The Making of Americans* deliberately stages its own failure by setting itself against an impossible fantasy of absolute historical coherence or explicitness, usually imagined as an incipient future: “Sometime there will be here every way there can be of seeing kinds of men and women. Sometime there will be then a complete history of each one” (290); “Sometime then there will be a complete history of every one who ever was or is or will be living” (283). Or even more hyperbolically: “Sometime there will be a description of every kind of way any one can know anything, any one can know any one” (311); “sometime there will be a completed system of kinds of men and women, of kinds of men and kinds of women” (334).

³⁵ Exhibited at PS 1, *Deep Storage*. New York, 1998.

While stuplimity offers no fantasy of transcendence, it does provide small subjects with what Stein calls “a little resistance” in their confrontations with larger systems. The fatigues generated by the system which is *The Making of Americans* may be “nervous and driving and unhappy,” but such fatigues can also be darkly funny, as Beckett's Molloy, Keaton, Harpo Marx, and Pee Wee Herman remind us by their exhausting routines: running endless laps around a battleship, trying to enter a door, falling down and getting up again, collapsing in heaps. Significantly, the humor of these local situations usually occurs in the context of a confrontation staged between the small subject and powerful institutions or machines: thus we have Chaplin versus the assembly line; Keaton versus military engines such as *The Navigator* (a supply ship) and *The General* (a locomotive); Lucille Ball versus domesticity. Here we might add: Stein versus her own taxonomy. Critics have persuasively suggested that Stein's refusal of linear for cyclical or repetitive time signals a rejection of official (male) history for a temporality specific to feminine subjectivity, formulated by Kristeva as “the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm” (113). Yet this preference for the cycle, one of “driving” excitations and fatigues, could equally suggest Stein in Chaplin drag. By adopting this particular cultural role, Stein chooses the artifice of comedic “types” over the seriousness of “biological rhythm” as a preferred strategy for feminist and linguistic change.

Just as in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, where Constantin describes himself, consumed by laughter at a farce, as a pile of discarded clothes, the “kinds” of subjects produced in *The Making of Americans* function like garments without bodies, heap-like outlines, as it were, waiting to be “filled up” with the repeating (the discourse) that makes them “whole ones.”

Whole—but loose as opposed to firm. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein calls attention to the male comedian's use of misshapen or “misfit” clothes “later so well known on Charlie Chaplin,” clothes that “were all the delight of Picasso and all his friends” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 75)—i.e., Stein herself, well known for her own loose and flapping garb. We see here again the role of limpnesses or “flabby masses” in counteracting an oppressive System's fantasies of phallic virility: the clothes worn by Chaplin so admired by Stein are, of course, always falling down. Hence slackness becomes underscored by slacklessness. Stein's love of the wobbling heap or mushy mass similarly recalls the strange fascination with dough in Chaplin films. As if in anticipation of Oldenberg's soft and puffy typewriters and other machines, or Yayoi Kusama's squishy penis-shaped pillows covered with polka-dots, Chaplin shapes flabby substance into handcuffs and missiles (*Dough and Dynamite*, 1914). Perhaps to ask us to imagine: what might happen to the machine when the exaggeratedly obedient cog within it, while continuing to maintain its function, goes limp? As when the characters played by Chaplin or Keaton, continually in confrontation with the larger systems enclosing them, repeatedly fall into heaps? Here we might also imagine the incontinent Molloy, collapsed under his bicycle, or Murphy, overcome by the “total permutability” of his biscuit assortment (“edible in a hundred and twenty ways!”) (Beckett, *Murphy* 97).

In the tradition of Beckett and Stein, formulating a materialist poetic response to the “total permutability” of language is perhaps what is most at stake for poets like Farrell and Goldsmith, as well as visual artists like Zweig. For these postmodern practitioners, the staging of “accidental concretions,” as Constantin describes the comic character in farce

[Kierkegaard 163], strategically enables us to find new forms of “coherence” in an incoherent world—such as seen in Alice Notley's feminist epic poem, *The Descent of Alette* (1996):

“When the train” “goes under water” “the close tunnel” “is transparent” “Murky water” “full of papery” “full of shapelessness” “Some fish” “but also things” “Are they made by humans?” “Have no shape,” “like rags” “like soggy papers” “like frayed thrown-away wash cloths”... (16)

“There is a car” “that is nothing but” “garbage” “Shit & spittle” “dropped food” “frayed brownness” “dirty matter” “pressed down & flattened” “Paper piled” “piled on the floor” “heaped on the benches” “Napkins yellowed” “tampons bloody”... (17)

Each quoted phrase, in being presented as a citation, becomes “thick” and carries with it a behindness or prior context—creating a series of halts or delays in the narrative produced through their accumulation.³⁶ There's clearly nothing “accidental” about this concretion of language, yet the poem nevertheless seeks to look like one. For like the massive accumulations of “dirty matter” in Hamilton's installations, Stein's mushy masses, and the lumps formed by comic actors in their continual collapses and falls, such concretions challenge existing notions of form and aesthetic order. We can see how unsightly

³⁶ In the Author's Note to *The Descent of Alette*, Notley offers “A word about the quotation marks. People ask about them, in the beginning; in the process of reading the poem, they become comfortable with them, without necessarily thinking precisely about why they're there. But they're there, mostly, to measure the poem. The phrases they enclose are poetic feet. If I had simply left white spaces between the phrases, the phrases would be rushed by the reader—read too fast for my musical intention. The quotation marks make the reader slow down and silently articulate—not slur over mentally—the phrases at the pace, and with the stresses, I intend. They also distance the narrative from myself, the author: I am not Alette. Finally they may remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of thought-process, this a story, told” (n. pag.).

“heaping” offers what Stein might call a “little resistance” strategy for the postmodern subject, always already a linguistic being, hence always a small subject caught in large systems. For as Deleuze suggests,

There are two known ways to overturn moral law. One is by ascending towards the principles: challenging the law as secondary, derived, borrowed, or 'general'; denouncing it as involving a second-hand principle which diverts an original force or usurps an original power. The other way, by contrast, is to overturn the law by descending towards the consequences, to which one submits with a too-perfect attention to detail. By adopting the law, a falsely submissive soul manages to evade it and to taste pleasures it was supposed to forbid. We can see this in demonstration by absurdity and working to rule, but also in some forms of masochistic behaviour which mock by submission. (5)

This “too-perfect attention to detail” is the main strategy utilized by Notley, Goldsmith, and Farrell, all of whom exaggeratedly follow structural laws in their work; Farrell the days of the calendar (“Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...”), Goldsmith the mechanisms of the body (“Swallow. Arm lifts. Arm drops...”). It appears also the main strategy used by Stein's endlessly classifying and subdividing narrator in *Making of Americans*, as well as by the comic in farce. For as Deleuze also notes, while one can oppose the law by trying to ascend above it, one can also do so by means of humor, “which is an art of consequences and descents, of suspensions and falls” (5, my emphasis). Like other “falsely submissive souls” before them, some postmodern American poets follow this path in their confrontations with the systems encompassing them, formulating a stand-against by going limp or falling down, among the bits and scraps of linguistic matter.

Chapter Two

Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Females, and Other Bad Examples: Rethinking Gender and Envy

As in matters of the heart in general females are more susceptible to the passion than men.

—G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence* (1904)¹

Jealousy is, on several counts, more inexcusable in a woman than in a man.

—E.B. Duffy, *What Every Woman Should Know* (1873)²

Envy is concealed admiration. An admirer who sense that devotion cannot make him happy will choose to become envious of that which he admires. He will speak a different language, and in this language he will now declare that that which he really admires is a thing of no consequence, something foolish, illusory, perverse and high-flown. Admiration is happy self-abandon, envy, unhappy self-assertion.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Four Edifying Discourses* (1843)³

Why don't you look in the mirror ... huh? *Look*. You're in a different league—I know that. You have this great personality, you've got this great style, you run your own

¹ George Stanley Hall, *Adolescence* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904) 357. Cited in Peter Stearns, "Gender and Emotion," *Social Perspectives on Emotion Vol. 1.*, eds. David D. Franks and Viktor Gecas (Greenwich: JAI P, 1992) 127-160, 135.

² E.B. Duffy, *What Every Woman Should Know* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1873) n.pag. Cited in Stearns, 135.

³ Cited in Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior*, trans. Michael Glenny and Betty Ross (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966) 172.

business. You're always going to find somebody. You've got be stupid to think that you won't.

—Hedy Carlson to Allison Jones, *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992)

Though previously at the center of much feminist debate, today the notion of “penis envy” rings so antiquated it seems more deserving of ridicule than sustained analysis and critique. Yet this concept, formulated by Freud in 1914 as a structuring principle of gender differentiation and well-assimilated by popular culture today, remains something of a shibboleth to be reckoned with by feminist readers of psychoanalytic theory. Most critiques within feminism have been made from the standpoint that the concept entails a “characterization of feminine sexuality as deficiency,”⁴ a critique approaching “envy” as a quality of the *subject* who lacks, rather than the subject’s affective *response* to a social relation marked by an unequal distribution of property. While accurate in singling out a stereotypical attitude towards femaleness subtending the concept of “penis envy,” this critical tendency also points to an equally prevalent attitude towards “envy” itself; one which tends to perceive it as a subjective condition or attribute (“deficiency”), rather than a dynamic of recognition and antagonistic response. In a criticism of Gayatri Spivak’s invocation of the affect, for instance, in her critique of Kristeva’s “ethnocentric sense of

⁴ Cynthia Chase, “Desire and Identification in Lacan and Kristeva.” Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof, eds. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 65, fn. 2.

‘alienation’ at the sight of some Chinese women in Huxian Square”⁵ (a moment described by Kristeva in *Chinese Women*), Rey Chow writes,

While I agree with [the following] observation, I find Spivak’s formulation of these other women’s identity troubling: “Who is speaking here? An effort to answer that question might have revealed more about the mute women of Huxian Square, *looking with qualified envy* at the ‘incursion of the West’.” Doesn’t the word “envy” here remind us of that condition ascribed to women by Freud, against which feminists revolt—namely “penis envy”? “Envy” is the other side of the “violence” of which Fanon speaks as the fundamental part of the native’s formation. But both affects—the one of wanting to *have* what the other has; the other, of destroying the other so that one can *be* in his place—are affects produced by a patriarchal ideology that assumes that the other at the low side of the hierarchy of self/other is “lacking” (in the pejorative, undesirable sense) The fate of the native is then like that of Freud’s woman: Even though she will never have a penis, she will for the rest of her life be trapped within the longing for it and its substitutes. (32; original italics)

Chow’s discomfort with Spivak’s use of “envy” assumes that the term is being deployed in the same way it has been traditionally configured by patriarchal ideology: as a static sign of lack and deficiency, rather than as a motivated affective stance. Yet her paranthetical qualification of this deficiency (so it becomes lack “in the pejorative, undesirable sense”) points to the fact that there may be forms of lacking signaled by envy which are not necessarily pejorative, morally coded, or even subjective; that are in fact the consequences of objective factors such as political and economic disenfranchisement. By aligning the affect Spivak attributes to the peasant women’s gaze with “penis envy,” a particular situation of not-having, produced by a complex set of material relations inclusive of, *but not*

⁵ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*

limited to, “patriarchal ideology,” becomes disturbingly occluded, reduced to an illusion wholly circumscribable *within* (Western) patriarchal ideology.⁶ Moreover, by describing envy as the “other side” of hostility or violence, replacing an aggressive stance towards those who own property with a passive state of deficiency marked by “longing” (a desire *for* property), Chow like Kristeva seems to pass over what Spivak finds in the Huxian peasants’ silent stare at the French intellectual on tour; namely, antagonism. For insofar as it involves converting one’s *philic* relation to a thing desired to a *polemic* relation to the subject who possesses it, isn’t “envy” primarily an oppositional way of responding to a perceived inequality?—and moreover, the only negative affect defined specifically in terms of addressing it? (Anger, for instance, isn’t necessarily directed at inequality, though it does offer one way of responding to it). It thus seems more accurate to describe “envy” as a culturally codified way of actively and polemically signaling one’s acknowledgment of a social relation (say unequal ownership of the means of production), rather than a passive reflection of selfhood or subjective property.

Given envy’s potential to draw unenvious people into class conflict (Schoeck 172), then, (“Who does not envy with us is against us!” [172]), why is it that when we think of enviousness in our daily lives we tend to automatically assume it to be unwarranted or

(Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 31.

⁶ In a Derridean-inflected reading of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, Clayton Koelb suggests that feminized lack *itself* can be an object of envy. See “Castration Envy: Nietzsche and the Figure of Woman” in Peter Burgard, ed. *Nietzsche and the Feminine* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1994) 71-81.

petty? As purely imaginary or overreactive, even delusional and hysterical; a reflection of the subject/ego's condition rather than a trajectory directed outward? Unlike anger, another affective support or dimension of oppositional consciousness⁷ with the capacity to become "a legitimate weapon in social reform" (Schoeck 172), envy lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or pointing to inequality. Though the first affective response signals that the problem I am responding to is really there, verifying it to others, the latter suggests that it is solely in my imagination, or not significant enough to merit the nature of my response. Hence once it enters a public domain of signification one's envy will always seem unjustified, frustrated and effete—*regardless of whether the relation it points to is imaginary or not.*

As Rom Harré points out in an early social constructionist theory of affect, "Emotions are strategic. They play roles in forms of *action*."⁸ The fact that we tend to perceive envy as designating a particular quality of the subject, rather than as the means by which that subject actively recognizes and responds to a particular relation, suggests that

⁷ As Donna Haraway notes, Chela Sandoval theorizes 'oppositional consciousness' as a "hopeful new model of political identity...born of the skills for reading webs of power by those refused stable membership in the social categories of race, sex, or class. [...] Sandoval's oppositional consciousness is about contradictory locations...not about relativisms and pluralisms." Chela Sandoval, "Dis-Illusionment and the Poetry of the Future: The Making of Oppositional Consciousness," Ph.D qualifying essay, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1984. Cited in Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990) 197-8.

⁸ Rom Harré, "An Outline of the Social Constructionist Viewpoint" in Rom Harré, ed.

the dominant cultural attitude towards this affect converts its fundamentally allocentric orientation into an egocentric one, stripping it of its polemicism and rendering it merely a reflection of “deficient” and possibly histrionic selfhood. Socially uglified and thoroughly moralized, to the extent that it becomes fundamentally shameful or embarrassing to the subject who experiences it, envy also becomes stripped of its potential *critical* agency—as an ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially *real* or institutionalized forms of inequality.

It’s impossible to divorce the pervasive ignobility of this affect from its feminization—which may explain why the envious subject is so frequently suspected of being hysterical. As historian Peter Stearns has argued, while “jealousy was dramatically transformed into a female characteristic” in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century this feminization was accompanied by intensified social prohibition against the affect’s articulation—a prohibition, requiring self-policing and censorship, aimed specifically at women.⁹ Female subjects were thus “dispositioned” by envy in more than one way, since it confronted them with a set of paradoxical injunctions in conforming to the gender norm: that femininity entailed being “naturally” envious or jealousy-prone, but also never envious or jealousy-prone. Such disabling contradictions are, of course, an all-too familiar scenario in patriarchy; proliferating, circulating, and impacting on women across racial and economic divisions as “feminine standards” (normalizing ideals) are wont

The Social Construction of Emotions (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Books, 1986) 12, my italics.

to do. If by the twentieth century women were viewed, due to historical and cultural precedence, as “more susceptible” to the passion than men (according to the psychological expertise of George Stanley Hall), the same passion was increasingly viewed as “more inexcusable” in women than in men (according to E.B. Duffy’s prescriptive bestseller *What Every Woman Should Know*).¹⁰ In this sense, the feminine subject, positioned as an envious subject, in speaking of herself would be forced to speak (as Kierkegaard suggests) “a different language”; one involving a conscious appropriation of negation. Here, the articulation or declaration of one’s (gendered) subject position would depend on a not-saying for its full legitimization. In declaring myself feminine (implying that I am “naturally” envious), I *cannot* declare myself envious. Focusing on envy not just as the negative affect placing female subjects in this disjunctive position, but as a mode of negative or “unhappy” self-assertion (Kierkegaard), this essay examines how such rhetorical acts, organized and informed by a similarly emotive relationship between subjects and property (call it an “unhappy possessiveness”), contribute to—but also enable critical interrogation of—existing gender norms.

If the moralization and feminization of envy operate in conjunction to suppress its potential as a means of recognizing and aggressively responding to social inequalities, casting suspicion on the possible validity of such response and converting the subject’s oppositional agency into a pejorative reflection of petty selfhood, this should alert us to the

⁹ Stearns, *passim*.

possibility that such forms of negative affect tend to be stripped of their critical potential particularly when the impassioned subject is female. Envy's concomitant feminization and cultural devaluation thus points to a larger cultural anxiety over antagonistic responses to inequality made specifically by women. As we shall see in the next section, this anxiety over female antagonism within feminism comes to a particular head when concerning representations of antagonistic relations *between* women.

“Who Killed Feminist Criticism?”

It may seem like poor taste or judgment to use a reading of a film like *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) as a way of addressing issues of conflict in academic feminism today; particularly since the film has already undergone a vogue in critical response which has since long passed. For in its more or less blunt characterizations of an idealized femininity (white, middle-class, heterosexual) and a bad or threatening, working-class and putatively “lesbian” one, embodied respectively in the figures of Allison Jones (Bridget Fonda) and Hedra Carlson (Jennifer Jason Leigh), *Single White Female* inspired numerous feminist and queer critiques almost immediately upon reception, all of which “justly attack the film for its potent misogyny and homophobia,” and several for its attitudes towards class and race.¹¹ More recently, Karen Hollinger contextualizes

¹⁰ Stearns, 135.

Schroeder's film as part of a "major backlash" in response to the political conservatism of the 1980s and 1990s; a backlash she finds rendered visible in the popular re-emergence of the "manipulative female friendship film."¹² Grouping *Single White Female* with other mainstream American thrillers released the same year, such as *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992) and *Poison Ivy* (Kat Shea Ruben, 1992), Hollinger argues:

These films often rejuvenate antiquated stereotypical representations of female relationships from woman's films of the 1930s and 1940s. They represent women's friendships as plagued by jealousy, envy, and competition for men, and they teach women to beware of and fear one another. By focusing so strongly on conflicts between women, they obscure other issues related to women's position in society, relieve men of any responsibility for women's problems, and suggest, instead, that women should grant men primary importance in their lives because they are the only ones upon whom women can rely. (207)

Given that *Single White Female*'s plot turns on an initially happy domestic alliance between Allie and Hedy gradually becoming "conflicted" to the point that envious Hedy ends up (1) bludgeoning Allie's best friend and neighbor and leaving him for dead, (2) stabbing

¹¹ Ellen Brinks, "Who's Been In My Closet? Mimetic Identification and the Psychosis of Class Transvestitism in *Single White Female*," *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality*, eds. Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett and Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 3-12. Lynda Hart also comments on the film's reactionary attitudes toward race in "Race and Reproduction: *Single White Female*," *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 104-179. Hart's commentary on the film's racial ideologies usefully references Patricia Williams' critique of its segregationism. See Williams, "Attack of the 50-Ft. First Lady: The Demonization of the Hillary Clinton," *Village Voice*, January 26, 1993: 35-39. Cited in Hart, *passim*.

¹² Karen Hollinger, "Backlash: The Anti-Female Friendship Film." *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female friendship Films* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1998)

Allie's boyfriend through the eye with the heel of a stiletto pump, (3) murderously chasing Allie with a grappling hook, and (4) finally killed by her with a screwdriver in the back, it's hard not to agree with the assessment above.

But should "conflicts between women" *not* be focused on strongly, as Hollinger's statement also seems to imply? Even if the foregrounding of antagonism takes place at the exclusion of other issues (as any act of "focusing" necessarily entails), is such an emphasis in itself indicative of an anti-feminist agenda? One would hope not, given that "conflicts between women" are precisely what keep feminism—as a knowledge formation, critical praxis, and group dynamic—viable today. In the wariness it betrays, however, Hollinger's statement usefully points to the fact that the representation of female conflicts remains a particularly loaded issue for feminists—particularly since these antagonistic relationships usually gain greatest cultural visibility through hyperbolic, violent narratives fitting the paradigm above. There is a legitimate cause for fear, then, of female conflicts being subject to representational manipulation by feminism's outside; a fear reflected in Susan Gubar's reference to "a culture all too willing to exploit disagreements among women in a backlash against some or all of us" (880).

But how are polemic "conflicts between women" *within* feminism figured by feminists themselves? In the recent, important exchange between Gubar and Robyn Wiegman in *Critical Inquiry* 24–25 (1998),¹³ for example, itself a debate concerning the role

of polemic antagonism in academic feminism, murder gets invoked not just once, but twice—both times at the beginning of each critic’s essay. In both cases, the reference to violence is both immediate and apparently strategic, as if to provocatively induce the same “thrill” associated with the thriller genre. Originally called “Who Killed Feminist Criticism?,” Gubar’s “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” starts with an explanation of why she decided not to use the more graphic and accusatory title; while Wiegman begins her critical response to Gubar by invoking Amanda Cross’s *Murder Without a Text*, a mystery novel featuring “a seasoned feminist scholar bludgeoning a student to death.” Since both essays characterize the nature of the feminist disputes they discuss as fundamentally “generational,” and Wiegman’s text specifically addresses her previous relation to Gubar as student, it’s difficult not to read the latter’s invocation of the Cross story (older feminist kills younger feminist) as a canny way of reversing the roles of murderer and victim assigned in Gubar’s essay (younger feminists kill older feminism), as well as a way of foregrounding the *murderous* scene of “feminist betrayal” (Wiegman, 363) Gubar’s text calls forth only to immediately disavow. This culturally familiar narrative of generational violence and betrayal between women, however, invoked by both Gubar and Wiegman (though with ironic distance by the latter), recalls the plotline of *Single White Female*’s 1950 predecessor, *All About Eve*. For in utilizing violent and thriller-related motifs to dramatize generational disputes or “betrayals,” and in being framed by subsequent

¹³ Susan Gubar, “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” *Critical Inquiry* 24.4 (Summer 1998), 878–902. Robyn Wiegman, “What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion.” *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999), 362–379. See Susan Gubar, “Notations in *Medias Res*” in the same volume, 380–396, for her response to Wiegman.

commentators as a conflict between an older feminist and a younger feminist previously the student of the former, the Gubar-Wiegman debate does seem to mirror the plot of Joseph Mankiewicz's film, which depicts the antagonistic rivalry that develops between an older theater star (Bette Davis), and the younger woman (Anne Baxter) who begins as her admirer and "pupil." If the themes of envy and (in)gratitude in this film also remind some readers of Melanie Klein's eponymous 1957 essay¹⁴, in a letter defending Gubar and condemning Wiegman, Carolyn Heilbrun ("Amanda Cross" herself) reinforces the association—indeed, makes it hard to ignore—by describing the debate ("another battle in the war of generations") as a *mother/daughter* dispute: one ultimately explicable in terms of infantile aggression. As Heilbrun/Cross writes, "My initial astonishment at finding my story quoted in *Critical Inquiry* soon dwindled to dismay as I understood the rudeness offered to my [seasoned feminist scholar] character, Beatrice Sterling, was not far from the tone Professor Wiegman chose as appropriate for addressing Professor Gubar, who had fought early feminist academic battles when Professor Wiegman was at her mother's knee" (397); "Why Professor Wiegman agreed to answer Professor Gubar in such a mode is explicable...chiefly upon maternal principles" (398).¹⁵ In a statement ironically recalling (if not ultimately lending support to) Wiegman's criticism of Gubar's "first-wave"

¹⁴ I am referring of course to "Envy and Gratitude." See *The Writings of Melanie Klein Volume III: Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946-1963* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 176-235.

feminism, symbolically represented in Cross's Beatrice Sterling, as reducing race and class-based issues raised by younger feminists to "bad manners," Heilbrun's statement unfortunately results in reinforcing the notion of the former as genteel and obsessed with decorum.

Between Gubar's essay and Wiegman's, then, we have an accusation of allegorical "murder" by a seasoned feminist scholar, and the allegory of a seasoned feminist scholar who murders her accuser. In Heilbrun's response, these violent motifs get compounded by the introduction of two related themes: infantile rage and aggression towards a maternal object, envy and ingratitude. It thus becomes as difficult *not* to make an associative link between the Wiegman/Gubar debate and films like *All About Eve*, as it is to not find this association politically suspect. For the comparison itself seems to do what Hollinger finds *Single White Female* guilty of doing—i.e. "rejuvenate antiquated stereotypical representations of female relationships from woman's films of the 1930s and 1940s" (207). It does seem troubling that a debate foregrounding the centrality of the question of antagonism's proper role within feminism could be so readily made to fit an older, certainly pre-feminist, but also culturally pervasive narrative about female aggression that obviously still exerts its force today.

But aside from the fact that both key players in the debate use violence *themselves* as a way of framing their arguments (Wiegman self-consciously, Gubar through a form of disavowal), is there something necessarily wrong with women using metaphorical violence, even "murderous desire," as a way of critically discussing conflicts between

¹⁵ Carolyn Heilbrun, "Letter to the Editor." *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999), 397-400.

women? While images of “murderous desire” can obviously be used to distort and exploit disagreements between feminists from feminism’s outside, doesn’t the Wiegman/Gubar debate also demonstrate that such images can also be imaginatively and provocatively used—that there are in fact strong, politically-motivated motivations *for* using them—to address such disagreements from within? Here it’s worth noting that while Gubar is willing to figuratively *invoke* aggression to make her argument, as well as participate in the kind of aggressivity specific to accusations and blame (“*who* did this?”), she pinpoints this aggressivity in other critics (mostly those of color) as the cause of feminism’s demise; thus finding bell hooks’ “*curiously condemnatory vocabulary*” (888), “[Hazel] Carby’s *hostility*” (889), and “the *aggression...surfacing* in Spivak’s competing for perceptual supremacy over First World feminist critics” (893) equally culpable (my italics). Ironically, Gubar’s complaint against such instances of polemical antagonism actually confirms its *necessity* for the enterprise of feminist critique, insofar as her complaint itself depends on the rhetorical mode of accusation for its articulation. Thus instead of simply reformulating the question, who or what is responsible for conflicts within feminism?, we might consider a new one: to what extent do homosocial group formations such as “feminism” rely on antagonism and its associated images, metaphors, and paradigms of aggression? With its hyperbolic use of violence, then, in depicting conflicts between women, perhaps *Single White Female* does have something to offer in this regard—particularly since this violence becomes most concentrated in the film’s main narrative event: the uneasy transition from “single” femaleness to a dual or compounded version of gendered identity. It is precisely this

transition—one *motivated* and *facilitated* by aggression—that the film becomes ultimately “about”—the site and stake of the female-female struggle on which its plot depends.

Is it not also precisely with a transition from singular to compound subjects that the process of group formation necessarily begins? Since the question of how collective identity is constituted and sustained becomes central in the Gubar/Wiegman debate, it should be noted that one useful thing Gubar’s essay does accomplish is remind us of the political *necessity* of “groupness” to feminism (though her idea of what counts as such remains a source of contention). As a politicized discourse or mode of critique, feminism implies and *requires* group-affiliated subjects for its agency, which is to say what seems obvious: the subject of feminism cannot be a singular one. Thus feminists have frequently called for abandoning a fixed, determined concept of “femaleness” grounded in fantasies of unitary selfhood (the female self as produced by and existing outside social relations and their contingencies), for an understanding of femaleness perhaps more like a “structure of feeling” or “social experience in solution” (SF 135)¹⁶; based on the subject’s often shifting position within a network of relations, including ties to other women. Always already in relation, the subject of feminism is in this sense always compounded. But while group formation depends on the transition from singular to compound subjects, it is a rhetorical enactment of this very transition which Gubar finds troubling in the prose style of Judith

¹⁶ As noted in my Introduction, Raymond Williams’s concept of “structures of feeling” describes social relations distinguished from “the *reduced* senses of the social as the institutional and the formal,” and in terms of “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt.” See *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 128–135.

Butler. Leading to “mistakes in agreement,” this shift becomes construed as symptomatic of a fundamental incompatibility between feminism and poststructuralism—a discourse Gubar finds complicit, along or even in confederation with racial and postcolonial theory, in “sidelining” “the first three stages” of feminist criticism and “marginalizing” the aesthetic. Here the problem is not with the subject of feminism’s emotional attitude, as in Gubar’s psychological critique of the latter as “aggressive,” but with the subject’s *discursive* status, as “compounded.” As Gubar writes,

One especially revealing feature of Butler’s style is the preponderance of subject-verb disagreements. I want to speculate that this penchant, by reflecting the difficulty of sustaining a Foucauldian critique of the singular self and the biological body, reveals the tensions continually at play in efforts to combine poststructuralism with feminism. Since my argument depends on a pattern of mistakes in agreement, I will cite ... examples here from *Gender Trouble* [...]:

The *totality* and *closure* of language is both presumed and contested within structuralism. [GT, p. 40]

The division and exchange between this “being” and “having” the Phallus is established by the Symbolic, the paternal law. [GT, p. 45]

[...]

Note how prone Butler’s prose is to a compound subject with a singular form of verbs that eschew action and instead denote a condition or stipulate a mode of existence. Her dual subjects often involve not persons but abstractions, which are treated as if they have combined in her mind into a single force that therefore requires the singular verb. (896–897, Gubar’s italics)

Interestingly, while the critique aimed at women of color is primarily psychological, the critique aimed at the poststructuralist is grammatical: the problem here is not with “hostility,” but with a situation in which dual or compound subjects are combined “into a single force that therefore requires the singular verb.” According to Gubar, this misuse of compound subjects “bespeaks a quandary, for it demonstrates how often the most

vigilantly antitotalizing theorist of poststructuralism relies on *stubborn patterns of totalization* (two treated as one)” (898, my emphasis).

In a reversal of her critique of hooks, Carby, and Spivak, which pits universality against particularization, here Gubar seems to be eagerly playing the particular against what she construes as the universal in a not particularly useful way. Aside from the fact that the statement above drastically elides the substantial difference between “totalization” and the treatment of two abstract qualities as one (as seems fitting when such qualities are acted upon or engender effects in tandem), isn’t the “combining” of dual or multiple subjects into “a single force” or agency precisely the way in which group alliances (even antagonistic or uneasy ones such as “feminism”) are formed? If such a transition “bespeaks a quandary,” perhaps what Gubar’s complaint about Butler’s grammatical enactment of the transition bespeaks is an uneasiness over the “compound subject” in general. Since Gubar’s argument collectively links poststructuralism and ethnic studies as complicit *together* in causing the demise of feminist criticism (thus, as Wiegman notes, “creating a confederacy among knowledge formations that are not often seen as collaborative culprits” [368]), one might also ask how the *discursive* threat of the paradoxically doubled-yet-single subject, associated with the poststructuralist feminists, relates to the *psychological* threat of female aggression associated with feminists of color. In other words, what is the relationship between aggression and the grammar of compounded or de-singled subjects?; between the subject of emotion and the subject of language? What makes this notion of feminism’s subject as a compound, multiplied or non-singular one, seem threatening?—as threatening as an explicit show of “hostility”? Oddly enough, these questions are ones

which *Single White Female* directly addresses. But to see how requires some initial working-through of the terms in which the film's dynamics of aggression and compounding are most frequently conceived.

Single White Female Seeks...Same?

It's perhaps easiest to summarize *Single White Female* as a story about the violent production, but also destruction, of non-singular female subjectivity—in both cases *by means of* antagonism or aggression between women. In other words, the film essentially dramatizes the emergence of the “compound” female subject, while depicting the emergence itself as an emergency, or cause for alarm; both dangerous and unstable. Because this central aspect of the movie, based on John Lutz's novel *SWF Seeks Same*, turns on Hedy's (1) emulation of Allie in manner and appearance and (2) intense emotional attachment to her, with these two operations closely linked and similarly pathologized, readings of the film have continued a line of psychoanalytically-informed inquiry, developed and elaborated by critics such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Teresa de Lauretis, and Kaja Silverman, into the complex relationship between identification and desire. The role of this relationship in the production of gendered and sexed modes of spectatorship became the predominant issue of feminist film theory in the 70s and 80s. Thus, like popular “woman's films” foregrounding extremely close but troubled female attachments, such as *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950), and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Ronald Neame 1968), *Single White Female* has

made its way into ongoing debates concerning the relationship between “wanting-to-be” and “wanting-to-have,” as primary in constituting sexual and gender norms. Tracing the history and development of these arguments, often in close and detailed response to one another, is beyond the ambition of this essay. One key issue raised, however, particularly in addressing representations of close but problematic female relationships in mainstream film, has been the dangers of conflating the two dynamics (as Teresa de Lauretis warns in her study of *All About Eve* and Susan Seidelman’s *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), since this leads to mistaking “homosocial, i.e. woman-identified bonding” for lesbian sexuality¹⁷), as well as those of too-rigidly separating them (as Jackie Stacey argues in an assessment of the same two films¹⁸). Thus Scott Paulin suggests, “Perhaps identification and desire are ‘not to be confused’ in that they cannot occupy the same moment in time, but surely an oscillation between the terms is possible, just as a film spectator can be encouraged to oscillate between identification and desire for a character, regardless of gender. At the very least, whether this situation has a counterpart in ‘reality,’ films like *All*

¹⁷ Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 120. Blakely Vermeule makes a similar argument, also through a reading of *All About Eve*. See “Is there a Sedgwick School for Girls?” in *Qui Parle* 5.1 (1991) 53–72.

¹⁸ Jackie Stacey, “Desperately Seeking Difference.” *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 244–257.

About Eve and *Single White Female* fantasize a space in which such oscillation can and does occur.”¹⁹

My intention is not to shift attention from the desire/identification dialectic *per se* (obviously a crucial site of inquiry for intersectional analyses of gender and sexuality), but rather to suggest that its dominance in the critical discourse surrounding “films like *All About Eve* and *Single White Female*”—films foregrounding the subject of unhappy or *negative* bonds between women—often limits other ways, feminist and/or psychoanalytic, in which they might be read.²⁰ For an almost exclusive focus on these poles tends to produce a reading that overlooks or underestimates, hence potentially neutralizes, the importance of antagonism in these alliances. As a dynamic which is in itself neither reducible to desire or identification (though desire and identification may inform it), antagonism, or aggressive conflict, is emphasized as the relation of *primary narrative significance* between women in these films. Though psychoanalytic theory makes it easy to imagine how one might simultaneously desire and bear aggression toward an object, identify with one’s aggressor, or (easiest of all to imagine, from a classic Oedipal

¹⁹ Scott Paulin, “Sex and the Singled Girl: Queer Representation and Containment in *Single White Female*.” *Camera Obscura* 37 (1996) 52.

²⁰ For examples of the focus on identification vs. desire in treatments of such films, see also Rhona J. Berenstein, “‘I’m not the sort of person men marry’: Monsters, Queers and Rebecca” in *Out in Culture*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 239–261; Mary Ann Doane, “*Caught and Rebecca*: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence,” *enclitic* 5.2 (Fall 1981): 75–89; and Janet Harbord, “Between Identification

perspective) be in an antagonistic relation with someone one identifies with, the terms are not conflatable: antagonism in itself is not identification, nor is it a sub-species or type of desire. We can find precedence for an insistence on this separation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which Freud clearly establishes aggressivity as the manifestation of an independent drive, parallel rather than secondary to sexual instincts, and confers on it a distinct name. Whether or not one assumes a viewpoint approaching antagonism as some primordial psychic force, a view which risks naturalizing this dynamic into an entity existing apart from any particular social relation (though see de Lauretis' "The Stubborn Drive" for the persuasive argument that Freud's concept of innate drives [*Trieb*] actually undermines the opposition between constructionism and essentialism),²¹ what makes the postwar Freud so fascinating is rather that this dynamic, primal or not, is repositated as *primary* (on equal standing with the sexual) in the process of subject formation—hence preparing the way for Klein's insistently negative theories of constitutional aggression and infantile envy.²² It's worth noting here that this reformulation of aggression as a separate phenomenon, irreducible to sexuality, enables Freud to introduce one of his few accounts of

and Desire: Rereading *Rebecca*," *Feminist Review* 52, (Summer 1996): 95-107.

²¹ Teresa de Lauretis, "The Stubborn Drive." *Critical Inquiry* 24.4 (Summer 1998). 851-877. See also p. 21, fn. 20 in this volume.

²² On Klein as "[h]igh priestess of psychic negativity" (128), see Jacqueline Rose, "Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein in *Reading Melanie Klein*, eds. John Phillips and Lyndsey Stonebridge (London: Routledge, 1998), 126-159. See also Rose, *Why War?—Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

subject formation in which the subject is not necessarily marked by, nor entirely produced in, gender differentiation. Wariness, then, of a critical tendency to treat antagonism as merely a vicissitude or side effect of desire/identification, particularly in assessments of the explicitly rivalrous female relationships represented in the subgenre identified by “films like *All About Eve* and *Single White Female*,” is one of two motivations for my shifting a discussion of the more recent film (which, as Ellen Brinks has pointed out, is very much a “double” of the older one) from these conceptual poles. Thus in examining the means by which public fantasies, such as cinematic ones, structure uneasy attachments between women, my approach is not to focus on desire and identification as the *primary* psychic functions informing this kind of relation, but rather to consider how these phantasmatic processes work when inscribed within the discursive logics of *envy* and *emulation*. In this sense, my focus is also *not* “not on desire and identification,” since it is neither useful nor possible to understand envy and emulation apart from these processes.

My second motivation for articulating some form of break, however, is to point out another tendency frequently accompanying readings pivoting on the former binary; namely, *the conflation of emulation with identification*.²³ Thus what Ellen Brinks accurately describes as Hedy’s “mimetic performance,” in which she “gradually transforms her

²³ Identification is conflated with “mimetology” or mimesis, for instance, in Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen’s and Ruth Leys’ readings of Freud and Morton Prince. Mikkel Borch-Jacobson, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988). Ruth Leys, “The Real Miss Beauchamp: Gender and the Subject of Imitation,” *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992) 167–214.

appearance and manner, assuming an identity difficult to differentiate from her roommate's," is renamed "*Mimetic Identification*" in her essay's title. As Brinks writes, "For Hedy, 'to look like' is a way 'to become'... Instead of the purely acquisitive desire *to have* the clothing or the man that Allie possess or enjoys (something which would assume an already constituted *subject* who desires some *thing* or *object*, Hedy 'does the double' in order to create a subjective identity for herself. She desires *to be*, *to be like*, or *to become* Allie" (3, original emphases). Here the attempt to copy or "double" Y is explicitly equated with the attempt to be Y, with the agency of these attempts attributed to some unfinished (not "already constituted") subject X. Similarly, Scott Paulin uses the fact of Hedy actively copying Allie's "look" (though this look is one she identifies as not entirely specific to Allie, but a mass-produced, middle-class urban one: "Where did *you guys* learn to dress like that? I mean, it's just so 'New York'") as basis for claiming, "It is clear that Hedy identifies with Alli [*sic*] as an ideal, that she envies her and 'wants to be her'" (51).

As a mode of admiration that takes the active form of *striving towards* an ideal or idealized object, emulation in *Single White Female* is depicted as this striving-towards gone awry; displaced or rerouted, as it were, from object to subject. This rerouting coincides with a shift in affectivity, so that the act of striving-towards changes in moral value as well as emotional key. *Female* emulation in particular (one woman's emulation of another woman) is constructed as an unstable mode of admiration that easily transforms itself into aggression; or more specifically, as a mimetic behavior that *initiates a trajectory*: from reverence of an ideal, to full-blown antagonism towards the subject embodying that ideal. We can thus see the logic underlying the popular psychological view that takes emulation

to be a process that naturally subtends envy—a cultural idiom that *Single White Female* will make use of in order to feminize, moralize and pathologize both behaviors through the ideological contradiction it enables. This contradiction involves positioning Allie as the embodiment of a feminine ideal whose admiration (by Hedy or other women) is to be expected, even mandated, yet shows that any active attempt of striving towards it to be fundamentally corrupt and corrupting. Hence Hedy's attempts to emulate Allie are perceived by her as a threat, and diegetically structured for spectators as a kind of “warning sign”; that through it a pathway from reverent fascination to aggression is being inaugurated. In *All About Eve*, such a trajectory is ironically foreshadowed in the two sides of Margot's response to Eve's emulation. When Birdie points out, “She's studying you—like you was a book, or a play, or a set of blueprints—how you walk, talk, eat, think, sleep,” Margot replies, “I'm sure that's very *flattering*, Birdie [i.e. deferential, an act of homage] and I'm sure there's *nothing wrong with it* [i.e. hostile, aggressive].”) Since in *Single White Female*, emulation is explicitly posited as the act that facilitates this anticipated transition (from deference to enmity), Allie's growing distrust of and “disturbance” by Hedy begins when she discovers its signs—all of which involve acts of “appropriation,” or progressively forceful claims to property: Hedy's unasked borrowing of her clothes, replicates of her own clothing in Hedy's closet, Hedy's change of hair color and style to match her own, her stolen letters hoarded in Hedy's own shoebox of personal momentos.

According to the film's narrative logic, then, Hedy's emulation of Allie is an accurate indication that she “envies her”; and that this mimetic performance is enabled

through, if not synonymous with, a process of acquisition. But is it *equally* synonymous with, as Brinks and Paulin claim, a process of identification? Given the variety of circumstances in which it might occur, it seems incontrovertible that emulating someone does not *necessarily* entail that one wishes to *be* that someone, nor even that one fantasizes approximating the symbolic position he or she occupies (in order to enjoy the social privileges that site offers). In fact, it seems fairly easy to imagine antagonistic situations in which emulation is performed for reasons entirely other than a wish for equality or adequation; here one emulates the other in order to overtake or eclipse him, even “dispossess” him by claiming exclusive recognition for the attributes that define him. Instead of being a form of altering one’s self in *deference* to another, emulation can thus be a form of aggressive *self-assertion*: performed solely for the hostile purposes of causing the other anxiety or distress, to “spoil” him by rendering his own self-identity unstable, even to destroy him. In Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1960), Judy’s second assumption of the role of Madeleine (under direct pressure from Scottie), provides an example of how emulation can also be performed *reluctantly* or ambivalently, without genuine desire for adequation with the subject being emulated, or complete willingness to alter one’s own identity according to the other’s model. (Judy might be said to “fake” identification, then, in more ways than one). Thus emulation in more aggressive forms of parody (such as politically-motivated ones, including satire and cultural mimicry) often works to produce the exact opposite of identification: to make manifest an incongruity or disjunction, to forcefully assert one’s *difference* from that which one emulates. Similarly, by foregrounding the antagonism between Hedy and Allie (which hyperbolically escalates into murderous violence), *Single*

White Female calls attention to the fact that Hedy's acts of emulation actually work *against* prior, "phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty [and] cohabitation" (105) or "sympathetic connections" (100), as Judith Butler describes identifications;²⁴ moreover, that her "copying" is precisely what enables her to produce the disjunction between itself and the latter, since it directly facilitates the *transition* from philic "striving-towards" to a phobic "striving-against." Surely the film *insists* on disjoining emulation from identification; why, then, the tendency to equate them? Or treat the former as direct evidence of the latter's efficaciousness?

"Group Psychology" and Freud's Exemplary Females

If *Single White Female* lends unlikely insight into the question of how aggression relates to the production of "compound subjects," which in turn carries implications for feminism (where "feminism" connotes a group dynamic *based on* critical practice), at stake in re-examining the film is a reinvestigation of the convergence of psychic and social domains. As Freud's attempt to "contribute toward the explanation of the libidinal structure of groups" (79) or theorize the emergence of what he calls communal or "group feeling" (i.e. social affect; "the social" *as* affect or something "actively lived and felt"), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) becomes an important text in this

²⁴ Judith Butler, "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex." *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 93-119.

regard.²⁵ And as Diana Fuss notes, Chapter VII of *Group Psychology* is where Freud “first begins to systematize the complicated relation between identification and object-choice in the formation of the sexed subject,”²⁶ formalizing the concepts on which major debates in feminist film theory have been based.²⁷ The tendency in psychoanalytically-informed film

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Bantam Books, 1965).

²⁶ Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 67.

²⁷ Significantly, it is this chapter where Freud also advances his notorious theory of homosexuality as narcissistic identification; defining the former as object-choice having “regressed” to the latter (48). Unfortunately, this theory often becomes inadvertently replicated by *anti*-homophobic critics in their readings of *SWF*, who in their eagerness to construe Hedy as a lesbian—since this readily enables critique of her negative representation *as such*—do so primarily on the basis of Freud’s reductive and erroneous equation; using what seems to be Hedy’s mimetic “love of the same” as evidence of sexual orientation. Thus Hart’s characterization of Hedy as “seeking the same; indeed she is seeking the self-identical” (115) occurs in tandem with her characterization of Hedy as a “pathological ‘lesbian’ ” (114) who “effects a disruption of Allie’s heterosexuality” (117). The tendency to conflate copying and identification seems to often subtend this equation (“seeking same” = “lesbian”), which is one of my other motivations for questioning it. As Tim Dean notes, “The troubling reduction of homosexuality to narcissism (for which Freud must be held primarily responsible)” is discussed in detail by Michael Warner in “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality,” *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York: Routledge, 1990) 190–206. “Warner argues that Lacan’s conception of alterity reinforces the homophobic assumption that homosexuality is nothing more than narcissism, love of the same, and that therefore homosexuality is inimical to the recognition of difference.” Tim Dean, “Two Kinds of Other and Their Consequences,” *Critical Inquiry* 23.4 (Summer 1997) 919 fn.9. Sharing de Lauretis’ concerns about the conflation of affective bonds with sexual drives, I would also question why it is that, even if one does take Hedy to be connotatively figured as lesbian (Hart, Brinks), one tends to assume that *because* she is a lesbian, her relationship to *Allie* is a lesbian one—my sense is that it is clearly not.

criticism towards confusion between copying and “identification” (psychic affiliation, affective connection, “phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty [and] cohabitation”) makes sense to a degree if one takes a closer look at the slipperiness in Freud’s own account of the identification in this text; a slipperiness that in fact makes the confusion possible particularly when it pertains to female subjects.

If one’s identification with another is, as Freud defines it in the first five paragraphs of “Identification” based on the boy’s relation to his father prior to the Oedipal complex, a *fantasy or wish* to be like him, or replace him in his role with respect to another, emulation would seem to be the means by which identifications are *pursued*, rather than *established*. In either case, the former must clearly be a process separate from the identification itself; this being, as Butler reminds us, a *phantasmatic trajectory*—not an actual *event* said to taken place (105). Copying or imitating is not equivalent to “wishing”; the difference is between the way an already existing fantasy might be enacted or manifested, and the psychic process by which the fantasy is formed to begin with. Here it should be stressed, however, that in this basic definition of identification (as a phantasmatic connection between boy and father), Freud makes no reference to emulation whatsoever. At this point, then, there can be no possible confusion between the two; not just because Freud’s insistence on the imaginary nature of identification logically implies its ontological distinction from emulation—which *does* have the status of a performed action or “event”—but because the latter simply isn’t mentioned as a factor. So far, identification is only defined in terms of one male’s psychic investment or “special interest” in another: as an “emotional tie” to the father that takes the form of a wish or fantasy about him.

But a slipperiness between the two dynamics enters Freud's account of identification once he tries to detach it from the normative boy-father configuration where it first gets isolated and exemplified, and develop his initial formulation by analyzing identification "as it occurs in the structure of a neurotic symptom" in *girls and women*. We can locate the moment of transition in the last sentence of the following, frequently-cited paragraph:

It is easy to state in a formula the distinction between an identification with the father and the choice of the father as an object. In the first case the father is what one would like to *be*, and in the second he is what one would like to *have*. The distinction, that is, depends upon whether the tie attaches to the subject or to the object of the ego. The former kind of tie is therefore already possible before any sexual object-choice can be made. It is much more difficult to give a clear metapsychological representation of the distinction. We can only see that identification endeavors *to mold a person's own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model*. (47; italics in last sentence mine.)

Molding one's own ego "after the fashion" of another as model, an act of transforming the self by example, *does* sound like an act of emulation—and very much like a description of Hedy's behavior towards Allie. And in introducing this new dynamic, Freud immediately links it to (even inscribes it within) the psychic process of identification, describing the event of "ego-molding" as its very aim or goal. Here it becomes easy to understand why critical theories derived from the Freudian concept tend to conflate the purely *imaginary* act of "wishing to be" (which, as Butler reminds us, "never can be said to have taken place; identification does not belong to the world of events" [105]) with the highly realizable event of mimetic self-transformation; in the sentence above, Freud practically conflates the two himself. However, even in this expanded concept of identification, emulation

(copying an other, reshaping oneself after their fashion) is *still* not reducible to the original *fantasy* of being the idealized other, even though it now comes extremely close—construed as both an *objective* of this wishing (what it directly seeks or “endeavors”), as well as a means by which its other objectives (replacing the other in his relation to a third party, for instance) might be achieved.²⁸

However close it comes to doing so, then, the last statement in the paragraph above does not render emulation entirely synonymous with identification; in fact, it could be said to maintain the difficulty of equating these terms precisely through the proximity it establishes between them (much as acts of assimilation, and fantasies of becoming an ideal, are apt to do themselves). It’s important to recognize, however, that the sentence marks a logical jump in the paragraph that contrasts significantly with the methodical, step-by-step progression of arguments preceding it. This leap consists in the fact that Freud’s sentence

²⁸ Rather, here emulation seems simply *assimilated* to or *incorporated* within the psychic process of identification. As critics involved in race and gender studies can attest, however, being sensitized to how acts of assimilation function in social and political arenas, the incorporation of X into larger entity Y does not necessarily result in a neutralization of the distinction between them; rather, it often reinforces it. As Laplanche and Pontalis note, “assimilation” and “incorporation” are themselves viewed as modalities or prototypes of identification by Freud—who in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) insisted on the irreducible *difference* between emulating and identifying: “Identification is not simple imitation but *assimilation* on the basis of a similar aetiological pretension.” It could thus be said that Freud “*identifies*” emulation with identification—but just as in the case of the boy who wishes to be (i.e. identifies himself with) his father, the two terms, like “boy” and “father,” remain discrete entities. Similarly, in the metaphor of oral ingestion which Freud uses to illustrate this relation, the subject who eats or devours an object, though ultimately to annihilate it, remains ontologically separate from the substrate taken in. See J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973) 207.

introduces an entirely new and distinct phenomenon, only to immediately assimilate it to a previously defined one. This happens so rapidly, however, that no explanation is given for *why* the previous formulation (which defines identification as a *fantasy* about an *other*) should be expanded to include the *self's actual* transformation as its particular objective. Here it should be noted that though the beginning of the paragraph posits the ego/subject (boy) as grammatical subject, i.e. source or agent of his identification, in the last sentence “identification” becomes the grammatical subject of an action aiming toward the ego’s transformation. We thus cross over from a purely phantasmatic, imaginary register to a world of physical structures and events; from the ego’s potential to fantasize, to a fantasy’s potential to structurally alter the ego. Though the sentence does not fully equate identification with emulation, the strategic function it does perform is to make it *possible* to *confuse* identification with emulation, and in doing so, *make it possible to subsume achievable acts or events within the structure of fantasy*. Before considering the implications of this, it’s crucial to recognize the context in which this maneuver gets made—and the way it marks an important rhetorical shift in the essay as a whole.

The confusions the sentence introduces have much to do with the fact that, like sentences placed at the end of paragraphs in expository essays often do (see my own above), it works less as a logical extension of the remarks preceding it, and more as an proleptic introduction to the subject matter of the paragraph that follows. Whereas the first paragraph only discusses identification in purely phantasmatic terms of a boy *wishing* to be his father (no mention of actual mimetic behavior here), the latter immediately introduces the observable event of a girl imitating her mother’s cough—visibly behaving

“after the fashion” of her mother as model. Thus the proposition in this last sentence, insofar as it implies an actual inducement to imitation by example, “belongs” more to the second paragraph than the first which it concludes. Here it is again:

It is easy to state in a formula the distinction between an identification with the father and the choice of the father as an object. In the first case the father is what one would like to *be*, and in the second he is what one would like to *have*. The distinction, that is, depends upon whether the tie attaches to the subject or to the object of the ego. The former kind of tie is therefore already possible before any sexual object-choice can be made. It is much more difficult to give a clear metapsychological representation of the distinction. We can only see that identification endeavors to mold a person’s own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model.

Let us now disentangle identification as it occurs in the structure of a neurotic symptom from its rather complicated connections. Supposing that a little girl (and we will keep to her for the present) develops the same painful symptom as her mother—for instance, the same tormenting cough.

Rather than directly addressing or attempting to answer the questions raised in the paragraph in which it is positioned (concerning the distinction between object-choice and identification), the last sentence’s rhetorical function is primarily to anticipate or prepare us for the paragraph coming after—which deliberately diverts focus from the “difficult” relation between *fantasies* of being and *fantasies* of having, produced in the imagination of the boy, to the observable, more empirical behavior of female subjects: from the hypothetical little girl’s replication of her mother’s cough, to Dora’s “imitation” of her father’s. Thus the sentence also marks the *termination* of the male-male relation as conceptual paradigm for Freud’s theory; from this point on, all of his theoretical “sources” consist of relations involving women: the coughing girl, Dora’s mimicry, the jealousy outbreak at the boarding school, and a “genesis of male homosexuality” based on maternal

fixation. In this manner, what is most significant about Freud's introduction of emulation into the discussion of identification is its location in the essay as a whole. Occurring where it does—a sentence pivotal in more ways than one—it enables Freud to make a crucial transition: namely, relocate the basis of his definition from a generalized account of normative human development (“typically masculine,” heterosexual subjectivity [46]), to particular instances of *neurosis* in girls, women, and homosexual men (productions of hysterical “feminine” subjectivity). The shift from *imaginary fantasies of being* to *observable acts of copying* in Freud's theory of identification thus coincides with a shift from normative to *neurotic*, boys to *girls*, general to *particular*, definition to *example*, and “typically masculine” to feminizing relations; which establishes an alignment of terms revealing a hierarchical logic not unsurprising to feminist critics of Freud. As evinced in the re-delegation of grammatical agency undergone in the sentence enabling this transition, the change in the gender of Freud's exempla *also* occurs in tandem with a move away from the use of ingestion as dominant metaphor for identification, to that of infection; a turn which, as Fuss notes in an excellent close reading of the same chapter, involves switching from “an *active* subject's conservation of the object of its idealization,” to “a *passive* subject's infiltration by an object not of its choosing” (41, my emphasis).

Once Freud resituates his theory in a specifically feminine register, identification and emulation (“copying,” or “imitation”) immediately become interchangeable. Beginning in the second paragraph quoted above, Freud continues to use one as a synonym or substitute for the other; hence when speaking of “the identification” in the case of the heterosexual girl who copies her mother's cough, the phenomenon he refers to is precisely

that of the replicated symptom—*not*, as one might expect from his previous discussion of the boy's identification with his father, a separate and distinct act of fantasizing.

Phantasmatic operation and mimetic behavior are further collapsed in Freud's second female "source" (49), which comes from his failed analysis of Dora (the patient, most will recall, who loved Frau K.) In a much criticized account of how object-choice "regresses" to identification based on Dora's imitation of her father's cough, Freud uses her mimetic transformation itself as evidence of this regression: "Where there is repression and where the mechanisms of the unconscious are dominant, object-choice is turned back into identification—the *ego assumes the characteristics of the object*" (48, my emphasis).

As it becomes increasingly theorized within a world of feminine subjects and feminizing relationships, identification becomes increasingly depicted as a mode of fantasizing that not only strives toward but assimilates, even *assumes the characteristics of* observable, *non-phantasmatic* events—events that can be said to happen. Once femininity rather than masculinity is at stake, in other words, Freud's text inadvertently *encourages* its reader to view what Butler emphasizes as the "phantasmatic *staging of an event*" (identification proper) and an *achievable* event (mimetic self-transformation) as overlapping. And as Freud moves through his "sources," the ontological distinction between wishing and acting, identifying and imitating (which seemed fairly obvious in the case of the boy), is further and further reduced to a point at which no real separation exists between them. The further Freud locates his theory away from the original paradigm of male heterosexuality, in other words, the easier it becomes to equate identification with mimeticism. Thus by the time we reach the fourth example, one of "the genesis of male

homosexuality,” things have become “transformed” indeed: “Things have taken a sudden turn: the young man does not abandon his mother [at the onset of adult sexuality], but identifies with her; *he transforms himself into her*, and now looks about for objects which can replace his ego for him, and on which he can bestow such love and care as he has experienced from this mother” (50, my italics). Identification itself—a phantasmatic trajectory initially allocentric, or directed towards the *other*—is now the direct agent of a egocentric trajectory whose destination is the *self*: “identification...*remolds the ego*” (51).

The increased proximity between identification and mimetic acts of self-transformation, which we can now see coincides with a shift in the gender of Freud’s examples (moving from “typically masculine” attitudes and behaviors to “feminizing” ones), thus *also* strategically coincides with an increase in the exemplarity—or exemplificatory effects—of these very examples. In other words, once Freud turns to feminine cases for theoretical sources (cases involving female subjects as well as “feminizing” relationships), the proximity between identification and mimesis increases because the ‘examples’ *in* these examples (the ideals or models providing the “fashion” after which the ego molds itself) *increase in their exemplariness*—that is, *their capacity to encourage or induce imitation*.²⁹ The more “feminine” the example, the more exemplary the example. As if “femininity” itself were *a hyperbolic mode of exemplarity*? Or: structured like an example?

²⁹ Fuss, 42.

The logic underlying Freud's own deployment of examples thus suggests that in the case of social relationships involving women, not only is identification more closely bound up with emulation than in male-male configurations, but that the subjects involved have a closer relationship to exemplarity in general. An extension of this logic implies that to become *feminine*—i.e. acquiring a particular kind of subjectivity through identifications with female others—is to become an *exemplary* example; always actively inducing imitation in others, while at the same time already itself a kind of imitation—something that appears “after the fashion” of a previously established model, that reflects or refers back to it. Thus Richardson's *Clarissa*, put in the position of having to be “an example *to her sex*,” becomes most of all an example *of exemplarity*—of the inducement to imitation itself; her status as such evinced in the phenomenon of thousands of 18th-century parents naming their daughters after the novel's protagonist. It could be said that in “Identification,” Freud's exemplification of femininity (that category produced precisely through identifications in which the phantasmatic trajectory toward the other *becomes indistinguishable* from the event of mimetic self-transformation) induces *the feminization of exemplarity*.

Gender becomes discursive; a discursive function becomes gendered. Suggested by Freud's own sequencing of examples, this implicit correlation between femininity and exemplarity is reinforced through a mutual principle of transmissibility; which Freud figures as “infection.” This metaphor gets introduced in his third example, which significantly turns on a hypothetical anecdote about jealousy. Concerning the contagious outbreak of this emotion among “girls in a boarding school,” Freud's example strikingly recalls the plot of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; another narrative about schoolgirls in

which jealousy is foregrounded in tandem with the mimetic production of feminine ideals—thus the reproduction of “femininity-effects.”³⁰ Significantly, Freud’s example similarly invokes the image of infection in order to reinforce the already implicit linkage of femininity with utter iterability or transmissibility—a link *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* also establishes in order to associate, in turn, the operations of homophilic idealization subtending the former with political leader-worship and fascism.³¹ Since it is most pertinent to my focus, let me quote the example in its entirety:

There is a third particularly frequent and important case of symptom formation, in which the identification leaves entirely out of account any object-relation to the person who is being copied. Supposing, for instance, that one of the girls in a boarding school has had a letter from someone with whom she is secretly in love which arouses her jealousy, and that she reacts to it with a fit of hysterics; then some of her friends who know about it will catch the fit, as we say, by mental infection. The mechanism is that of identification based on the possibility or desire of putting oneself in the same situation. The other girls would love to have a secret love affair too, and under the influence of a sense of guilt they also accept the suffering involved in it. It would be wrong to suppose that they take on the symptom out of sympathy. On the contrary, the symptom only arises out of the *identification*, and this is proved by the fact that *infection or imitation* of this kind takes place in circumstances where even less pre-existing sympathy is to be assumed than usually exists between friends in a girls’

³⁰ Here, also, the public reading of a letter testifying to a “secret love affair” becomes pivotal to the narrative as a whole.

³¹ When Sandy “puts a stop” to Jean’s ability to transmit or reproduce her theories of ideal femininity (putting a stop to her ability to copy as well as be copied), Jean equates this with “assassination”; hence linking the end of transmissibility with the death of a feminine ideal, but also with the death of the fascist political leaders Jean admires. The relation between the mimetic production of “compound” female subjectivity in this film and Freud’s post-war analysis of the “libidinal organization of groups” in *Group Psychology* is a worthy topic for an essay on its own.

school. One ego has perceived a significant analogy with another upon one point—in our example *upon openness to a similar emotion*, and under the influence of the pathogenic situation, is displaced on to the symptom which the one ego has produced. The identification by means of the symptom has thus becomes the mark of a point of coincidence between the two egos which has to be kept repressed. (48–49; my italics)

Here, moving from individual acts of feminine identification to feminine identifications *en masse*, note the implied equivalence of identification, imitation, infection. Since the logic of exemplarity in Freud's essay has already suggested that unlike their masculine counterparts, feminine identifications *cannot easily be detached from acts of mimetic transformation* (i.e. imitation), hence cannot be detached from the discursive function of exemplarity (which is to *compel* imitation), it comes as no surprise that here the latter are viewed as contagious; since, as Freud notes in the earlier *Totem and Taboo* (1912), "*examples* are contagious" (my emphasis).³² Whereas identification and emulation remained ontologically distinct phenomena in the case of the boy–father relation (the former being a purely psychic or affective trajectory whose destination is the other; the latter an act of transforming the self), we have seen how difficult they become to separate in examples involving women. Not all identifications, then, but *feminine* identifications in particular ("phantasmatic efforts at alignment, loyalty [and] cohabitation" with *women*) are rendered coeval with mimetic acts; emulations "after the fashion" of another's model which in turn actively solicit or induce emulation—that is, become *exemplary* acts. Leading to the production of female subjectivities, feminine identifications are thus more "contagious" than masculine ones

³² Cited in Fuss, 42.

since they work *like* examples. The displacement of agency Fuss remarks upon with acuity here, based on the turn from ingestion to infection, thus corresponds also to a shift in gender; whereas the boy is the locus or enunciator of his identification with the father, identification “happens” to girls. Complementing Fuss’s observation about ingestion/infection, I would add that the logic of gender difference enters Freud’s own use of exemplarity in a way which suggests that some kinds of identification will be more closely linked to this particular discursive function than others. All genders, or gender in general, may be performative or mimetic (“the stylized repetition of acts in time”³³), but “Identification” suggests that some genders are more mimetic than others; and that the discursive function of inducing imitation—exemplarity itself—is anything but neutral to the logic of gender difference.

If femininity is structured “like” an inducement to imitation, or its discursive logic akin to that of hyperbolic exemplarity, and envy or jealousy provides the setting in which it becomes most clearly manifested *as such*, how might Hedy’s envious attitude towards Allie in *Single White Female* constitute a way—a strategic and perhaps even critical way—of negotiating her relationship to gender? And how might this in turn enable us to rethink the relationship between antagonism and the production of “compound” subjects” with respect to feminism—as knowledge formation, group formation, and in terms of “group feeling”?

³³ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” Sue-Ellen Case, ed. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist*

~~Single White Female Seeks Same~~

Envious Female Undoes Her Exemplarity

In accordance with what Stearns describes as a ubiquitous, early 20th-century cultural attitude toward the emotion, Freud's implicit equation of femininity and exemplarity in "Identification" occurs in tandem with a feminization of envy; in fact, the latter strategically reinforces the former. For unlike his other theoretical sources, the boarding school anecdote enables Freud not just to posit that identifications can "leave entirely out of account any object-relation to the person who is being copied," but also to demonstrate that infectious identifications, unlike those based on the (male) ingestion model, can be partial rather than whole—"borrow[ing] a *single* trait from the person who is its object" (48), hence even easier to make and transmit. Importantly, the shared trait in this example, the attribute all the girls seem quite naturally to have in common, is their predilection for jealousy. Freud stresses that *this* is the "point of coincidence" enabling *feminine* identifications; i.e. highly contagious or exemplary ones: "One ego has perceived a significant analogy with another upon one point—in our example upon openness to a *similar emotion*: an identification is thereupon constructed on this point, and, under the influence of the pathogenic situation, is displaced on to the symptom which the one ego has produced" (49, my italics). As the grammar of this sentence indicates, the actual point of similarity is not so much "openness" or susceptibility to emotional arousal in general (or

“sympathy,” as Fuss suggests (114); Freud is quite explicit that sympathy is not the cause or enabling condition for the identification), but rather the *specific emotion* aroused.

According to Freud’s account, identification leads to or implies imitation, particularly where feminine subjects are concerned, and even more so where jealous females are concerned; in fact, we have seen how in this arena, under the aegis of an “infection” metaphor, the two processes become virtually synonymous. Given that a hypothetical envy scenario provides an ideal setting for this linkage of terms to become visible as such, the gendered logic at work in “Identification” seems to support Scott Paulin’s assertion about what is most obvious about the central relationship in *Single White Female*: “It is clear that Hedy identifies with Allie as an ideal, that she envies her and ‘wants to be her’” (51). Here again, a fictional account of envy between women seems to provide a way of demonstrating emulation’s coextensiveness with identification. As noted earlier, *Single White Female* does make obvious Hedy’s attempt to appropriate for her own use—literally “borrow,” as in the case of “partial,” non-sexual identifications—the markers of Allie’s identity. First she wears Allie’s clothes with her permission, then without; and eventually buys replicates of the clothes themselves. She pays to have her hair cut in the same style and dyed the same flamboyant color as Allie’s, which brings their resemblance close enough to the point that when dressed in the same clothes, she effectively passes for Allie to others who know her.

Yet insofar as emulation turns the thing emulated (whether this be a single characteristic or a whole person) into *a thing that can be copied*, and in doing so transforms that thing into something slightly other than it was, it’s possible to interpret Hedy’s

mimeticism not as the enactment of a wish to “be” Allie, of transforming *herself* into Allie or even taking her place, but rather as an attempt to transform *Allie*. As film’s plot confirms, it is the *emulated* subject’s life (Allie’s relationships with others, Allie’s sense of self-definition), and not the emulator’s, which most radically changes as result of the latter’s actions. Defined in terms of its ability to shapeshift, Hedy’s persona remains comparatively consistent. In contrast, by *being* “copied,” *Allie* is transformed by Hedy’s mimetic behavior—transformed, moreover, into *a replication or duplicate*. If Freudian identification is a process “where the subject makes himself *one* with the other person,”³⁴ Hedy’s emulation of Allie could be described not as an endeavor at achieving “oneness,” but a process of making “twoness.” In their semiotic study of rivalry, which posits envy and emulation as indissociably linked, Greimas and Fontanille describe the latter as implying “an unfinished process, S_1 ’s process, in relation to another subject, S_2 , whose process is treated as finished” (SP 124). Paradoxically, however, here the “unfinished” subjectivation is not so much the emulator’s (Hedy), but that of the person emulated, since in many ways Allie is the one ultimately altered. In one of their final encounters, Allie herself acknowledges the success of this intended outcome: “I’m like *you* now.”

Allie’s comment thus indicates that Hedy’s mimetic behavior may have little to do with identification; either in the sense of a fantasy about her *own* transformation (becoming “like” Allie), or a fantasy of replacing her in her relationships with other people. The film makes the latter particularly clear: though Hedy deceptively seduces Allie’s boyfriend, she

does so precisely in order to force him out of both their lives (using the seduction as blackmail to get him to return to his ex-wife); nor does she express any interest in the only other social relationships Allie seems to have (both with men); her friendship with Graham, the upstairs neighbor, and disastrous business alliance with Mitch. Rather than attempting to take Allie's place *within* these relationships, Hedy's aggressive emulation actually aims at dissolving them. Allie's "I'm like *you* now" further indicates that neither is Hedy ultimately trying to mold *herself*, qua "unfinished" ego or not-fully-constituted subject (Brinks), after the fashion of the "finished" model supplied by Allie. Insofar as the comment suggests that what Hedy's mimeticism strives toward is the alteration of *Allie*, (implying a trajectory whose destination is the other, rather than the self), in this sense the fantasy underlying it bears more resemblance to what Laplanche and Pontalis call "centrifugal" identification, in which the subject "identifies the other with [her]self" rather than identifying herself with the other, as in Freud's "centripetal" version. The former is allocentric, or outward-oriented; the latter egocentric.

Yet insofar as centrifugal identification involves an simple reversal of direction, transforming the other using the *self* as precedent or model, Hedy's emulation of Allie seems to veer away from it as well. For while her mimeticism *does* appear aimed towards Allie's transformation, this transformation *does not* take place after the fashion of Hedy's *own* self—as a *positive* entity that can be modeled after or induce imitation. Hedy's emulation of Allie "molds" Allie, in other words, but not based on the example of what Hedy "is" or can be said to "be." For in dramatic, secret-revealing fashion, the film reveals

³⁴ Laplanche and Pontalis, 206.

early in its diegesis that who/what Hedy *really* is, is an identical twin who lost her sister when she drowned at the age of eleven. Significantly, Hedy retells the story to Allie to make this deprivation more “original,” even constitutive: situating the moment of loss at birth, rather than the actual childhood accident: “I was *supposed to be* a twin but she was stillborn. I grew up feeling a part of me was missing.” In conjunction with numerous other doubled-female motifs in the narrative (an opening scene comprised of twin girls applying makeup to one another, shots depicting Hedy and Allie staring at their own mirrored reflections, Allie’s discovery of Hedy’s secreted photographs of herself and her sister), the film extravagantly foregrounds this disclosure in order to suggest that what Hedy ultimately desires is the recovery of this *no longer existent identity*. We are thus encouraged to read Hedy’s efforts at emulation, directed at the “molding” or transformation of Allie, as not based on who Hedy is, or after Hedy’s “own” self as model, but after the model of what Hedy defines herself *as lacking*—as what she was *supposed to be*, but *is not* and (according to her own fictitious account of the story) *never actually was*. Never actually made it out into the world outside the womb, that is, as being: a form of *female twoness*, or “compound” subjectivity.

Single White Female thus constructs a story about feminine envy, similar to yet very different from that of Freud’s, in which the envier emulates not to make herself “*one with*” the other (where the other provides the example to be imitated), nor to make the other “*one with*” herself (where the self provides the example), though this comes significantly closer; rather, she emulates in hopes of making a *two-with*. Thus Hedy’s attitude towards Allie conforms neither to Freud’s notion of identification (particularly of the

feminine/infectious sort), involving the transformation of self *after the model* of the other, nor to Laplanche and Pontalis' centrifugal identification, involving the transformation of the other *after the model* of the self. For in this case, *neither subject provides the model* for what the emulation produces. "Twoness," the implied ideal/model/example, or attribute whereby a partial identification might be established, is indeed the "point of coincidence" between Hedy and Allie, but one *not located in either subject*. In other words, the exemplary trait which would seem to provide the *inducement* to imitation, hence preceding it as enabling condition, is in this case *missing*—only to emerge, paradoxically, through the process of imitation itself. Prior to Hedy's transformation of Allie by assuming her characteristics, "twoness," or non-singularity, is precisely what both single white females self-consciously lack. This seems particularly true for Hedy, whose identity the film takes pains to define and symbolically reinforce as *not-being* "twoness"; hence the impossibility of this singular self providing the model for Allie's transformation. Here my previous statement requires a slight but important addition: Hedy emulates Allie to transform Allie into a duplicate or copy, it's true, but not a copy *of Hedy herself*; paradoxically instead, Allie becomes a copy produced after the fashion of what Hedy is not (a dual or compound subject), based on the model of a characteristic she yearns for but painfully lacks. Thus Allie's transformation cannot be said to ensue from her having "borrowed" this characteristic from Hedy, insofar as the act of borrowing presupposes prior ownership of the property borrowed; just as an act of copying seems to presuppose a positive substrate which *can* be copied ("openness to a similar emotion," for instance)—an example which actively *induces* the imitation. Here the property or exemplary attribute seems to be

“female twoness,” but the locus/agent/source/owner of it isn’t Hedy. Hedy is *not* a dual or compound subject—and this is precisely the pathos surrounding her character and its motivations (which in turn ensures the film’s melodramatic appeal).

Where *is* the example located, then? If mimetic transformation, as it occurs in partial modes of identification, requires the “borrowing” of an attribute from one subject by the other, how can this attribute be lent when initially possessed by neither party? Hedy’s emulation of Allie may endeavor to mold *Allie* after the fashion of female twoness (where this particular trait becomes exemplary rather than Hedy as “whole person”), yet this twoness, unlike “openness to a similar emotion” in Freud’s scenario, is neither a common quality both subjects share or individually possess (hence providing the point of coincidence or “significant analogy” by which an identification might be established), nor, subsequently, an attribute that can be transferred between them. (Significantly, the only common quality between these subjects is a painful *lack* of twoness; both begin—and ultimately end up as—dramatically “single.”) Rather, the “property” of female twoness seems to be a *product* of the emulation, rather than an existent preceding and informing it. Thus while Hedy’s imitation of Allie depends wholly on material acts of borrowing (involving possessions like jewelry, perfume, skirts, stiletto-heeled pumps, and other gendered commodities), the transformation of Allie her imitativeness ultimately strives toward is paradoxically facilitated through the transfer of a property *neither subject owns*. If there is a “borrowing” at stake in Hedy’s behavior towards Allie, then, it is not the kind of borrowing that for Freud makes partial identifications possible. What Freud means by borrowing is precisely the appropriation of some thing, belonging to, possessed by, or

otherwise located “in” the other, for the self’s own use; i.e. a form of “taking.” (This emphasis on the *subject’s* agency, or “taking,” is in accordance with Freud’s definition of identification in *Group Psychology* as centripetal: as identification of *oneself* with.) Yet borrowing can also be thought of as a form of “receiving”; moreover, receiving “with the implied or expressed intention of *returning the same or an equivalent*.”³⁵ Here the emphasis signifies a more passive relation to the other (the self is the object of the receiving, rather than the agent of the taking), but also implies a trajectory towards the other rather than the self as destination. This second definition, which involves *two* mechanisms (receiving and returning), rather than the single one of “appropriating,” usefully suggests that in the case of Hedy and Allie’s relationship, the thing or attribute “borrowed” (twoness) has no existence prior to being returned. More specifically: the thing borrowed has no existence prior to being returned *as identical to something which the self has already received from the other*. If, as suggested earlier, envy involves forms of negative or “unhappy” self-assertion (Kierkegaard) subtended by a negative relationship to property, Hedy’s aggressive emulation of Allie ensures that for both subjects, “property” will be redefined as something always already transferred and circulated (continuously received and returned), rather than something that is actually *owned*. It thus becomes significant that in this case, the property transferred cannot be traced back as originating from either one of the subjects involved. While one normally thinks of property as something *possessed*, hence capable of being

³⁵ “Borrow.” *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*. 1977.

traced back to an original owner, the property at stake in Hedy's envious relationship with Allie has no ontological consistency outside its mobilization *between* them.

Given the strange and paradoxical relationship between self-definition and property that Hedy's emulation produces, it makes sense that the exchange of material possessions between them becomes a significant source of anxiety for Allie; and that this anxiety about "borrowed property" becomes inextricably linked to her anxiety, say her intellectual doubt or uncertainty, about her status as feminine oneness or twoness. Am I a single WF, or a non-singular one? Is my non-singular femaleness, or femininity, a property I can actually own? or only receive back from the other as an entity previously lent? Hence different attitudes towards borrowing become a crucial site of difference between the films' central characters; where one has a significantly more ambivalent view of compound subjectivity than the other. In the campy, Freudian-reference overloaded scene depicting the purchase of the stiletto pumps Hedy will eventually use to pose as Allie, trick boyfriend Sam into sex and stab him through the eye afterwards (the jumble of allusions made here including fetishism, the uncanny, and the Oedipal narrative), we hear the voices of Hedy and Allie over an image of their cut-off (visually "dismembered") legs; both wearing copies of the same shoes.

Hedy: Hey, what do you think?

Allie: I think YOU should get them.

Hedy: Oh god, do YOU like them?

Allie: Well, I think they go with that dress.

Hedy: You take them.

Allie: Well...

Hedy: I'll just borrow them when I want to.³⁶

The initial conflict over who will end up owning the shoes as property is dispelled by Hedy's encouragement that Allie should be their "taker," while also confidently asserting her own right to receiving and returning them. This claim is met with no objection. In the very next scene, however, where Allie is awkwardly "caught" looking at Hedy's possessions in Hedy's room (trying on her perfume, holding up Hedy's earrings to her own face in a mirror), and Hedy similarly attempts to ease tension by saying "Anything of mine you want is yours, go ahead: share and share alike," Allie's response is notably hesitant.³⁷ And she explains or attempts to legitimate this hesitation by re-asserting her status as a female oneness: "But I don't really know about that. I'm an only child." It is at this point that Hedy reveals her own single- (white) femalehood — but by defining it in terms of the loss or absence of a former female twoness ("I was *supposed* to be a twin but she was

³⁶ It's worth noting here that this scene also exemplifies a pattern of relentlessly negative self-assertion in the film as a whole, in which each subject interprets propositions the other puts forward concerning herself (the other) as actually being propositions about the subject, and vice versa. (For instance, earlier when Hedy makes a statement concerning Allie's appearance ("Where did *you*...learn to dress like that?"), Allie immediately reads this as Hedy making a statement about *Hedy's* appearance, and responds accordingly ("I think *you* look very comfortable.") Thus Hedy similarly reads Allie's statement, "I think *you* should get them," a statement about *Hedy's* desire for the shoes, as a statement about *Allie's* desire for the shoes.

³⁷ The significant difference between the relationships Hedy and Allie have to feminine property is reflected in the contrast between Hedy's remark here ("Anything of mine you want is yours..."), and what Allie says to a cab driver while in pursuit of Hedy dressed as

stillborn..." etc.), implicitly links her propensity for borrowing and lending property to the very attribute or property she defines herself as lacking possession of. Compound femaleness is a property Hedy does not herself possess and thus cannot lend, but which she nonetheless endeavors to "return" to Allie—again, as in the case of the shoes, placing Allie in the position of owner—paradoxically through the very acts of borrowing she performs. In other words, Hedy's imitation of Allie (by way of borrowing Allie's clothes) *retroactively* constitutes Allie into the locus or original possessor of an attribute that subsequently *can* be "lent." A radically negative relationship to property thus subtends the forms of *negative*, yet forceful self-assertion ("I am *not* X," rather than "I *am* X"), enabled through Hedy's mimetic behavior.

Thus if a phantasmatic orientation is being expressed through Hedy's mimeticism, as must clearly be the case, it cannot be described as *Hedy's* identification with Allie, as Brinks and Paulin suggest ("She desires *to be, to be like, or to become* Allie"; "It is clear that Hedy identifies with Alli as an ideal, that she... 'wants to be her'"); nor, according to the various criteria Freud establishes, can it even be described as an *identification*—however partial or "limited," since this depends on a notion of "borrowed property" presupposing prior ownership of the attribute transferred. And interestingly, what this orientation seems *furthest* from in resemblance is the type of identification Freud's essay implicitly constructs as "feminine," insofar as this rests on exemplarity. It seems more accurate to say that the fantasy organizing and informing Hedy's mimetic behavior—which the film constructs as *envious* behavior—is rather the *undoing* of identification (fantasies that ultimately constitute

Allie's double: "Don't lose her. She has something of mine."

who *one is*³⁸), since the event it strives toward, imagines or phantasmatically ‘stages,’ is the *other’s* transformation after the fashion of what *one is not*. In its goal of escaping or undoing female singularity, this fantasy can be described as one of dual or compound gendered identity, but perhaps also a fantasy of female multiplicity in general. As such, it might also be thought of as a phantasmatic trajectory towards the acquisition of “femaleness” as *group affinity* or what Freud calls “group feeling.” For group formation, as Freud frequently observes in *Group Psychology*, begins with and can be limited to two members; which enables him to use twosomes throughout the text as allegorical representations of group formations as a whole.

Though both create fictional accounts of female homosociality emphasizing its (negatively) emotional dimensions, Freud’s essay and Schroeder’s film use the affective configurations they establish to offer very different arguments about (1) the relationship between identification and emulation; (2) how this relationship consolidates gender roles; and (3) produces “group feeling.” While in Freud’s schoolgirls scenario, jealousy-motivated imitation is depicted as highly conducive to the *formation* of feminine identifications, in *SWF* envious emulation enacts the *reversal* of these identifications—that is, fantasies about a female other that take that other, or a single attribute which she possesses, *as an ideal or model to be imitated*—insofar as this affective behavior is shown to *paradoxically undo that other’s exemplarity*; in other words, to actively separate the other from

³⁸ Laplanche and Pontalis: “In Freud’s work the concept of identification comes little by little to have the central importance which makes it, not simply one psychical mechanism

the model on which the imitation is based. Hedy's copying of Allie ensures that Allie will become replicable; transformed into an entity which *undergoes* replication; hence much like the mass-produced, "New York" fashions she wears and the fashion software programs she designs. Yet unlike these items, the substance which Allie becomes cannot be described as a copy *of*, or copy *after*, some previously established or positively existing model. One could say at this point that Hedy's envious emulation of Allie transforms Allie into an imitation without an original, but it is perhaps more interesting to formulate this another way: that in envying and imitating Allie, Hedy is able to transform Allie into an example (something that appears "after the fashion" of a category already defined) *voided of its exemplarity*. Allie becomes an example that does not exemplify; in other words, she becomes a particular instance or manifestation of X—say female multiplicity or *non-singularity*—that does not refer "back" to X as a value *already in place*. Putting this another way, in being emulated, she comes to embody a standard that cannot be positively defined or located—that has no ontological coherence or consistency—prior to its actual embodiment.

Might not this situation provide us with a way of viewing the subject of feminism? As a tenuously "compound" subject, produced precisely in and through modes of undoing exemplarity and reversing identification?

among others, but *the operation itself whereby the human subject is constituted*" (206).

Giorgio Agamben notes that the example is “one concept that escapes the antimony of the universal and the particular,”³⁹ since:

In any context where it exerts its force, the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type, and, at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all. On one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity. Neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that *shows* its singularity. (10)

It's important to note that this formulation, in defining the example as that which “stands for” and “serves for” all cases of the same type, presumes both the *prior existence* of the type, as well as this prior existence as determining factor in there being multiple instances of it. In other words, what an example exemplifies, or appears “modeled after,” is a general concept assigned a determinate value, already established or in place, which in turn provides the enabling condition for there to be more than one thing, plural things or a “group” of things, which could be said to embody it. The potential multiplicity of particular embodiments ensues from there already being a model. But in the case of Allie becoming an example of female “twoness,” where the concept embodied is itself one of multiplicity, the model is one we find *markedly absent* prior to its particular instantiation; not established in advance for/in either subject, but retroactively produced by the fantasy underlying Hedy's mimetic actions.

³⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of

Yet while successfully produced in this manner, the compound subjectivity Allie embodies (by means of Hedy's emulation of her) is revealed to be tenuous, unstable, and as the ending of the movie finally proves impermanent. While Paulin accurately observes that "what the film's title reflects is an endpoint, and the fundamental work of the film is to produce the 'single white female' we are promised" (33), the film's conclusion ultimately reinstates the female singleness with which it also begins. For Hedy, self-defined as a subject lacking or "missing" compound subjectivity, dies in spite of her efforts (paradoxical, to be sure) to "borrow" it. And Allie, also initially and painfully singular, but effectively made into a particular embodiment of this multiplicity through Hedy's mimetic behavior, ultimately kills the borrower who has been "returning" the attribute to her (and by "returning" it, affirming Allie as its owner, validating her right to its possession). In doing so, she ends the cycle of reception and return *producing the attribute*, and reverts back to singularity.

In spite of this final failure, however, in which female singleness regains precedence over female non-singularity or compoundedness (by means of the violent elimination of an emulator—literally screwed *and* stabbed in the back, with a screwdriver), *SWF's* foregrounding of a stereotypically "feminine" affect, or passionate homosocial configuration, suggests some interesting things about aggression, gender, and group formation which pertain very much to conflicts within feminism today. At the very least, the film's violence demonstrates what seems like an almost obvious point: that while identification may be mimetic (and feminine identifications in particular, according to

Minnesota P, 1993) 10. Hereafter referred to as CC.

Freud), mimeticism does not require or entail identification; in fact, it can actively strive to reverse, undo, or ensure the *failure* of identifications; even preempting their formation. By insisting on the difference between identification and emulation, *Single White Female*'s representation of a complex, female-female relationship enables us to see how not-identifying might be the enabling condition for homosociality, rather than an obstruction to it.⁴⁰ Moreover, *pace* Freud, the goal and outcome, albeit temporary, of Hedy's envious behavior—namely, the transformation of Allie “after the fashion” of what Hedy herself is not: a non-singular or compound female subject—suggests that not-identifying can be an effective, even strategic way of generating compound identities; in fact, that group formations might be based on the refusal or undoing of identifications, as well as their production. If aggressive acts of *not*-identifying or undoing identification can play as active and constitutive a role as identification can towards the formation of non-singular, dual or plural, even collective identities, equally facilitating the transition from “single-femaleness” to *group* femaleness, then this usefully highlights the primary, even constitutive importance of antagonism to gender-based group identities such as that of feminism.

If we focus solely on the film's depiction of envy in terms of a transition from admiration (the philic striving-towards an ideal) to antagonism (a polemical relation which works *against* sympathetic affiliation), it would seem that envy enables a strategic way of *not*-identifying which, in facilitating and ensuring this very transition, preserves a critical

⁴⁰ Citing Lauren Berlant's “The Female Complaint” (*Social Text* 19–20, Fall 1988), Gubar partly concedes this point in her response to Wiegman. See “Notations” 394.

agency whose loss is threatened by full-blown idealization of the attribute admired. In this sense, it could be said that a subject might envy (and emulate) not just as a prophylactic against fully identifying herself with the quality emulated (say “femininity”), thus maintaining a certain distance even while striving towards it, but precisely in order to *convert* her admiration into polemicism, *qua* critical force or agency. Envy’s critical potential thus resides in its ability to enact a *refusal to idealize* quality X, even *attacking* its potential for idealization by transforming X into something replicable, while at the same time enabling acknowledgment of its (culturally-imposed) desirability.

In Melanie Klein’s “Envy and Gratitude” (1957), it is precisely the ideal object, or object modalized by idealization, which gives rise to envy and is attacked and spoiled. Klein also describes primal envy as both a form of de-proprietorization or theft, in which the envier robs the object of what it possesses: “In both male and female, envy plays a part in the desire to take away the attributes of the other sex, as well as to ... spoil those of the parent of the same sex” (201). Significantly, envy is further viewed as underlying all forms of “destructive criticism,” including in particular any distrust, skepticism, or contestation of the analyst’s interpretations on the part of the analysand (202). In this theory of envious aggression as *critical aggression*—one’s refusal to accept and assimilate, *without dissenting from, contesting, or forming a polemic response to* an authority-figure’s interpretation of a particular text/dream—which Klein uses to explain most negative therapeutic reactions and failed attempts at analysis (184), the ideal or “good” object envied and

phantasmatically attacked is attacked precisely because it is idealized and “good”⁴¹—as if the real source of antagonism is less the object than *idealization* itself. It’s important to note here that in envying the good object, the Kleinian infant ultimately seeks to *transform* it; i.e. by phantasmatically disfiguring or spoiling it, hence rendering it as something no longer desirable as well as *something which can no longer be possessed*.⁴² Significantly, Klein also suggests that such envious attacks are both accompanied and intensified by the subject’s belief that the idealized object *is a source of persecution*; hence the envied breast becomes a “devouring” breast. But if envy thus enables the subject to formulate the assertion: *this idealized object persecutes me*, might we not interpret Hedy’s aggression towards the kind of idealized, *singular* white femininity Allie initially embodies, her “envious” efforts at transforming it into some form of compoundedness, as an attempt to forcefully put forth a similar proposition? That is, to *identify* that particular feminine ideal, essentially an ideal

⁴¹ Though bearing much resemblance to sadism in its destructive aims, Judith Hughes reminds us that “What distinguished [Kleinian] envy from sadism was that envy constituted an attack upon the good *because it was good*.” See Hughes, *Reshaping the Psychoanalytic Domain* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 89.

⁴² Rather than seeking to “preserve and spare” the object, “Envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it” [183]; that is, change the *status* of the object with respect to its ownability, and thus convert one’s *relation* to the thing originally admired and desired. Envy interferes with the subject’s ability to accept, assimilate, possess or internalize the “good object” (which it subsequently transforms by challenging its value), as well as its ability to distinguish between objects “good” and “bad” (185, 192).

functioning as property whose possession can be claimed, as a persecutory, devouring, or brutally assimilating one?

This theoretical approach to the negative affect, which Freud suggests toward the end of *Group Psychology* to be an *inevitable* factor in group formation, bears some interesting applications with respect to aspects of being feminist that are “actively lived and felt”—hence run the risk of “not [being] recognized as social, but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating” (SF 132). Say I am a woman of color, and say that there is a certain version of femaleness, or femininity, which I recognize as (1) idealized, culturally desirable and (2) conveying a certain kind of power—or producing certain kind of effects. If, as a feminist, what I struggle with most is my having been acculturated into admiring and desiring that thing, envy would seem to enable me to critically negotiate rather than simply disavow or repudiate this desire (which would entail positing myself as outside or unaffected by culture), to effect a transition from my desire for the object to a polemic attitude towards the subject who declares herself its owner or possessor—precisely because this transition enables me to identify what I have been trained to admire as *something which is possibly threatening or harmful to me*. As Klein notes, it is only once the ideal object is envied that it becomes viewed as persecutory (188); a view which in turn mobilizes the subject’s efforts to criticize and transform it; and in particular transform its value or status as property, spoiling it and “rob[bing] it of what it possesses.”⁴³

⁴³ This is not to argue that one *has* to go through envy to recognize persecution, but that envy in the Kleinian sense might provide a particular strategy for doing so—particularly

While the dramatization of envy in “Identification” reinforces the suggestion that femaleness, the kind of subjectivity or group identity produced through feminine identifications, may be structured “like” an example, in *Single White Female* envying becomes a way of stripping this example of its exemplarity, or showing it to have none; that is, qualifying as a member of the class one ends up representing (being “female”) can take place without the membership condition being positively and coherently defined. This paradox, I would argue, actually offers a highly strategic way of approaching our “social feeling” as feminists. For if the concept enabling our collective affiliation becomes retroactively constituted rather than established in advance, phantasmatically produced through our various, material embodiments of it rather than an existent quality for us to mold ourselves after phantasmatically, this concept becomes more plastic and viable for transformation. And indeed more unstable, as Schroeder’s film demonstrates. Yet what the film fails or refuses to demonstrate is that this instability can be the concept’s particular force, can be what *ensures* its political agency in the sense of producing changes in the way we conceptualize and organize the world through our ideas. For while this internal instability, a kind specific to things always in making rather than things already made, guarantees that while the principle or membership condition of the group will always be in flux, this flux will be more likely determined by the members themselves; an instability produced by group X’s unexemplary examples, rather than an instability fostered or imposed by its constitutive outside. Hence if there is to be a *productive* “transition from the

when what is at stake is the ability to recognize an *idealized* object (what the dominant culture admires and strives toward) as persecutory.

critique of patriarchal masculinity to internal struggle within feminism,” for which Robyn Wiegman persuasively argues the necessity, in which we shift from a mode of critique “embroiled, indeed embattled, in a heterosexual paradigm in which women’s relationships to men are centrally interrogated” to one which is “fundamentally a homosocial circuit in which *feminism signifies from the conflicted terrain of relations among women*” (363, fn. 2, second italics mine), “feminism” needs to be thought not as a fixed social form or objective structure, *nor* as merely a kind of subjective tendency or “consciousness,” but as something akin to what Williams describes as a “structure of feeling”: that is, “a social experience which is still *in process*” (132). While offering a particularly hyperbolic account of how (female) compound subjects might be (albeit painfully and violently) generated, *Single White Female* reminds us that “group-feeling” can be as easily based on antagonism, even aggression and antipathy, as it is on consensus and sympathetic identifications⁴⁴. If we

⁴⁴ Interestingly, in a chapter in *Group Psychology* following “Identification,” Freud proposes that envy in fact *precedes* the establishment of identifications which enable group formation; suggesting that ultimately “social feeling is based upon *the reversal of what was first a hostile feeling* into a positively-toned tie” (Chapter XI, “The Herd Instinct,” 67; my italics). If Hedy’s aggressive emulation of Allie suggests that envy can reverse or undo identifications, Freud’s thesis here is that the identifications are only secondarily established through a reversal of envy. Anticipating Klein, envy becomes *primary* in the production of “social feeling,” which results only when the subject, encountering the moralization and cultural disapproval of his affective response to inequality, comes to recognize “the impossibility of his maintaining his hostile attitude without damaging himself,” which in turn *forces* him (the verb is Freud’s) “into identifying himself with [others].” The subject is forced into identification only after being forced into renouncing the affective response; thus “What appears later on in society in the shape of *Gemeingeist*, *esprit de corps*, ‘group spirit,’ etc., does not belie *its derivation from what was originally envy*” (67; my italics). Once again, the example used as “theoretical source” for this argument is one involving hypothetical girls and women—this time in terms of their specifically *feminine* relation (a too-close

overcome the tendency to dismiss the *affective* dimension of this “conflicted terrain of relations among women” as a matter of pure psychology, and instead view what Freud calls “the libidinal structure of groups” as an *objectively*-generated state (one that is nonetheless subjectively-held),⁴⁵ we can see that such affects are themselves social experiences which in turn discursively organize or amplify others.

Bad Examples

relation) to popular culture:

This transformation—the replacing of jealousy by a group feeling in the nursery and classroom—might be considered improbable, if the same process could not later on be observed again in other circumstances. We only have to think of the troop of women and girls, all of them in love in an enthusiastically sentimental way, who crowd around a singer or pianist after his performance. It would certainly be easy for each of them to be jealous of the rest; but, in face of their numbers and the consequent impossibility of their reaching the aim of their love, they renounce it, and, instead of pulling out one another’s hair, they act as a united group, do homage to the hero of the occasion with their common actions, and would probably be glad to have a share of *his* flowing locks. Originally rivals, they have succeeded in identifying themselves with one another by means of a similar love for the same object. (66)

For Freud, previous *non*-gender-specific examples of sibling rivalry, or group dynamics in “the nursery and classroom” don’t seem to lend enough support to his theory. It is as if in order to make the thesis of envy’s primary role in the production of “social feeling” truly convincing, “we only have to think of the troop of women and girls”; the military image of the troop suggestive of an organized threat. The best or most effective example again seems to be a feminine example—which brings us back to the question of how Hedy’s “envious” emulation of Allie might be interpreted as a way of critically negotiating her relation to exemplarity.

⁴⁵ Evans, “The Dynamics of Literary Change” 8.

If femaleness, that social and subjective category from which feminism begins and continually confronts (but which remains its most contentious point of reference), can be thought of as structured like an example—which is to say like an inducement to imitation, or particular instantiation of some X—this exemplariness can also be precisely what challenges the stability of the category it would appear to exemplify, or passively reflect as something already established or in place. All the more so if X itself is a kind of exemplarity; that is, something by definition never self-identical, since “the proper place of the example is always besides itself” (Agamben, 10). Insofar the example is never fully universal to begin with, there can be examples which, while being “unable to serve in their particularity,” must point or bear witness to some general or universal category, but without actually *exemplifying* this universal as a determinate value.⁴⁶ If femininity can be imagined as a form of exemplarity, the act of becoming a particular embodiment of this category would involve becoming an example of an example; that is, an example of something non-adequated or radically external to itself.

In this sense, it seems possible to imagine an example emptied of its exemplarity: i.e. something which becomes the *constitutive* site of the idea it is supposed to secondarily *reflect*. Significantly, this happens to be the way examples most often function in philosophy and other kinds of theoretical discourses. Thus referring to a rhetorical strategy

⁴⁶ For X can be a “universal” quality while also being an indeterminate one, in the form of a named variable. Hence instead of “I am an example of X, where X = femaleness,” we have “I am an example of femaleness, which is X.” Here I am an example of femaleness that does not exemplify “femaleness,” but only “femaleness-as-X, as a Whatever.”

used by Kant, as well as one informing his reading of Kant, J. Hillis Miller writes, “The choice of examples ... and their ordering, is never innocent. Does not my choice of examples load the dice, predetermine the conclusions I can reach and, like all examples, in fact form the essence of the argument it is apparently only meant to exemplify?”⁴⁷

Similarly, Andrzej Warminski shows how Hegel’s attempt to explain the difference between an example and the idea it exemplifies (as the difference between a secondary, passive mode of representation and a primary and active one) actually *rests* on the use of a example, leading to a reversal of the hierarchical roles initially assigned them.⁴⁸ It’s interesting in this regard to note that in “Identification,” Freud conspicuously does not refer to his own examples as such, but as “theoretical sources” or “cases”; terms more accurately used, since the concept of identification they would seem to reflect, or be particular embodiments of, is being derived *from* them. Theory, or critique, thus seems to *rely* on examples without exemplarity; or, in other words, on examples which *produce* what they would seem to exemplify *retroactively*.

Emptying the example of its exemplarity is exactly what Hedy’s envious emulation of Allie seems to do. And in so doing, it suggests that when the production of non-singular or compound forms of identity is precisely what is at stake, the best kind of examples are

⁴⁷ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell UP) 11.

⁴⁸ Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987) 110. Cited by Slavoj Žižek in *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*

always the bad ones: examples that “fall short” of exemplifying, in the sense of being modeled *after* what someone else—say from the group’s would-be constitutive outside—has already established as the determinate value they should exemplify. In other words, “bad examples” of X in group X, become *good* for group X, and also good examples of group X’s *groupness*, since (1) they reaffirm the numerousness of X’s particular embodiments as something that cannot be reduced to their being merely myriad *reflections* of an idea *already in place*; and (2) since they enable other members of the group, or other examples of X, to constantly question, reevaluate, and perhaps redefine what it is that they supposedly exemplify. Hence the “bad examples” that come up in Gubar’s “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” consist of those “particular cases” *within* feminism, which do not seem modeled *after*, or to identify themselves with, previously established notions of “feminist” as type, thus undermining the notion of there *having* to be a type established *prior* to their being particular manifestations of it. In other words, these “bad examples” are precisely those women who challenge that fact that *as* feminist exemplars, they necessarily *exemplify* “being-feminist” in the sense of reflecting or referring back to a positive value already defined.

While a philosopher’s choice of examples “is never innocent,” exemplarity may not always be a choice. Once a minority group has fought for and attained a certain level of political and social recognition, for instance, the particular demand imposed on its members to be representative of the group they belong to (initially a necessity for gaining recognition), can easily become a oppressive one—especially when this imperative for

(London: Verso, 1991) 40-42.

exemplarity emanates from the group's constitutive *outside* rather than from within.

Returning to our literary example of this demand for feminine exemplarity, it's worth recalling that the requirement that Clarissa become an "example to her sex" coincides and operates in ideological collusion with other demands made on her person—not just by Lovelace, her father, or any sovereign authority, but by the institutional, relational structures in the world she inhabits—that are explicitly violent. This demand often takes the following form: You, having declared yourself an example of X (perhaps to heighten X's cultural visibility), *now must exemplify X* as a concept already in place, as a fixed or determinate value which you, as particular embodiment of, *must refer back to or secondarily reflect*. Or: You, having declared yourself a "real particular case" of X included among other particular cases, now must demonstrate that X is a general type, with a positively established value, *which has preceded and given rise to your very multiplicity as such*.

A corollary of the logic underlying these demands would thus be, In your failure to adequately exemplify X, you threaten the validity and legitimacy of X, hence the groupness or collectivity identity you claim to be an example of. To use Gubar's metaphor, the implication is that a group becomes "sick" when its members become examples which *do not exemplify*. The demand for exemplarity thus bears close resemblance to the imperative, or assumption, that one must identify with what one emulates or strives toward; particularly since both depend on the notion that groups, or numerousness, are formed on the basis of models already in place to be imitated, and that mutual relation to an established model subsequently guarantees the identification of individuals with one another. Yet as an inherently oppositional or critical praxis, feminism is itself testimony to

the fact that groups can be constituted based on the *refusal* to passively reflect, or identify with, predetermined concepts as models. Here group emergence significantly coincides with the emergence of a crucial *disjunction* between (1) being an *example* of “female subjectivity” (i.e. being interpellated or socially recognized as a female subject), and (2) *exemplifying* “female subjectivity” as a category already established and assigned determinate values by the system in which that recognition is sought and conferred. Here is where bad examples become critically and politically useful—particularly in calling attention to the uncanniness of what Warminski identifies as the “(chiasmic) exchange of properties” in Hegel’s own method of theorizing the example. In other words, the potential for examples to formulate or *give rise to* the very idea or principle they should merely illustrate or reflect, suggests that the “perverseness” of exemplarity which “bad examples” uniquely demonstrate is precisely what enables them to become powerful tools for criticism. Since the implication is that any example, once established as such, has *the potential* of becoming a “bad” one, we can see a certain logic behind that fact that in Richardson’s narrative, myriad descriptions of its female protagonist as “example to her sex” are only equaled in number by references to her as “perverse girl”; as if to suggest that what is most “perverse” about Clarissa is her exemplarity itself.

While having-to-*exemplify* can be a demand imposed, even violently imposed, on members of a group from those seeking to define and control its parameters from without, being-an-example can be a site of change from within. One acknowledges oneself, or declares oneself, to be an example of X, a “real particular case” among numerous other cases, precisely in order to make and shape what X is—or to affirm X as being not identical

to itself. If an example of X “cannot fully serve in its particularity,” neither can X, as an attribute which is exemplified, fully serve in its *universality*. Bad examples, examples that actually produce what they should only illustrate or reflect, also become important in showing that paradoxical reasoning, which Gubar rejects as a form of “obscurantism” undermining “the writing of feminist poststructuralists who rely on counterintuitive maxims recycled as *fiats* [and] a logic at odds with normative syntactic procedures (894)” (thus connecting this strategy of thinking to Butler’s grammar of dual or compound subjects “combined...into a single force that therefore requires the singular verb”) is often *necessary* in countering the disabling ideological contradictions perpetuated by feminism’s constitutive outside.⁴⁹

Gubar argues that feminist poststructuralists, along with feminists of color, have “marginalized the aesthetic” or literary, and that the use of “a logic at odds with normative syntactic procedures” contributes to this marginalization as well as to the demise of feminism’s political force. But is not producing “a logic at odds with normative syntactic procedures” the very *aim* of a radical and feminist *poetics*, as noted by numerous feminist, literary critics of Gertrude Stein? Or as exemplified in the work of poet Harryette Mullen?

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⁴⁹ See Butler’s response to being publicly criticized for her prose style in *The New York Times*. “A ‘Bad Writer’ Bites Back,” editorial, *New York Times* 20 Mar. 1999, lat ed.: A 15.

Her red and white, white and blue banner manner. Her red and white all over black and blue. Hannah's bandanna flagging her down in the kitchen with Dinah, with Jemima. Someone in the kitchen I know. (11)

A light white disgraceful sugar looks pink, wears an air, pale compared to shadow standing by. To plump recliner, naked truth lies. Behind her shadow wears her color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink. And she is ink, The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large, pink dress. (15)

Some panties are plenty. Some are scanty. Some or any. Some is ante. (27)

In feathers, in bananas, in her own skin, intelligent body attached to a gaze. Stripped down model, posing for a savage art, brought color to a primitive stage. (47)

Thinking thought to be a body wearing language as clothing or language a body of thought which is a soul or body the clothing of a soul, she is veiled in silence. A veiled, unavailable body makes an available space. (66)

In a proliferation of modal rather than formal differences, each poem functions less like a description of a particular object than a network of relations, in which the potential for slippage is dramatized. Whether in engagement with the exclusions by which a “national” or patriotic subject is constructed (the black and blue in red-white-and-blue, the someone in the kitchen one knows), how one looks at Manet’s *Olympia* or portraits of Josephine Baker, or convergences between the sexual and economic (“Some is ante”), undermining “normative syntax” is precisely what gives these poems their aesthetic and political edge, as well as their commitment to “social feeling.” Syntax, grammar, and the formal differences subtending these methods of discursive organization are the site and stake of the

⁵⁰ Harryette Mullen, *Trimnings* (New York: Tender Buttons, 1991).

struggle each poem enacts. At the end of her book *Trimmings*, from which the above excerpts are taken, Mullen notes the following:

Trimmings was a way for me to think about women and language. I don't think there is necessarily any "feminine language" except in the sense that there is feminine clothing. I suppose in both cases we mean an arbitrary set of signs or mannerisms we conventionally associate with "woman." Then also I was interested in the sense of those qualities we regard as feminine. Gender is a set of signs which we tend to forget are arbitrary. [...]

Other concerns were the use of women as aesthetic objects in art and literature, the use of women's bodies in advertising and pornography, the use Freud made of "hysteria" of his women patients. *Trimmings* proceeds metonymically and associatively, from women's clothing to women's bodies; from a word to another word, linked by association—since women are also called skirts, petticoats, fluff, trim. Words like pink and slit are equally at home in the sewing catalog or the girly magazine.

The words pink and white kept appearing as I explored the ways that the English language conventionally represents femininity. As a black woman writing in this language, I suppose I already had an ironic relationship to this pink and white femininity. Of course if I regard gender as a set of arbitrary signs, I also think of race—as far as it is difference that is meaningful—as a set of signs. Traces of black dialect and syntax, blues songs and other culturally specific allusions enter the text from the linguistic contributions of Afro-Americans to the English language. ("Off the Top," *Trimmings*; no page number)

Since Mullen describes herself as writing from *within* the discourse she critically explores (thus rejecting an imaginary site of enunciation outside ideology), her poetics seems less like mere "appropriation" of the signifiers of "feminine language," but rather an act of *receiving* and *returning* these signifiers in an uncannily inverted form. As once "poststructuralist" and engaged with theories of race and ethnicity, *Trimmings* stages this process of reception and return as a form of critical position-taking inside the system it describes; a way of resisting and overturning identification with a (single white) feminine

ideal, while refusing to underestimate the power of the language supporting it. It may seem strange to compare this mobilization of language (deliberately “at odds with normative syntactic procedures”) with Hedy’s “envious” emulation of Allie, yet both involve forms of *negative* self-assertion in which similar effects are achieved: femaleness becomes “compounded,” which is to say complexified or radically desingularized, and its status as “property” transformed. If for Klein envy underlies all forms of antagonistic *criticism*, including any contestation or challenging of an analyst’s interpretation, and actively interferes with the subject’s acceptance and assimilation of idealized objects (including her “possession” or “internalization” of these ideals), both Mullen’s linguistic play and Hedy’s aggressive mimeticism exert a similar critical force; one which undoes the work of feminine/exemplary identifications, and empties “feminine” examples of their exemplarity. In the case of the latter, the negative affect of envy reveals itself as a relentlessly negative way of “thinking”—and here it’s worth noting for cultural theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, “negative thinking,” which he uses as an synonym for “negative dialectics,” constitutes a praxis of critical position-taking.

As a knowledge formation as well as a group identity, “feminism” necessarily implies a collective or social subject, or at the very least a non-singular one. “Within feminism [there exists] political necessity to speak as and for *women* [a compound subject], and I would not contest that necessity.”⁵¹ If we take affectivity seriously as a dynamic

⁵¹ Judith Butler. “Contingent Foundations.” Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds. *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 15.

informing and produced by this speaking position (as well as a factor involved in any kind of political stance or position-taking), feminism would thus seem to entail some kind of “social feeling.” Which usefully points to the necessity of presupposing *group identity*—but perhaps not the dissent-free, identification-based kind of group identity advocated in “What Ails Feminist Criticism?.” For insofar as antagonism, even something as ignoble or culturally debased as *envious* antagonism, can function as a critical mode of resistance to idealization and exemplarity, it strategically enables subjects to consolidate, or become “compounded,” under the aegis of “feminism” without necessarily identifying with one another, and without having to fix or stabilize the concept/model, “feminist,” *prior* to their becoming particular exemplars of it (molded “after” its fashion). Envy thus offer not just a way of critically or aggressively addressing the relation of inequality, but a critique of identification (*qua* adequation) and proprietorship as viable ways of *combating* inequality. As Hedy’s attitude towards Allie suggests, envy functions as a way of acknowledging and critically responding to inequality precisely through the assertion of difference; which may be one of the reasons this affect is so frequently devalued. All the more since it involves changing the status of the idealized object, the locus or marker of the inequality, *as* property; not simply redistributing it, but transforming it into something than *can no longer be properly owned*. This offers another way of thinking one’s relation to femaleness: femaleness is not a property (characteristic, trait, attribute, predicate) which I can be said to be the locus of or possess as my own, *on my own*; but rather something that comes into existence between two subjects; its exists only insofar as it remains something subjects perpetually receive and return to each other. If femaleness is property, it is one that can

only be borrowed and never truly owned. This may sound like a “counterintuitive maxim recycled as fiat” or “utopian ontological paradigm” (Gubar, 894), yet it does offer, I hope, some challenge to the logic of “normative syntax” which subtends conventional notions of grammar—which in turn support, as Stein would have argued, conventional approaches to gender. The disjunctions between subjects and their predicates are precisely what enables us to rethink the problematic of feminism’s compound subject.

Like other films “represent[ing] women’s friendships as plagued by jealousy [and] envy,” *Single White Female* seems to offer an especially bad example of homosocial collectivity; especially since its reaffirmation of singular femaleness depicts the “social feeling” associated with *compound* gendered subjectivity as threatening, destructive, and ultimately untenable. However and in whatever way bad, or perverse, the example it does provide of how female–female alliances might be formed, and the “libidinal” or affective structure of these alliances, provides some interesting alternatives to Freud’s theory in *Group Psychology*; where the process of group formation is viewed as ultimately dependent on identifications of individuals with one another based on a mutually shared model or ego ideal, one and the same for all, *already established and in place*. In contrast, the film’s dramatization of envy suggests that it’s quite possible for female subjects (1) to form coalitions based on something other than “similar love for the same object” (Freud, 66); (2) to emulate attributes without identifying with them; (3) to receive and return feminine “property” without there being prior or re-established ownership of the property transferred; and (4) to be an example that does not exemplify; that is, one which actively produces or refashions the category it would seem only to passively reflect. What is most

surprising about the film, and most interesting with respect to how we approach aggressive conflict within feminism today, is that it shows that female *non*-singularity, or “compoundedness,” to be actually *fostered* through these disidentificatory, antiproprietary, and antifoundationalist dynamics. As Butler notes, “This is not to say there is no foundation” to feminism’s implicit collective subject or *we* (nor to deny the necessity of *some* kind of collective identity, even if it remains a purely abstract or imaginary one); “but rather, [to say] that wherever there is one, there will also be a foundering, a contestation ... To refuse that contest is to sacrifice the radical democratic impetus of feminist politics. That the category is unconstrained, even that it comes to serve antifeminist purposes, will be part of the risk of the procedure (16).” Yet the preservation of the category *as* a site of perpetual resignification, which both Mullen’s “poststructuralist” poetics and Hedy’s aggression in different ways perform, ultimately renders the category *less open* to manipulation from feminism’s outside (since it’s *easier* for anti-feminists to attack a category that is fixed rather than in flux), and more open to change from within; particular since most often the constant shifting and resignifying will only be *visible* from within. This is the main impetus behind Agamben’s definition of the “coming community” as Whatever (CC 2-3): the group which refuses to fix or assign determinate value to its “membership condition” is paradoxically safest from external co-optation. Protection from outside manipulation is thus fostered not by reinforcing boundaries, as one might expect, but by maintaining them in flux.

To argue against a genteel repudiation of aggressive “hostility”, but also against its dismissal as merely “subjective” or psychological” (not truly social, hence not truly

relevant to feminism's political aims), is to argue that feminism needs its affective dimensions—particularly when they offer a form of polemical orientation or critical agency; one which subtends modes of oppositional consciousness. Yet to argue for aggressive disidentification as a political strategy, and for the kind of feminism in which feminists act as *examples* of feminists (real particular cases among numerous others), who in their numerousness constantly *empty out each other's exemplarity*, is not to render the category “feminist” inefficient or obsolete. Nor is it to imply, by analogy,

that the term “women” ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that “women” designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. (Butler 16)

“Bad exemplarity” thus provides an alternative way to think the conditions for collective or “social feeling”: we are compound subjects *not* because there is some positively determined, stable category already in place; a generality *which can give rise to many particular cases* (“feminist” → feminists); rather, we are numerous because that is necessarily the situation of being particular cases of “feminist” *as whatever*: a universal, but an open one (feminists → “feminist as []”). “Whatever” is what saves us from the single white femaleness *Single White Female* depicts its characters attempting to escape, but ultimately reverting to; a fantasy of the female subject severed from and existing apart from all social and emotional ties—*especially antagonistic ones with other females*. It is a similar kind of fantasy, involving a similar disavowal of antagonism, which underlies a idealized notion of

feminism as female homosociability without conflict or internal struggle: where every feminist is a good example, and there are no “perverse girls.” The importance of bad examples thus reminds us “that the rifts among women over the content of this term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the *ungrounded ground* of feminist theory” (16, my italics). I would suggest that the ungrounded ground of *this* “ungrounded ground” is its affective structure—which may include “structures of feeling” we don’t normally think of as exerting social or critical force.

Chapter Three

Projectile Objects, Moody Organizations: The Spatialization of Male Anxiety

I am now postponing, for a short time, the exposition of my analysis of anxiety.

—Louis Althusser¹

[Since] more general psychological problems are involved in the question of the nature of projection, let us make up our minds to postpone the investigation of it . . . until some other occasion.

—Sigmund Freud, “On the Mechanism of Paranoia”²

In psychological parlance, anxiety is frequently described as something “projected” onto others: that is, as a quality or feeling the subject refuses to recognize in himself and attempts to locate in another person or thing, usually as a form of naive or unconscious defense.³ By examining occasions of affective displacement in texts by Melville, Hitchcock and Heidegger, however, I hope to show that the externalizing mechanism of “projection” can be perceived equally as the means by which the affect

¹ This quotation has been attributed to Althusser by poet Jeff Derksen. I have been unable to track its exact source.

² Sigmund Freud, “On the Mechanism of Paranoia,” *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rief (New York: Collier Books, 1963) 29–48, 36.

³ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 349.

culturally codified as “anxiety” assumes its determinate form. For the accounts of anxious male subjectivity provided by these three authors, in which actual and phantasmatic acts of “throwing” reinforce the boundary between center and periphery on which the experience of threat depends, depict “anxiety” less as an inner reality which can be subsequently externalized or spatialized, than as a structural effect of spatialization in general.

In intellectual discourse, “anxiety” seems to have acquired a certain aura or cachet, having evolved into an all-purpose term stretching across knowledge formations and disciplinary vocabularies. Pointing to the dominance of dread in general as a signifying economy in modern culture,⁴ popular critical expressions such as “anxiety of influence,” “middle-class anxiety,” and “millennial anxiety” use the negative affect they invoke as a way of immediately establishing a theoretical or critical stance towards the phenomena described (literary influence, middle-classness, the significance of the millenium). Yet in conjunction with its versatility as a theoretical framing device, “anxiety” carries a history of being gendered in Western culture, particularly in the arenas where it has played the largest roles. The most obvious example is psychoanalysis, where the dominant model of gender differentiation, castration complex, relies on an affective split to distinguish “masculine” and “feminine” attitudes towards a missing or potentially missing object: female subjects become consigned to nostalgia and envy, male

⁴ As Massumi argues throughout his preface (vii-x) and introductory chapter, “Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear” (3-40) in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*.

subjects to anxiety or dread. And in the tradition of philosophy known as existentialism, the privileging of anxiety as a key for interpreting the human condition is accompanied by its being secured as the distinctive—if not exclusive—emotional provenance of male intellectuals. The agitated scholars and obsessive young men in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, for example, seem fused in his description of Don Giovanni, the hypermasculine, uber-heterosexual hero of Mozart's opera, as "anxiety" itself:

There is an anxiety in him, but this anxiety is his energy. In him, it is not a subjectively-reflected anxiety; it is *substantial* anxiety. In the overture there is not what is commonly called—without knowing what one is saying—despair. Don Giovanni's life is not despair; it is, however, the full force of the sensuous, which is born in anxiety; and *Don Giovanni himself is this anxiety*, but this anxiety is precisely the demonic zest for life.⁵

While Kierkegaard is careful to distinguish this anxiety from melancholia (vitalist to the core, Don Giovanni's life "is not despair"), in many ways the agitated male subject seems a modern variant of the male melancholic, a figure with a much older cultural history. It could in fact be argued that the unease or agitation codified as "anxiety" eventually replaces melancholia as the male intellectual's signature affect or sensibility. By the nineteenth century, and in the wake of romanticism, Stephen Rachman argues, "cerebral activity and worry" had become a token of genteel literary culture and its "bookish lads"

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987) 129. The speaker here is the aesthete Mr. A.

in particular (231).⁶ Rachman notes that the connection between literariness and anxious agitation had become so culturally pervasive that in 1807, the clinician-author of *A View of the Nervous Temperment* [sic] could observe, “All men who possess genius. . .are endued by nature with more than usual sensibility of nervous system.”⁷ The heightened nervous sensibility ascribed by clinicians to “men of letters” in the nineteenth-century could thus be viewed as paving the way for anxiety’s privileged status in twentieth-century theories of emotion, from Silvan Tomkins’ psychological studies of negative affect to Heidegger’s phenomenology of moods.

Considering its centrality across knowledge formations—literary culture, philosophy, psychoanalysis—one might ask the following questions: how does anxiety come to acquire its special status as the distinctive “feeling-tone” of intellectual inquiry itself? Concomitantly, what makes anxiety culturally codifiable as a distinctively, if not exclusively, masculine disposition? To approach this question, this essay considers strikingly homologous accounts of social and symbolic dis-positioning in three texts preoccupied with the “moody organization” (a term repeatedly used in *Pierre*) of male knowledge-seeking subjects: Melville’s *Pierre*, Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, and Heidegger’s analysis of “anxiety” in *Being and Time*. In each case, the configuration anxiety assumes becomes inextricably bound up with the trajectory of the male analyst’s intellectual quest

⁶ Stephen Rachman, “Melville’s *Pierre* and Nervous Exhaustion; or, ‘The Vacant Whirlingness of the Bewilderingness,’” *Literature and Medicine* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 226–249.

⁷ Cited in Rachman, 231.

for understanding or interpretation. “Anxiety” subsequently emerges as a general effect of spatialization curiously dominated by a projectile logic involving thrown, hurled or forcibly displaced objects. The topologies of dispositioning produced here, marked by disorientation, dizziness or vertigo, suggest that the logics of “projection” and “anxiety” converge in the production of a distinct kind of knowledge-seeking subject.

The Detective and The Phenomenologist

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We awake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. . . . All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again.

—Emerson, “Experience” (1844)

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Here anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself.

—Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844)

Having described *Vertigo* (1958) in seemingly contradictory terms as “the most static thriller. . . in the history of the movies” as well as “Hitchcock’s most passionate film,” one writer explains: “What gets to you in *Vertigo* isn’t anything so straightforward as visceral shock, but the stunned, hypnotic lassitude of its pace.”⁸ This peculiar rhythm

⁸ Terrence Rafferty, “Hitch at a Hundred.” *GQ* (August 1999): 63–69.

perhaps sets *Vertigo* closer to the genre of the noir film than that of the gothic, though the film conspicuously borrows from both traditions. Accordingly, *Vertigo* presents its protagonist not just as a retired detective but as what Gavin Elster (the industrialist who hires him) calls a “hard-headed scholar,” in keeping with the noir convention of depicting the private investigator as a democratized version of the male intellectual. The film’s explicit spatialization of this male knowledge-seeker’s phobia at first seems to follow, unsurprisingly, the logic of its setting’s insistent verticality. Shot on location in Northern California, and featuring several of this steeply inclined area’s zenithal landmarks (Coit Tower, the sequoias in the National Forest, the church tower at the Spanish mission), *Vertigo* uses the motif of physical disorientation to characterize Scottie’s emotional life and repeatedly stages this experience at sites of high elevation. Here the camera’s famous track-out/forward zoom from an initial shot establishing the “acrophobic” protagonist’s point of view—looking down from a rooftop, as in the film’s opening chase sequence, or from a stair similar to the one described by Emerson⁹—dramatizes the sensation of dizziness Scottie experiences by suddenly attenuating the vertical distance depicted, creating the illusion of the ground sinking beneath his gaze. Paradoxically, as is also the case in Emerson’s account of philosophical vertigo, the viewer’s perspectival identification with *Vertigo*’s male intellectual, or the alignment of our viewing position with his, becomes securely fixed in an originary moment of spatial

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” *Selected Essays, Lectures and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990) 225-247.

dis-positioning, or perspectival flux. Repeated at crucial times in the narrative, this cinematographic maneuver seems to be *Vertigo*'s most overt way of spatially rendering its male protagonist's dread, explicitly attuning our perception of exaggerated verticality to his.

In spite of this configuration, however, Scottie's affective condition remains irreducible simply to his officially diagnosed "fear of heights." For the organization of the male investigator's psychic orientation could equally be described in terms of a *horizontal* oscillation between two sites of simulacric discontinuity, embodied in the figures of "Madeleine" and Judy (both played by Kim Novak). Radically externalized from themselves, and not just doubled but redoubled, both women are marked by a structural negativity, at all moments defined by who they are not as much as who they are. Thus the film's romantic pathos hinges on Scottie's inability or refusal to perceive Judy as Judy, seeing her rather as always not-Madeleine. Yet the figure Scottie first encounters as Madeleine is *also* not-Madeleine, not simply because she is Judy playing the part of Gavin Elster's wife, but because this "Madeleine," as part of her impersonation, is *also* at times not-"Madeleine": that is, a subject herself subject to self-estranging possession by a dead woman named Carlotta Valdez. Ironically, while Carlotta and Madeleine Elster provide the models that "Madeleine" and Judy copy, it is these authentic originals who are figured as "projections" of the latter, extending outward beyond the prevailing surfaces of the living women Scottie encounters. For while Carlotta and Madeleine Elster do not impersonate other women, and have identities outside of any relationship to Scottie, they are also strikingly occulted figures—violently

absented or dead. Thus the film immediately confronts us with this paradox: it is the self-identical, non-dissimulative female presences in the narrative who are perceived as phantasmic or supernatural; the dissimulating, internally divided figures played by Kim Novak are the ones Scottie finds most actual or real.

In this sense, the oscillation Scottie experiences cannot be interpreted as a movement between fixed poles or discrete symbolic positions, since the two living women he woos (Judy and “Madeleine”) are not only self-discontinuous modulations, but presented as surfaces for the casting of other feminine images. As “screens” on which other figures are projected, Judy and “Madeleine” are also openings or thresholds; *liminal* sites of flux and discontinuity. Thus, as in Greimas and Fontanille’s semiotic analysis of “worry,” “[W]hat we have is a perpetual hesitation within a mixed figure who cannot fix his terms,” preventing the male protagonist from “effecting a polarization that would make a true subject of quest of him” (*SP* 138). Thus the anxious subject tends to “wander,” as Scottie at one point describes his occupation to “Madeleine,” rather than traverse actual distances—a movement epitomized in one markedly protracted driving scene when Scottie’s effort to tail “Madeleine” leads him in a meandering progression of turns back to his own apartment. Analogously, for Greimas and Fonatille, worry is a motion without direction, as when one paces back and forth, defined as a zone of emotional in-betweenness:

Worry is no more than this oscillation that sets into place a simulacrum available for another passion. This oscillation brings about the shifting of the tensive subject with a view to his traversing more specific trajectories. Worry in a way prepares the way for

other passions. It defines a certain *constitution* of the subject. It becomes particularized only as a function of the passions that subsequently invest the simulacrum and provide it with a modal arrangement. (*SP* 138–39, original italics)

This characterization of worry as a generic or template-like affect (a state of undifferentiated psychic tension), reconfigures what one ordinarily perceives as a phobic construction into an oddly *neutral* affective state. As we shall see, Heidegger's similar approach to anxiety as a "basic" state of mind will enable him to posit it as the mood, among all others, most suited for acts of interpretation. Just as Heidegger approaches anxiety as a *predisposition* for interpreting, Greimas and Fontanille describe worry as a form of presentiment, a state of mind that "prepares the way" for more determinate kinds of dispositions. Yet while *Vertigo's* spatial rendering of its male hermeneut's phobia seems to enact a similar dynamic, "preparing" him, as it were, for the more specific passion of falling in love, the conspicuous surplus of female figures required for this shift to take place (no fewer than four), suggests that Scottie's "anxiety" is a structure of feeling less neutral than it would seem, that its symbolic configuration is, in fact, defined in a complex field of gender relations.

But in what sense does *Vertigo's* spatial rendering of its protagonist's "moody organization" describe a trajectory of *masculinization*? and how is this movement related to the one defined by the film's various projectile objects, most of which paradoxically seem to be feminine? The first question seems superfluous or redundant (it would seem that the protagonist's masculinity is something established to begin with), unless we recall that the film follows its opening "primal scene" of Scottie's trauma with a scene

deliberately jumbling the cultural markers of gender difference. Like the bandaged and crippled figure played by James Stewart in *Rear Window*, we first encounter Scottie wearing a self-described “corset” and restlessly playing with a cane, while his platonic friend Midge works at her job as a ladies undergarment designer. At one point, Scottie’s speech in fact provides a voiceover for a close-up of her drawing, which features a female torso in a bra. The joke linking Scottie’s corsetedness to impotence becomes an explicit one, which Hitchcock continues for most of the scene:

SCOTTIE: [Stretching to retrieve dropped cane.] Ouch.

MIDGE: I thought you said no more aches and pains

SCOTTIE: Yeah, it’s this darn corset. It binds me.

MIDGE: No three-way stretch? How very un-chic.

SCOTTIE: Those police department doctors have no sense of style. Well, anyway, tomorrow will be the day.

MIDGE: Why, what’s tomorrow?

SCOTTIE: Tomorrow? The corset comes *off* tomorrow! I’ll be able to scratch myself like anybody else tomorrow, and I’ll throw this miserable thing out the window and be a free—a free man.

Foregrounded by the crucial placement of the pause, which creates a telling stammer, the process of becoming “a free man” is clearly at *stake* for Scottie at the film’s beginning, rather than something determined in advance. This process of masculinization is specifically described in terms of forcibly ejecting a corset, or in Scottie’s words, predicated on the act of throwing a “miserable thing” out a window. Yet Scottie’s fascination with throwable corsets and other feminine “objects” seems based on a more abstract preoccupation with the physics of “projection” in general. Midge accordingly appeals to mechanics rather than erotics, as might be expected, to account for Scottie’s

highly particular interest in a brassiere he finds in her apartment. Responding to Scottie's quasi-scientific curiosity ("I've never run across one like *that* before"), she matter-of-factly explains, "Revolutionary uplift. No shoulder straps, no back straps, but it does everything a brassiere should do. It works on the principle of the cantilever bridge. An aircraft engineer down in Peninsula designed it. Worked it out in his spare time."¹⁰

Scottie's enthusiastic response, "Kind of a hobby—a do-it-yourself kind of thing," signals that this apparatus of bodily "projection" will come to serve as inspiration and model for his own "do-it-yourself," entrepreneurial effort to overcome his acrophobia, bringing the externalizing design or projective logic of the brassiere/corset, as throwable feminine object, and the spatial configuration of the male investigator's affective condition, into a rather unusual alignment. This conflation of topologies becomes increasingly dominant, however, as *Vertigo* foregrounds its male protagonist's growing anxiety in correspondence with his developing quest for knowledge. Thus while the trajectory of retired Scottie's own "spare time" investigation seems strangely anticipated by the motif of a thrown corset, and even more strangely motivated by the projectional design of a mechanically innovative, male-engineered brassiere, his pursuit of understanding eventually comes to involve a succession of encounters with numerous other thrown feminine "objects"—a chain culminating in an identificatory fantasy of himself as projectile.

¹⁰ *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines "cantilever" as "A projecting structure, such as a beam, that is supported at only one end"; "A member, such as a beam, that projects beyond a fulcrum and is supported by a balancing member or a downward force behind the fulcrum."

Initially posed to Scottie as a red-herring task of disclosing the “truth” behind one woman’s seeming possession by another, this phony line of inquiry not only leads to the male hermeneut’s anxious oscillation between “Madeleine” and Judy, female figures rendered self-discontinuous by one another in *actuality*, but to the dead or occulted “originals,” Carlotta and Madeleine Elster—the real women who in absentia paradoxically function as “projections” or phantasmatic extensions of the former. Thus if anxiety is “no more than this oscillation that sets into place a simulacrum available for another passion,” the simulacrum set into place by Scottie’s spatialized mental state seems to be one made available for yet *another* imaginary structure—one that extends outward beyond the prevailing surface of “Madeleine”/ Judy. Yet this prevailing surface, epitomized in the opaque silhouette “Madeleine”/Judy becomes in her darkened apartment (a flattened image that says, “Do I remind you of her?”), is itself a projection, since the two women forming the composite are extensions of each other. Thus the simulacrum Scottie encounters, in a film self-consciously preoccupied with the mental state of this male investigator, is one where the symbolic truth, to echo Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Plato, ironically emerges *via* the ‘projection of projection’—a redoubling in which projection itself is projected back into “reality.”¹¹ This is why, as previously noted, the realness of Carlotta and Madeleine manifests only through the mediation of

¹¹ This sentence rewords one of Slavoj Žižek’s comments on the Platonic fear of “imitation of imitation.” See *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991) 15.

fantasy, their status as self-continuous “originals” becoming apparent, to ourselves as well as Scottie, only after we first encounter them as imaginary extensions of the women who imitate them.

This objectivity, a “projectedness” which emerges as the film’s predominant theme, is significantly reinforced by the status of all four women as projectile objects, in each case forcibly hurled or thrown. Thus the imaginary act of ejecting a feminine object out the window in order to become “a free man,” as anticipated in Scottie’s quip about his corset/brassiere, comes to inaugurate a chain of events positioning Scottie as a helpless or coerced witness to the hurling of *actual* women. In this manner, his trajectory of re-masculinization becomes coeval with the “line of flight” characterizing the film’s feminine minority (in the Deleuzean sense of a group determined not by the small number of its members, but by the very fact of their being occulted or displaced by social forces: in this case, patriarchal violence.)¹² When Scottie consults a local history buff about the origins of Carlotta, for example, the man explains she was the cast-off mistress of a wealthy manufacturer who bore his illegitimate child: “I don’t know how much time passed, or how much happiness there was, but then—he threw her away. He had no other children; his wife had no children. So, he kept the child and—threw her away. Men could do that in those days; they had the power, and the freedom.” The characterization of Carlotta as “thrown away” by her capitalist lover explicitly mirrors

¹² On “minority” defined this way, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) 16–27.

corporate-shipbuilder Gavin Elster's act of killing his wife by throwing her from the top of the mission church tower, an act itself preceded by the imitation "Madeleine's" act of throwing herself into San Francisco Bay (in a staged suicide attempt intended to replicate Carlotta's successful one). These dizzyingly interlinked events of "being thrown" come full circle at the film's conclusion, as Scottie helplessly witnesses Judy's accidental fall from the same church tower where he previously witnessed "Madeleine" and Madeleine's faked and actual deaths.

In this sense, all four of the women constituting the boundaries of the simulacrum Scottie finds himself in—each rendered "projections" or phantasmatic extensions of one another—are also literally *thrown projections*. This aspect gets accented in a grisly way by a shot of Madeleine Elster prostrate against the surface of the roof where her body lands, as if to evoke cinema's fundamental dependency on flattened images hitting the surface of a screen. The performative redoubling of this spatial relation (a "*thrown projection*" is, after all, a tautological construct that enacts the same principle twice over—describing the projection of a projection, or the thrownness of something already thrown), reinforces that fact that each woman seems to constitute a template for the others on which to superimpose themselves, much like a substantive modified by a repetition of itself. (As we shall see, this grammatical maneuver will become crucial to Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of anxiety). In each case the projection's spectacular redoubling seems performed specifically as an event to be witnessed by Scottie. The throwing of "Madeleine" from the church tower, for example, as well as the act of hurling herself into the bay which prefigures it, are deliberately orchestrated by Gavin

Elster for his hired investigator's gaze. Accordingly, Scottie becomes increasingly attuned to and inscribed within this spatial logic as he grows increasingly involved and affectively entangled in his hermeneutic quest (one which is, as we have seen, inextricably bound up with his quest of becoming a "free man")—to a point at which the film's particular way of configuring his state of mind becomes virtually indistinguishable from its equally insistent and repeated enactments of "projection" in general. Given this coincidence, the importance of this point should be stressed: the logic of "projection" in *Vertigo* does *not* appear to signify, as it does in psychology, a subjective operation whereby preexisting attitudes or feelings of the subject are attributed to others (i.e. the displacement of one's own, unacknowledged anxiety onto persons one feels anxious about), but designates the objective mechanism by which the affect emerges. It is therefore less accurate to say that Scottie "externalizes" his anxiety as an already established, interior condition, or as something within his self that he rejects and subsequently locates in other persons, rather, the case is that his anxiety *is* this dislocating and externalizing function—and emerges as the film's dominant symbolic or representational economy as such.

Thus Scottie's affective organization and the trajectories defined by the hurled objects he witnesses are not only isomorphic, but *consubstantial*. Scottie does not "project" his anxiety—his anxiety is precisely the signifying logic which emerges through the *mechanism* of projection, in the temporal sense of "anticipation," but predominantly in the spatial sense of a movement outward. As with Jonathan Lear's theory of catharsis as emotional discharge, Scotty's anxiety "comes packaged" with its own logical (spatialized) explanation, an affect containing its own "theory" or formative

principle. Lear's observation that "The conceptualization of an [affect] is a development within the [affect] itself" (68) illuminates that in *Vertigo*, "projection" is not something which *happens* to Scotty's anxiety, but something like "a justification of its own occurrence" (50) enabling the affect to manifest itself as such, suggesting that feelings may be retroactively constituted by the means and methods used to project, "discharge," "expel," or ex-press them.¹³

¹³ In the context of a philosophy of mind, this thesis has been extensively explored by Sue Campbell in *Interpreting the Personal* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997). See especially Chapter 2, "Expression and the Individuation of Feeling" (Campbell 46-74). Lear's study of Freudian catharsis culminates in a position indirectly anticipating Campbell's. In *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990), Lear reexamines Freud and Breuer's early papers on hysteria in order to problematize their early definition of catharsis as a type of emotional discharge, or the expulsion of an individuated substance as foreign body. He stresses that the discharge or purgation of "psychic energy" typically ascribed to catharsis in early psychoanalytic theory is actually a *theoretical fantasy* of discharge or purgation; one described by the hysterical patient (Anna O) herself, though not explicitly conceptualized by her as such. Thus "the case of Anna O shows us, right at the beginning of psychoanalysis, that . . . archaic mental life has a 'theory' of the mind's own workings. [. . .] Her 'theory' was expressed at the same archaic level of mental functioning as the rest of her fantasies: she experience [psychoanalysis's therapeutic] catharsis as a corporealized discharge" (36). Lear argues, however, that the "theory's" phantasmatic nature does not necessarily imply its invalidity. Since "even the most archaic unconscious mental process contains within it an implicit, fantasied 'theory' of that process" and this theory of the mental process "is part of the person's (perhaps unconscious) experience of that process," Lear notes that "the fantasied 'theory' becomes part and process of the mental process itself, and in altering the fantasy one alters the mental process itself." Though Lear does not make this point directly, his argument that in giving conscious, conceptualized expression to one's emotional life or "archaic fantasies of mental functioning" in language, "one is able to influence the fantasy and thus the mental functioning which embodies and expresses that fantasy" (38), comes close to Campbell's suggestion that feelings, as forms of "mental functioning," are individuated by their expressions.

Hence the film's convergence of trajectories (that of Scottie's quest for knowledge/masculine agency, the spatialization of his affective "condition," and the pathway of objects hurled into space) becomes most pronounced in Scottie's dream: one narrative sequence in the film in which all four women seem co-present or at least metonymically linked together, and in which he explicitly fantasizes himself as thrown. Framed by an exterior shot of Scottie's apartment featuring Coit Tower in the near distance, whose blinking light seems to initiate the succession of images which follows, Scottie's dream stages his identification with "Madeleine's" trajectory as hurled object when it shows him walking in a cemetery and peering into an empty grave by an unmarked stone—an exact reenactment of the phony dream "Madeleine" describes to him as part of the possession hoax: "It's an open grave and I stand by the gravestone looking down into it." In the dream, Scottie's gaze into this site of negativity, or nothingness—a patch of blackness resembling the opaque profile of "Madeleine"—Judy, strangely giving the impression of surface rather than depth—propels him into a fantasy of *himself* as projected projection, a point Hitchcock emphasizes by depicting his body (the "object" thrown) as a black silhouette cast towards the same surface on which Scottie witnesses Madeleine herself flattened. Here the simulacrum of the dream brings forth, once again, the redoubling of the spatial relation, which in this case literally returns the subject to waking reality, depicting the entity projected as itself a projection, *qua* two-dimensional surface or flattened image.

In this manner, the dream sequence initiates a line of flight explicitly linking the projectional logic of Scottie's anxiety (as evinced in the fantasy of his fall) to an aversive

encounter with nothingness. This is emphasized by the fact that the location from which his trajectory emanates, the open grave, is fundamentally a dislocation or *non-place*—there is no there there. For having established Scottie's initial look at this "there," the film immediately stages the aversive *turning* of his gaze: not showing us the grave's interior, as might be expected from the camera's slow zoom towards it, but abruptly cutting away to a highly defamiliarized, mask-like closeup of the gazer's face: a shot that in turn establishes Scottie as both witness *and* object of his *own* "projection" which follows. In this manner, the film oddly substitutes the subject himself, and his outward propulsion in particular, for the empty hole set up as the implicit locus of his original gaze. Recalling Kierkegaard's description of anxiety as having no object (or rather, as having "nothing" as its object"), it seems as if Scottie's encounter with this objectlessness directly precipitates the phantasmatic substitution of *himself* as object, calling attention to his mood's spatial configuration.

In reconstituting the male subject as thrown projection, the externalizing structure of Scottie's anxiety discloses his role as part of the elaborate system of "projections" designed and overseen by the film's predominantly invisible or offstage males: the wealthy patriarch from "Old San Francisco," the corporate shipbuilder who runs new San Francisco, and the military engineer (erstwhile bra designer) from Peninsula. Success stories from American capitalism who symbolize the "do-it-yourself" mentality Scottie admires, these male entrepreneurs are strikingly among the few fixed or *inertial* subjects in the film, unaffected by the mechanical forces they set into play to which other characters in the film become subjected. The redoubling of projection in

Vertigo thus discloses patriarchal ideology as what Pierre Bourdieu calls an "affective harmony of shared phantasms,"¹⁴ since the organization of Scottie's emotional state renders him as "ghostlike" as the thrown women he encounters,¹⁵ and much like the figure of the dis-positioned intellectual in Emerson's scene of staircase vertigo. Scottie's anxiousness emerges as a similar dispositioning, but one which reinforces the film's ironic critique of the emotional turbulence typically investing the male subject's quest for knowledge—a pathos-ridden inquiry which begins with its intellectual in a corset and culminates with him on a stair.

Scottie ultimately differs, however, from the other hurled figures in the narrative, since in his case the redoubling of projection enables him to regain his equilibrium by the film's conclusion. The closing shot depicts Scottie obviously "cured" of his phobia, as we see him standing on the edge of the church tower gazing directly at the surface where

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991) 10.

¹⁵ In *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), Žižek gives a great example of Scottie's becoming-phantom in the scene where he spies on Madeleine through the crack in the half-opened backdoor of the flower shop. "For a brief moment, Madeleine watches herself in a mirror close to this door, so that the screen is vertically split: the left half is occupied by the mirror in which we see Madeleine's reflection, while the right half is sliced by a series of vertical lines (the doors); in the vertical dark band, (the crack of the half-opened door) we see a fragment of Scottie, his gaze transfixed on the 'original' whose mirror reflection we see in the first half. A truly 'Magrittean' quality clings to this unique shot: although, as to the disposition of the diegetic space, Scottie is here 'in reality,' whereas what we see of Madeleine is only her mirror image, the effect of the shot is exactly the reverse: Madeleine is perceived as part of reality and Scottie as a phantomlike proturbance who (like the legendary dwarf in Grimm's *Snow-white*) lurks behind the mirror" (106-7).

Judy's hurled body has implicitly landed. In this sense, *Vertigo* could be described as a story of the process of restoring a "sick" male spectator to "healthy" masculine viewership of images flattened against a screen, by *replicating* the spatial logic of the viewer's original affect. While previously unable to gaze at thrown projections, Scottie regains the capacity to do so paradoxically by identifying with the thrownness of a feminine figure engineered by Gavin Elster. Yet the identification with "Madeleine" as hurled image perversely inspires Scottie to *continue* the tradition of male "engineering" Elster represents, attempting to remake Judy into "Madeleine" by using the former as a template on which to cast the image of the latter. Only in replicating Elster's original operation does Scottie become fully aware of "Madeleine's" status as "projected" even prior to her being thrown—an awareness that "returns" Scottie to the stability shared by the film's other men. While the logic of *Vertigo* thus renders Scottie's moody organization consubstantial with a projective dis-positioning, the *act* of projection is concomitantly claimed as a distinctly masculine prerogative. The safeguarding of this practice becomes clear in a scene early in the movie, when Scottie's friend Midge, excluded from his intellectual quest despite her efforts at involvement, attempts an analogous act of "projection" by painting her own face onto a otherwise exact copy of Carlotta's portrait. While not dissimilar to Scottie's own use of Judy as a template for "Madeleine" (though Midge reverses the trajectory by superimposing the living woman onto the mythic one), Scottie reacts with revulsion so intense that Midge finally drops out as a potential co-investigator. Thus while persons of both genders remain equally subject *to* projection's mechanical force, the film's logic dictates that the operation only

be actively *performed* by subjects who are male—a privilege limited to aircraft engineers, corporate shipbuilders, and retired police detectives alike.

Scottie's anxiousness, *as* projective dis-positioning, thus becomes posited as an odd sort of symbolic homeopathy: as a subject previously disturbed by and unable to gaze at "thrown" images, by the end of the film he becomes a normative viewer by acquiring the skill of throwing them, i.e. reenacting the same externalizing principle underlying his original phobia. Here we should recall that Elster deliberately seeks to enlist Scottie, precisely in his role as anxious skeptic or observer, as part of his initial scheme. Foregrounding Scottie's unknowing collaboration *with* Elster in act of constituting female subjects as "thrown," *Vertigo's* schematization of its male knowledge-seeker's dread thus reveals one of the most perverse paradoxes of American capitalism's "do-it-yourself" ideology—whereby a subject's awareness of his inscription *within* a system of power becomes predicated on replicating its functions. In starker terms, it is as if the logic of the male protagonist's "anxiety" dictates that he repeat Elster's act of constituting woman *as* thrown projection, *in order to identify with her as such*, since this identification provides the basis for *understanding his own status as inscribed within the same ideological system producing her as victim*. Potentially conceived as an excessive, hence potentially subversive act of role reversal, here "identification with one's victim" emerges as an instrumental and necessary step in a male hero's essentially conservative quest for "self-knowledge" and the recovery of his lost stability, ultimately facilitating his realignment with Elster and the film's other mechanical innovators. (An ideological construction becomes all the more pervasive if it requires subjects to duplicate its effects

in order to recognize its existence as such, so that, as “Madeleine” tells Scottie, and as he repeats to her as Judy, one is inevitably “too late.”) Thus the condition for the male subject’s realization of himself as a subject *enmeshed* in the economic system Elster represents—one in which women can be, as the historian notes, always already projected and then thrown away (“Men could do that in those days; they had the power, and the freedom”), is active participation in the production of self and others as projected projections. For Scottie’s final understanding of his *collaborative* role in Elster’s machinations (an arrival that coincides, significantly, with the “curing” of his anxious condition, as if as a psychological reward for this self-awareness) ultimately depends on subjecting Judy to the same acts of projection used by Elster to concoct the fiction of “Madeleine” needed to kill his wife—replicating what Elster does down to the sartorial details.

The doubly projective nature of anxiety in *Vertigo*, instigated by an encounter with negativity from which the male analyst, in his hermeneutic quest for knowledgge, withdraws and veers away as thrown, thus comes very close to the role “anxiety” plays with respect to the demonstrative pronoun “there” [*Da*] for Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1926),¹⁶ where anxiety’s consubstantiality with a projective dis-positioning elevates it to “a distinctive way in which Dasein [Being-there] is disclosed.” More specifically, this disclosure is that of Dasein’s “‘*thrownness*’. . . into its ‘there’; indeed, it is thrown in such a

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962). Hereafter referred to as *BT*.

way that. . .it is the 'there.' The expression 'thrownness' is meant to suggest *the facticity of its being delivered over*" (BT 174; original italics). For Heidegger, *all* moods or states-of-mind (but as we shall see, anxiety in particular) "*disclose Dasein in its thrownness,*" but do so primarily "*in the manner of an evasive turning away*" (175; original italics). The projective nature of Scottie's anxiety thus bears a striking resemblance to the aversive trajectory Heidegger attributes to mood (*Stimmung*) in general—as a mode of discovery paradoxically based on self-splitting or self-distanciation:

In a state-of-mind Dasein is always brought before itself, and has always found itself, not in the sense of coming across itself by perceiving itself, but in the sense of finding itself in the mood that it has. . .in a way of finding which arises not so much from a direct seeking, as rather from a fleeing. The way in which the mood discloses is not one in which we look at thrownness, but one in which we [predominantly] turn away. (BT 174)

For Heidegger, thrownness entails *a form of surrender* to the holistic complex of "the world," revealing its nature as a totality of contexts or involvements to which Dasein finds itself always already consigned, and hence "something by which [it] can be threatened":

A state-of-mind not only discloses Dasein in its thrownness and its submission to that world which is disclosed with its own Being; it is itself the existential kind of Being in which Dasein constantly surrenders itself to the 'world,' and lets the 'world' "matter" to it in such a way that somehow Dasein evades its very self. (BT 178)

We can thus find the affective organization of Scottie's intellectual quest paralleled in what Bourdieu calls the "philosophically stylized pathos" of Heidegger's analytic (10),

insofar as both trajectories insist on (and proceed from) the externalizing structure of moods. As Charles Guignon observes, “for Heidegger moods are not ‘subjective’ or ‘psychic’ in any sense,” nor “‘fleeting experiences which ‘color’ one’s whole ‘mental attitude’.”¹⁷ As such, moods cannot be grasped by turning “inward”: “Having a mood is not related to the psychical in the first instance, and *is not itself an inner condition* which then reaches forth in an enigmatical way and puts its mark on Things and persons” (*BT* 176, qtd. in Guignon 236, my italics). Contrary to a psychological theory of affect, where states of mind are in fact “inner conditions” disclosed *by* their extension outward into the world, for Heidegger “Being-in-the-world,” *as* a relation of consignment to “thrownness” or externalization, is what states of mind such as “anxiety” disclose. Thus in divulging Dasein as always already thrown, much as Scottie’s anxiety facilitates awareness of his own status as surrendered to “projection” in *Vertigo*’s elaborate system of projections, Heideggerean mood also imparts “the fact that Dasein is not brought into its *Da* of its own accord.”¹⁸ As Giorgio Agamben notes, “The originary discovery of the world is, thus, always already the unveiling of. . .a thrownness” to which Dasein has already surrendered (56). “Discovering” the world is thus not a matter of *knowing* the

¹⁷ Charles Guignon, “Moods in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*,” *What Is an Emotion?*, ed. Cheshire Calhoun and Robert C. Solomon (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) 235. The citation from Heidegger is from *BT* 340.

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 56.

world, but consignment to one's "being delivered over" to it as something that "matters."

For the mood-preoccupied analyst in *Vertigo*, as we have seen, this consignment to "projectedness" is both disclosed through and fundamental to his quest for knowledge, as if his "anxiety" and his investigative practice were coeval trajectories. Similarly, Heidegger begins his discussion of a uniquely phenomenological method of interpretation (the famous "hermeneutic circle") by immediately establishing moods as ontologically co-extensive or equally primordial with understanding, the phenomenon which in turn grounds the existential structures of interpretation and discourse. Drawing on Kierkegaard's thesis in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) of the indissociable relation between affect and concept, in which every cognitive structure is said to "presuppose a mood," (so much so that "an error in the modulation" becomes "just as disturbing as an error in the development of thought"),¹⁹ for Heidegger "state-of-mind always has its understanding and understanding always has its mood."²⁰ Mood and understanding are not only equiprimordial, but organized by intimately related spatial logics. Whereas mood discloses Dasein's "thrownness" as its "Being-in-the-world" (i.e. a mode of

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 14.

²⁰ Yet Heidegger also claims that "ontologically mood is a primordial kind of Being for Dasein, in which Dasein is disclosed to itself *prior* to all cognition and volition, and *beyond* their range of disclosure" (BT 175).

submission or surrender to the world), understanding actively throws or “projects” itself upon possibilities. According to Heidegger, this is

because understanding has in itself the existential structure which we call “*projection*.” With equal primordially the understanding projects Dasein’s Being both upon its “for-the-sake-of-which” and upon significance, as the worldhood of its current world. The character of understanding as projection is constitutive for Being-in-the-world . . . [As] thrown, Dasein is thrown into the kind of Being which we call “projecting.” Projecting has nothing to do with comporting oneself towards a plan that has been thought out, and in accordance with which Dasein arranges its Being. On the contrary, any dasein has, as Dasein, already projected itself; and as long as it is, it is projecting. As long as it is, Dasein . . . always will understand itself in terms of possibilities. . . . Projection, in throwing, throws before itself the possibility *as* possibility, and lets it *be* as such. As projecting, understanding is the kind of Being of Dasein in which it *is* its possibilities as possibilities. (145, original italics)

Understanding, then, is the enactment of the same “mechanical” principle to which Dasein has already been consigned (thrown), and to which it is made aware of being consigned through a state of mind. Having established the equiprimordially and *interpenetrability* of mood (manifestation of *thrownness*) and understanding (the event of *throwing*), Heidegger examines interpretation as a phenomenon grounded *in* understanding, and discourse, in turn, as a derivative mode or by-product of interpretation, one based on “the leveling down” of the primordial possibilities inherent in the latter.²¹ Continuing this process of “leveling down,” language is subsequently analyzed as grounded *in*, or an offshoot of, discourse. Finally, “only after this discussion of language has been concluded, is the everyday being of the ‘there’ presented in terms of

²¹ Christopher Macann, “Heidegger’s Kant Interpretation” in *Critical Heidegger*, ed. Christopher Macann (London: Routledge, 1996) 100.

the existential structure of falling” (100): the last of the four existential structures which Heidegger uses to disclose “care” as the unifying structure of Dasein’s being.²²

For Heidegger, falling (into the world) is an existential mode of everyday Dasein revealed in the “interconnection” between idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity: the paler, everyday versions of discourse, understanding and interpretation. In spite of its moral

²² Insofar as “falling” seems to characterize the intermediate state between an act of throwing (projection) and the resulting state of the entity thrown, (though in a characteristic Heideggerean maneuver, this order is reversed: Dasein’s thrownness actually *precedes* or prepares the way for acts of throwing—just as interpretation is preceded by and grounded in understanding), it comes as no surprise that the discussion of falling links this fourth existential back to the spatial principle introduced in the first. Paragraph 38 is titled “Falling and Thrownness,” a marked divergence from the one-word titles of the immediately preceding paragraphs on “Idle Talk,” “Curiosity” and “Ambiguity”: the paler, everyday versions of discourse, understanding, and interpretation. According to this progression, “falling,” which Heidegger introduces as the interconnective “horizon” encompassing the previous three phenomena, seems to be an “inauthentic” version of the thrownness associated with mood, and as such suggests that mood similarly functions as a horizon for the existential structures weakly mirrored by the phenomena above.. In other words, the logic of Heidegger’s analytic, which proceeds from mood to understanding, understanding to interpretation, and interpretation to discourse, and which then works “outward” by presenting the inauthentic modifications of these existentials in the reverse order, establishes a correspondence between falling and mood that subtly changes the *status* of mood as originally presented. Since falling is analyzed as the unifying structure encompassing idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, and falling seems to correspond with mood just as these three “inauthentic” phenomena correspond with discourse, understanding and interpretation; mood, *one* of the four structures of the holistic complex of mood, understanding, discourse, and falling which discloses care as “Dasein’s primordial Being,” now simultaneously seems to be the encompassing totality of the four structures. Zizek describes this maneuver, the “elevation of a particular moment of the totality into its Ground,” as a kind of “metaphysical or simply philosophical *hubris*.” See *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994) 97]. Yet in this case, as the title promises, falling is interpreted *in tandem* with thrownness, though Heidegger has previously kept his analyses of the “everyday” phenomena separate from the others.

and theological implications, Heidegger insists that “the term does not express any negative evaluation,” and must not be taken “as a ‘fall’ from a purer and higher ‘primal status’; nor as a “bad or deplorable ontical property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves” (BT 220). Rather, as a term “used to signify that Dasein is proximally and for the most part *absorbed in* ‘the world’ of its concern,” for Heidegger falling is “a kind of motion” that constitutes a essential part of Dasein’s topology. This “downward plunge” is in a sense the opposite movement or counterthrust to the dynamic of projection. Whereas projection “presses forward” (184), falling “tears away”: “Dasein plunges out of itself into itself, into the groundlessness and nullity of inauthentic everydayness. . . . This downward plunge. . . has a kind of motion which constantly tears the understanding away from the projecting of authentic possibilities . . . Since the understanding is thus constantly torn away. . . the movement of falling is characterized by *turbulence*” (223, original italics). Sounding not unlike an aircraft engineer, Heidegger uses this property of falling to clarify an aspect of “thrownness” hitherto unstated:

Falling is not only existentially determinative for Being-in-the-world. At the same time turbulence makes manifest that the thrownness which can obtrude upon Dasein in its state-of-mind, has the character of throwing and of movement. Thrownness is neither a ‘fact that is finished’ nor a Fact that is settled. Dasein’s facticity is such that as long as it is what it is, Dasein *remains in the throw*, and is sucked into the turbulence [of public everydayness]. (223, my italics)

Like the offstage male technicians in *Vertigo*, Heidegger functions like a “projectionist” in more ways than one: creating an abstract system in which beings are not only thrown,

but suspended *in* “the throw,” recalling the technical word used in cinema for the crucial distance between projector and viewing surface or screen. The topology defined by Heideggerean moods thus emerges as a strikingly filmic one, turning on the relation between Dasein’s status as thrown projection and the “screens” or possibilities on which it projects. Reinforcing this visual metaphor, Heidegger describes understanding’s “projective character” as that which “goes to make up existentially what we call Dasein’s “*sight*” (BT 186, original italics). The implicit “distance” between Dasein’s site of projection, and the possibilities where thrown projections land, becomes the focus of Heidegger’s interpretation of anxiety, which culminates in positing this affect as a distinctive method of gauging or estimating this distance or throw.

This analysis of anxiety begins only after the discussion of falling concludes, establishing the holistic complex of Being-in-the-world as a fourfold: “falling and disclosed, thrown and projecting.” Significantly, Heidegger introduces this particular state of mind in the context of searching for an analytic strategy that will make Dasein “accessible as *simplified* in a certain manner,” enabling the “structural totality of Being. . .[to] come to light in an elemental way” (BT 226, original emphases). Having laid out the problem as a methodological one, that of finding a way of “grasping the structural whole of Dasein’s everydayness *in* its totality,” or of bringing out Dasein’s Being “in such a unitary manner that in terms of it the essential equiprimordiality of the structures we have pointed out, as well as their existential possibilities of modification, will become intelligible,” Heidegger immediately posits anxiety as a potential solution. In doing so, anxiety suddenly becomes privileged, among all other possible moods, as the self-

disclosing function par excellence: “an understanding state-of-mind in which Dasein has been disclosed to itself in some *distinctive way*” (BT 226, my italics). Searching for “one of the most far reaching and most primordial possibilities of all disclosure—one that lies in Dasein itself,” Heidegger turns to anxiety as this *interpretive methodology*:

As a state-of-mind which will satisfy these methodological requirements, the phenomenon of *anxiety* will be made basic for our analysis. In working out this basic state-of-mind and characterizing ontologically what is disclosed in it as such, we shall take the phenomenon of falling as our departure point, and distinguish anxiety from the kindred phenomenon of fear . . . As one of Dasein’s possibilities of Being, anxiety—together with Dasein itself as disclosed in it—provides the phenomenal basis for explicitly grasping Dasein’s primordial totality of Being. Dasein’s Being reveals itself as *care*. (227, original italics).

Not just an affect but a “phenomenon which functions methodologically” (230), anxiety’s distinctiveness paradoxically comes to rest on its formulation as “basic,” as if a generic template for moods in general.

As promised, Heidegger begins the analysis of anxiety as this distinctive/basic state-of-mind by returning to his analysis of falling, previously defined as the existential structure of Dasein’s absorption in the world of discourse and the public interpretations of the ‘they.’ Like the evasive way in which moods disclose thrownness, falling as absorption in this inauthentic realm “make[s] manifest something like a *fleeing* of Dasein in face of itself [as authentic potentiality].” Yet “to bring itself face to face with itself, is precisely what Dasein does *not* do when it thus flees”; rather, “It turns *away from* itself” (BT 229). It is in this very act of turning away that Dasein “is disclosed ‘there,’” revealing the disclosive, “Interpretative” character of the evasive maneuver itself.

Having established “turning away” in falling as a mechanism of disclosure or interpretation, Heidegger suggests that anxiety performs a similar function, and proceeds to demonstrate this by distinguishing it from fear. In fear one does not so much “flee,” but rather “shrinks back” (a weaker version of the former) in the face of something threatening, defined as “A detrimental entity within-the-world which comes from some definite region but is close by and is bringing itself close, yet might stay away.” But since Dasein turns away from *itself* in falling,

That in the face of which it thus shrinks back must, in any case, be an entity with the character of threatening; yet this entity has the same kind of Being as the one that shrinks back: it is Dasein itself. That in the face of which it thus shrinks back cannot be taken as something ‘fearsome,’ for anything ‘fearsome’ is always encountered as an entity within-the-world.

Thus the turning-away of falling is not a fleeing that is founded upon a fear of entities within-the-world [as is the case for shrinking back in fear]. . . *The turning-away of falling is grounded rather in anxiety, which in turn is what first makes fear possible.* (BT 230, original italics)

Whereas in fear one shrinks back from a definite entity within-the-world, in anxiety one flees from something “completely indefinite” and “incapable of having an involvement.” As Heidegger elaborates, “Nothing which is ready-at-hand or present-at-hand within the world functions as that in the face of which anxiety is anxious” (BT 231). The claim that anxiety, unlike fear, has no concrete thing or “entity within-the-world” as its object, is by no means an original thesis; this particular point, like much of Heidegger’s discussion of falling and ambiguity, comes straight from Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety*: “I must point out that [anxiety] is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite. . . the relation of anxiety to its object [is] to

something that is nothing” (CA 42, 43). Kierkegaard’s distinction recurs in Freudian psychoanalysis (“[Anxiety] has a quality of *indefiniteness* and *lack of object*. In precise speech we use the word ‘fear’ [*Furcht*] rather than ‘anxiety’ [*Angst*] if it has found an object”),²³ and in writings of existentialists as well: “Anxiety differs from fear in that the object of anxiety is ‘nothingness,’ and ‘nothingness’ is not an ‘object.’”²⁴ Contemporary philosophers of affect have been similarly compelled to reassert this difference: Greimas and Fontanille, for example, write that “Fear is real only in terms of a coming event, one that is in play here in terms of an object of knowledge that mobilizes expectations. . . [whereas] worry by definition has no precise object” (SP 138), and for Annette Baier, having no thing as object is what distinguishes “mood” from “emotion” proper.²⁵

²³ Sigmund Freud, “Supplementary Remarks on Anxiety.” *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, ed. James Strachey, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989) 100.

²⁴ Paul Tillich, “Existential Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* V (1944): 44. Cited by Thomte in *The Concept of Anxiety* (“Introduction,” xvi).

²⁵ “Emotions [in the sense I am adopting] are different from moods in that they typically have objects, are about something, not everything, while moods, if they are about anything, seem to be about nearly everything. Nostalgia is an emotion—it is nostalgia for some roughly *intended* set of vanished joys, but depression is a mood—a sense that everything is hopeless. We can ask what makes a person depressed, solemn, irritable, euphoric, defensive, and sometimes get an answer, but the answer need not tell us what they are depressed about, what occasion they are solemnizing, what irritates them, what they are taking great joy in, what they are defending themselves against. Moods are either objectless, or have near all-inclusive and undifferentiated objects. They sometimes involve emotions searching for appropriate objects. The irritable person can be said to be set on finding an occasion for anger, but the depressed person need not be on the watch for an occasion for focused grief. She is more likely to be quite apathetic, not on the watch for anything in [particular].” Annette Baier, “What Emotions Are About,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 4 (1990): 3.

In Heidegger's uniquely spatialized topology of affect, however, the "nothing" one encounters in anxiety is also a "nowhere": that is, has no particular orientation or fixed position within the world. This combination causes the world itself, Dasein's total network of involvements, to assume the character "of completely lacking significance" (BT 231): "The threatening does not come from what is ready-to-hand or present-at-hand, but rather from the fact that neither of these 'says' anything any longer" (393). Yet this "nothing and nowhere" paradoxically makes manifest the world as such, in its lack of signifying value: "The utter [a-signifyingness] which makes itself known in the 'nothing and nowhere,' does not signify that the world is *absent*, but tells us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this *insignificance* of what is within-the-world, *the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself*" (231, my italics). This maneuver enables Heidegger to posit not only that "That which anxiety is anxious about is Being-in-the-world itself" (232), since it brings Dasein "face to face with its world *as world*" (23), but that the "nothing/nowhere" about which it is anxious is its own "being possible" (which, as many critics have noted, is also the source of anxiety Kierkegaard delineates in *The Concept of Anxiety*).²⁶ It is at this point that anxiety, already privileged as a "distinctive" mode of disclosure or interpretative paradigm, "[fit] to take over a methodological function *in principle* for the existential

²⁶ See for instance Dam Magurshak, "The Concept of Anxiety: The Keystone of the Kierkegaard-Heidegger Relationship," *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer UP, 1985) 174, and Gordon D. Marino, "Anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*," *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 308-328.

analytic” as a whole, becomes elevated into an “individualizing” and redemptive mode of affective self-discovery. Anxiety rescues or “brings Dasein back from its falling,” countering this movement by retrieving it “from its absorption in ‘the world’”:

In anxiety what is environmentally ready-at-hand sinks away, and so, in general, do entities within-the-world. The ‘world’ can offer nothing more, and neither can the Dasein-with of Others. Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the ‘world’ and the way things have been publicly interpreted. Anxiety throws Dasein back upon that which it is anxious about—its authentic potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world. Anxiety individualizes Dasein for its ownmost Being-in-the-world, which as something that understands, projects itself essentially upon possibilities. Therefore. . .anxiety discloses Dasein as *Being-possible*, and indeed as the only kind of thing which it can be of its own accord as something individualized in individualization. (BT 232)

Anxiety not only “saves” Dasein from falling, but restores its individuality and *capacity for projection* (that is, recuperates its capacity for understanding and interpretation), which is precisely the outcome of the anxious detective’s trajectory in *Vertigo*. Anxiety’s distinctive trajectory or “throw” in Heidegger is in fact the mirror image of Scottie’s pathway to recovering his status as “free man.”

Given the proclamation of anxiety’s “fitness to take over a methodological function in principle for the existential analytic” as a whole, and that Heidegger’s text is the very performance and demonstration of this existential analysis, the philosopher’s interpretation of anxiety amounts somewhat to a comment on the moodiness of his own hermeneutic practice: As everyday Dasein’s existential interpreter, I necessarily proceed from a state of anxiety, for this is the distinctive state of mind enabling one to define “the

totality of Dasein's structural whole" (mood, understanding, discourse, falling) in a phenomenologically unified manner. This is not to suggest or attempt, however, a critique of *Being and Time* based on the psychologization of Heidegger, which would be similar to dismantling a male theorist's misogynist thinking based on the premise that it can be traced to his insecurities about "the woman inside him" (reproducing, in effect, the logic of psychological "projection"). Rather, my aim is to point out that anxiety's privileged position in Heidegger's phenomenology, as a form of projectilism implying a movement from center to periphery, proceeds from claiming an initial position of strategic impotence or passivity. The individualizing freedom of "projecting upon possibilities" ultimately remains grounded in one's initial surrender to being "thrown," just as in *Vertigo*, the recovery of masculine agency seems predicated on initially being in a corset.

If "anxiety" thus takes on similar configurations in one analyst's attempt to solve the mystery of feminine projection and regain his equilibrium as a "free man," and in another's attempt to rescue Being from fallenness in a fundamentally discursive world, the spatial organization of anxiety in Melville's *Pierre* (1844) interestingly complicates these

accounts by showing their concerns with gender and language to be intimately related.²⁷

For in Melville's novel-length study of his intellectual protagonist's "moody organization," the problem of recuperating *masculine* agency raised in *Vertigo*, and the problem of recuperating Dasein's *self-interpretative* agency raised in *Being and Time*, explicitly converge through a spatial metaphor that encompasses both Pierre's destabilizing relations with women and his equally vertiginous struggles with texts and textuality. In doing so, *Pierre* reminds us that the nothingness or asignificance featured in both Hitchcock and Heidegger's accounts of anxiety is by no means a pure sort of nothingness, but one assigned to specific sites or locations: to femininity in *Vertigo*, and to the "world" in *Being and Time*. Here a dynamic of masculine "projectilism," familiar to us from the narratives of the detective and phenomenologist, emerges precisely from the conflation of the crises they feature.

Pierre's Anxious Unraveling

Like Hitchcock's anxious American investigator, whose spatialized quest for knowledge ultimately entails throwing off a corset in order to become a "free man," Pierre's quest for intellectual agency (reflected in his ambition of becoming a philosophical novelist) similarly depends on a dramatic severance from conventional relations with women, and becomes likewise bound up with an attempt to "unravel" the

²⁷ Herman Melville, *Pierre or The Ambiguities*, ed. William C. Spengeman (New York: Penguin 1996).

mystery of an “unknown foreign feminineness,” embodied in a Gothic heroine “irresistibly thrown” into or subject to possession by a “peculiar mood” (*P* 151). What becomes foregrounded in this endeavor is the intimate relation between the male subject’s own “moody organization” and his equally fraught involvements with discourse or language—the relation primarily at stake for Heidegger in his analysis of anxiety.

While Heidegger’s analysis of mood falls in the exact center of a larger philosophical project on being and time, a philosophical treatise on time appears in the exact center of his Melville’s larger study of his protagonist’s mood, constituting the hinge on which *Pierre*’s bifurcated plot structure turns. The first half of the novel, which takes place in the “pellucid azure” of Saddle Meadows, ancestral seat of the protagonist’s aristocratic family, foregrounds Pierre’s renunciation of this patrimony for the sake of his illegitimate sister Isabel, an act of rebellion also entailing the breaking of ties between Pierre and his domineering mother, and his guilty abandonment of fiancé Lucy. Sharply divided from this pastoral romance by the insertion of the apocryphal essay, which the male protagonist accidentally stumbles upon in the midst of relocating from Saddle Meadows to New York City, the novel’s second half primarily revolves around Pierre’s unhappy attempts to write a philosophical novel himself. The shift is reinforced by a corresponding change in narrational voice and tone: from the omniscient perspective and exaggerated lyricism with which the family romance is presented, to the narrator’s increasingly individuated presence as acerbic social commentator once the novel’s overall focus turns toward Pierre’s literary effort, one inspired in part by his fascination with the

phenomenological “Chronometricals and Horologicals” (a text that strangely reads like a very reductive parody of key themes in *Being and Time*.)

That this effort at a specific kind of authorship only results in unresolved tension, “nervous exhaustion,”²⁸ and unhappiness is anticipated by the narrator’s increasingly open suspicion of philosophy itself, which first becomes evident in his account of the phenomenological treatise (a “miserable, sleazy paper-rag” [207]) which Pierre finds in his coach. Unable “to master the pivot-idea of the pamphlet,” Pierre finds himself caught in a state of “wild fancyings [floating] through his soul,” a flux in which the atmospheric language of the text becomes both rhetorically and physically assaultive: “The detached sentences. . . would vividly recur to him—sentences before but imperfectly comprehended, but now shedding a strange, baleful light on his peculiar condition, and emphatically denouncing it” (293). Radically dissociated from the page, the “insufferably” metaphysical text becomes free-floating and capable of drift, returning to haunt Pierre in the New York half of the novel as he makes his own attempt at philosophical writing. (Not only do the sentences become unanchored and attack Pierre, but the “sleazy paper-rag” originally containing them seems to travel across the narrative with a volition of its own, later resurfacing in the lining of a suitcoat over Pierre’s rear end.) Thus the pamphlet authored by one “Plontinus Plinlimmon,” however unmasterable, itself seems the “pivot” or “shifter” on which the entire novel turns: as a

²⁸ See Rachman’s essay (fn. 4) for an excellent reading of this physiological aspect of Pierre’s unhappy efforts at authorship.

disembodied cloud of language appearing exactly between *Pierre's* pastoral and urban sections, it appears in turn to mobilize a transition from the sticky lyric expressionism associated with the former, to the more overtly ironic and aggressive language the narrator adopts with the latter—particularly in his increasingly vituperative attacks on philosophy as a kind of metaphysical quackery.

While such attacks are often indiscriminately aimed at all “philosophers and their vain philosophy” (208), from “so-called Transcendentalists” (262) to the “guild of self-imposters” comprised of “Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe. . .[and] a preposterous rabble of Muggle-tonian Scots and Yankees” (208), the narrator’s indictment is localized in the treatment of Plotinus Plinlimmon himself, whose “blue-eyed, mystic-mild face” seems to prefigure the blue-eyed, “Mystical Master” in *The Confidence-Man*, a figure often interpreted as a caricature of Emerson.²⁹ Given Emerson’s intellectual interest in the Neoplatonist Plotinus (one of the philosophers specifically praised in “Experience”), the portrait of Plinlimmon as an unsettling combination of youth and age (“A very plain, composed, manly figure, with a countenance rather pale if any thing, but quite clear and without wrinkle. Though the brow and beard, and the steadiness of the head and settledness of the step indicated mature age, yet the blue, bright, but still quiescent eye

²⁹ Plinlimmon’s text “Chronometricals and Horologicals” is presented as a section of a larger text entitled *If*. Though the Emerson-Plinlimmon connection is more obvious, it may be worth noting that the author of *Either/Or*, one of Emerson’s contemporaries, was known not only for producing a text named after a conjunction, but for using alliterative and latinate pseudonyms much like that of Plotinus Plinlimmon: Vigilius Haufniensis, Nicholaus Notabene, Constantin Constantius.

offered a very striking contrast" [P, 290]) directly anticipates the physical description of *The Confidence Man's* "stranger," who has "a look of plain propriety of a Puritan sort": "His age seemed betokened more by his brow, placidly thoughtful, than by his general aspect, which had the look of youthfulness in maturity. . . . Toning the whole man, was one-knows-not-what of shrewdness and mythiness strangely jumbled; in that way, he seemed a kind of cross between a Yankee peddler and a Tartar priest, though it seemed as if, at a pinch, the first would not in all probability play second fiddle to the last" (CM, 250)." In this last sentence, the implicit characterization of the metaphysician as huckster or quack (a theme itself addressed in "Experience") is already evinced in *Pierre's* description of Plotinus as essentially disguise:

To crown all, a certain floating atmosphere seemed to invest and go along with this man. That atmosphere seems only renderable in words by the term Inscrutableness. Though the clothes worn by this man were strictly in accordance with the general style of any unobtrusive gentleman's dress, yet his clothes seemed to disguise this man. One would have almost said, his very face, the apparently natural glance of his very eye disguised this man. (P, 290)

Like the sentences in Plinlimmon's own writing, unmoored from their page and able to hover and circulate of their own accord, the "floating atmosphere" which invests his person seems fundamentally discursive, not only renderable in words but by certain kinds of words in particular: Melville's "lexicon of supercharged neologisms" (Rachman 237) for which "Inscrutableness" functions as key example. Like the numerous other *-ness* constructions proliferating throughout *Pierre*, "Inscrutableness" induces a mode of linguistic drift, since the suffix *-ness* converts adjectives and adverbs into "categorical

qualities” or states (Rachman 237), essentially detachable from and transcending the specific syntactical contexts possibly limiting their application. (This is perhaps why the same constructions are so prevalent in, or even necessary to Heidegger’s phenomenology of moods.) In other words, Melville’s insistent application of the *-ness* instigates an important shift from the personal to the transpersonal: unlike *whirling*, *whirlingness* seems to be “the sort of thing that can perpetuate itself without the voluntary activity of any agent”; like Plinlimmon’s floating atmosphere, it “suggests a condition that endures through its own momentum rather than through the efforts of the individual.”³⁰ In this sense, *whirling* and *whirlingness* imply different relations to temporality as well as to volition:

The past history of the state somehow accounts for its continuation in the present, without reference to the present intentional activity of the agent. For example, an individual’s current state of depression may be explained by the fact that he has been depressed for three weeks. This does not mean that he has decided each morning to be depressed, or that something new has caused the depression each morning. Thus, the continuation of a state seems to fall outside the realm of the agent’s responsibility. This sort of ‘state’ might qualify as an antecedent condition that would prevent the ascription of responsibility . . . to the individual” (Barrett, 36).

In turning personal or behavioral attributes into states which persist “without reference to the present intentional activity” of any individual, Melville’s linguistic maneuver produces a structural effect strikingly similar to what we might ordinarily think of as mood. Rachman makes this point in his analysis of Melville’s *-ness* constructions by

³⁰ Lee Barrett, “Kierkegaard’s ‘Anxiety’ and the the Augustinian Doctrine of Original Sin,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary* 36.

suggesting that the suffix *-ness* not only “implies that *any* word can become a condition” (237), but also “imparts to ordinary language what Raymond Williams described as ‘structure of feeling,’ or a ‘structured formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many of the characteristics of a pre-formation, until specific articulations—new semantic figures—are discovered in material practice’” (*SF* 237–38). In other words, Melville’s *-ness* constructions reveal that the subjective qualities affected (*inscrutable, whirling, nebulous, mournful, dim*) are not merely part of individual experience, but as Rachman notes, “caught up in a transpersonal cultural dynamic, in which feelings are connected to categories of feeling, in part culturally constructed and in part culturally determined” (237). Like the nebulous, signifying substance that “eddie[s] and eddie[s] roundabout” the figure of Plinlimmon, the suffix *-ness* generates a vertiginous and “unraveling” atmosphere around the word to which it becomes appended, submitting this original attribute to a force which undoes its original capacity to refer to the “present intentional activity” of agents. Yet here it should be noted that “unraveling,” a key term repeatedly used throughout *Pierre* (and particularly in moments where the narration focuses explicitly on matters of writing, interpretation, and metaphysical speculation³¹) is something of a linguistic paradox, a highly peculiar

³¹ Versions of the word “unravel” appear four times in the single paragraph, for example, where the narrator reflects on hermeneutics and explicitly equates Isabel to the structure of a text—one similar to the narrative structure of *Pierre* itself: “In her life there was an unraveled plot; and he felt that unravelled it would eternally remain to him Like all youths Pierre had conned his novel-lessons; had read more novels than most persons of his years; but their false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements

instance in which the prefix *un-* actually seems to fail in its negating purpose or function.

³² Though when attached to a verb, *un-* normally “expresses an undoing of what the verb expresses,” and in doing so, as Quine shares, frequently “carries an air of liberation, as in *unbend, unbuckle, unburden, unbutton, undress, unfasten,*” etc., in the case of *unravel* and its close relative *unloosen*, this secondary effect supersedes the primary, negational one (164). In these cases, the *un-* perversely *accentuates* the verb, rather than undoing it: since to ravel is to separate, untwist, or fray something into its component parts, to unravel should technically involve doing the opposite: to tangle or twist up, enmeshing or binding parts together (just as *un-loosen* should technically mean “tighten”). Yet in the vernacular, as Quine observes, “unravel” has the sense not of “tighten” but of “loosen,” and like “unloosen,” becomes synonymous with the very verb which the prefix would seem to negate. Thus when Pierre counsels himself to be patient in attempting to solve the enigma of Isabel’s, identity because “Ever are such mysteries best and soonest unraveled by the eventual unraveling of themselves” (*P* 53), the word *unravel* carries the

. . . in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than goassmer threads which make up the complex web of life; these things over Pierre had no power now He saw that human life doth truly come from that, which all men are agreed to call by the name of *God*, and that it partakes of the unravelable inscrutableness of *God*. By infallible presentiment he saw . . . [that] the profounder elements of the human mind . . . these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings, but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate” (*P* 141).

³² W.V. Quine, *Quiddities: An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 164. I am indebted to Judith Goldman’s poem “dicktee,” where the following Quine quotation above appears as an epigraph, for directing me to this source, and for her comments on Melville’s prolific use of *un-*s in *Moby Dick*.

exact opposite meaning as it does when the narrator speaks of the “unravellable inscrutableness of God” (141). Melville’s favoring of this fundamentally ambiguous term is difficult to dismiss as merely coincidental, since the unraveling of individual qualities performed in his conversion of terms like *inscrutable* to *inscrutableness* is both a loosening and a tightening: at once producing an “atmosphere” surrounding or enmeshing the original property, but also turning this particular instance of meaning into a transpersonal condition able to float or circulate on its own. As a lexical looseness or unbindedness that seems to nevertheless threaten to *entangle* Pierre, the paradoxically formless linguistic form epitomized in the word *inscrutableness* replicates the “floating atmosphere” of radically detached words and sentences which Plinlimmon’s philosophical treatise becomes, and the atmosphere investing the figure of the philosopher himself—rendering him “disguised” in his very unconcealedness like the unassuming clothes he wears. (Interestingly, these garments seem to call into question the existence of the very body they surround, just as Melville’s suffix *-ness* simultaneously preserves and supersedes the status of the root word to which it attaches.) With the capacity both to consolidate and eddy, *un-ravel* and *unravel*, this cloud of atmospheric language is similarly recalled in the “so conveniently adjustable drapery of all-stretchable Philosophy” with which Pierre later “disguises” his own thoughts in writing his metaphysical novel. In each case, the vertiginous, ethereal substance (“whirlingness,” “floating atmosphere,” “stretchable drapery”) becomes a source of dread or revulsion for Pierre—precisely as a form of looseness that paradoxically also threatens to entangle or bind the would-be metaphysical

author, strangling his text in its own philosophical drapery. In these characterizations of Plinlimmon and his free-floating, self-circulating text, Melville makes clear that the kind of “moody” or seemingly self-perpetuating language exemplified by “Inscrutableness” is one specific to a metaphysical or phenomenological tradition, a discourse which the increasingly acerbic narrator obviously distrusts but also finds fascinating—much as Emerson himself apparently fascinated Melville while also at times seeming to irritate him.³³ In other words, while *Pierre*’s narrator and protagonist are repulsed by philosophy’s atmospheric language, neither can fully dismiss it because both are simultaneously forced to acknowledge (the former grudgingly, the latter almost reverently) its rhetorical and social *power*.

Yet if Pierre finds himself liable to being strangled by the “drapery of all-stretchable Philosophy” while in his author’s garret in New York, as Samuel Otter observes he also “chokes on the scenery” of Saddle Meadows,³⁴ where the majority of Melville’s *-ness* constructions are actually concentrated, though primarily in association with Isabel—the other object of Pierre’s simultaneous suspicion and fascination—rather than descriptions of the pastoral landscape. Often this atmospheric language comes straight from the mouth of Melville’s Gothic heroine, who at one point in telling the

³³ Merton Sealts provides a fairly detailed discussion of this relationship in “Melville and Emerson’s Rainbow.” *Pursuing Melville, 1940-1980* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1982) 250-77.

³⁴ Samuel Otter, “The Eden of Saddle Meadows: Landscape and Ideology in *Pierre*,” *American Literature* 66 (1994): 55-81. Quotation appears on p. 65.

story of her childhood describes the “ ‘infinite mercifulness, and tenderness, and beautifulness of humanness. . . [and at the same time] the feeling of the Sadness; of the immortality and universalness of the Sadness’ ” (P 122). Significantly, most of the omniscient narration in *Saddle Meadows* mirrors the syntax and diction of Isabel’s excessively lyrical, highly sensory mode of expression, as evinced in this particularly overwrought description of her playing her guitar:

Instantly the room was populous with the sounds of melodiousness, and mournfulness, and wonderfulness. . .the sounds hung pendulous like glittering icicles from the corners of the room, and fell upon him with a ringing silveryness; and were drawn up again to the ceiling, and hung pendulous again, and dropt down upon him again with the ringing silveryness. (126)

As evinced above, the cloud of nominalizations which generate and make up the grammatical “atmosphere” surrounding Plinlimmon, a language foregrounded as specific to the philosophical discourse he represents, is oddly *also* presented as a distinctive feature of a discourse far removed from the former. While the language’s properties and effects are essentially the same, in one case it indexes an exclusively masculine, highbrow intellectual tradition (the main focus of the *Pierre*-as-author plot), yet seems to no less function as a stylistic signature of the feminized forms of popular culture represented in the sentimental novel or romance (as featured in the *hyper*-conventional plotlines begun in *Saddle Meadows*). In this manner, there seems to be ultimately little difference between the sensory, expressionistic language characterizing Isabel’s speech, and which the omniscient narrator conspicuously emulates in the first half of the novel (“ ‘infinite

mercifulness, and tenderness, and beautifulness' " [Isabel]; "infinite starry nebulousness" [narrator describing Isabel]) and the language of philosophical abstraction in the second half—which the narrator significantly does not parodically replicate, but from a distance critically points to, comments on, and *attacks*. The revulsion or dread this atmospheric language later induces in *Pierre* is unsurprisingly shared by many of the novel's contemporary reviewers, whose critical assessments of the book also ironically point to the fact that the rhetoric used by the narrator in parodic imitation of the romantic mannerisms popularized by the American publishing industry (prolifically taken from the genres of Gothic, sentimental, sensational, and domestic fiction, as well as pastoral and lyric poetry), is not far from the kind of language the narrator later comments on as specific to Plinlimmon's tradition of philosophy. Though in most cases Melville's diction is recognized as philosophical in pretension (reviewers described the novel as one "in pursuit of cloudy metaphysics" [*Athenaeum*]; as a "slough of metaphysical speculation" [*Washington National Era*] written "in the mystic, transcendental vein of affection" [*Hartford Daily Courant*]; and an "affair [belonging] to the German school" [*Anglo-American Magazine*]³⁵), most of the terms singled out and quoted by critics as exemplary of this *philosophical* posturing actually come from the narrator's sentimental or *romantic* posturing, as primarily concentrated in the Saddle Meadows drama. *Godey's* witty reviewer, for example, describes the text as indicating a "transcendental metamorphosis"

³⁵ Collected in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983).

on the part of its author, seduced away from properly literary subjects by the “‘ambiguities’ of metaphysics” (Higgins and Parker 54), but bases the parody used to *demonstrate* this philosophical pretension on vocabulary associated with, or specifically from the mouth of, the novel’s Gothic heroine:

Melodiously breathing an inane mysteriousness, into the impalpable airiness of our unsearchable sanctum, this wonderful creation of its ineffable author’s sublime-winged imagination has been fluttering its snow-invested pinions upon our multitudinous table. Mysteriously breathing an inane melody, it has been beautifying the innermost recesses of our visual organs with the luscious purpleness and superb goldness of its exterior adornment. We have listened to its outbreathing of sweet-swarming sounds, and their melodious, mournful, wonderful, and unintelligible melodiousness has “dropped like pendulous, glittering icicles,” with soft-ringing silveriness, upon our never-to-be-delighted-sufficiently organs of hearing; and, in the insignificant significances of that deftly-stealing and wonderfully-serpentine melodiousness, we have found an infinite, un-bounded, inexpressible mysteriousness of nothingness. (54)

What unites the hyperexpressive language associated with the novel’s mystery woman (language coded “sentimental”), and the kind of highly abstracted, free-floating language associated with its male philosopher (coded “metaphysical”), is precisely language’s capability of becoming radically detached *from* its local codifications or discursive surroundings and acquiring a self-sustaining agency of its own. This is what Melville’s nominal conversions demonstrate at a grammatical level, embodying the very principle of textual “unraveling” that causes so much dread or anxiety in Pierre when encountering other instances of linguistic nebulousness or “atmosphere.” In this manner, the parallel Melville establishes between the inscrutableness of Isabel and Plinlimmon, the two main sources of Pierre’s uncertainty and suspicion, suggests that the novel’s stake is

ultimately less to parody or satirize the cultural tradition each represents, than to foreground an integral relationship between the affective and the discursive, between ways of language and the protagonist's "moody ways" (*P* 362). As we shall see, Pierre's response to the "floating atmosphere" associated with both the unknown woman and the male philosopher, each presented as a unreadable site of nothingness or negativity, is a fantasy of becoming thrown. Though this fantasy will seem an auxiliary or secondary response to an anxiety already generated by his unsettling relations with Isabel and struggles with philosophical writing, that is, an anxiety induced by the linguistic "nebulousness" investing both, it will be argued that Pierre's act of "projecting" this anxiety, as the phantasmic event of his own self-projection, is internal to the structure of the affect itself.

Throwing Stones

Though *Pierre's* two main plot lines begin in separate settings, the story of his increasingly complicated and emotionally fraught involvements with women, and that of his similarly fraught efforts to fashion himself as an American intellectual, eventually twist together towards the end of the novel. This convergence comes to the fore in the important Book XXV (containing the triple sections "Lucy, Pierre and Isabel" - "Pierre at His Book" - "Enceladus") when in the midst of trying to write his own philosophical novel, Pierre's already unconventional domestic arrangement with Isabel becomes newly re-complicated by the arrival of Lucy. Here the protagonist's vexed relations with

women and to textuality become similarly spatialized, coinciding in a experience of bodily disorientation. Oscillating between an illegitimate sister masquerading as a wife, and an abandoned fiancé who masquerades as a cousin and nun, (just as Scottie finds himself oscillating between Judy masquerading as “Madeleine,” and “Madeleine” masquerading as a woman possessed by Carlotta), Pierre’s growing agitation as a writer becomes inextricably linked to his conflicted allegiances to women whose social and symbolic roles are made increasingly difficult to categorize or define.³⁶ Thus upon hearing a sailor call out “Steer small, my lad; ‘tis a narrow strait thou art in!,” referring to the sight of Pierre “with both Isabel and Lucy bodily touching his sides as he walked” (353), Pierre experiences a “sudden tremble” exactly mirroring the convulsions accompanying the “terrible vertigo” he experiences while attempting to write his metaphysical novel, an effort similarly characterized, in nautical terms, of a precariously constricted passage: “His soul’s ship foresaw the inevitable rocks, but resolved to sail on, and make a courageous wreck” (339, “Pierre At His Book”).³⁷ Like the corridor in

³⁶ Aside from the constant re-shifting and deliberate blurring of kinship relations that occurs early in the novel—one which crosses lines of exogamous and endogamous affiliation (mothers become sisters, sisters become wives, wives become nuns), once Lucy moves to the city the symbolic roles of Isabel and Lucy modulate and become increasingly difficult to fix. If one wants to read the novel as a sequence of generic shifts, Isabel as conventional Gothic figure (dark, nomadic, myserious, a site of “unknown, foreign feminineness”) appears to neatly supplant Lucy as classic heroine of the sentimental novel (blonde, bourgeois, virginal). Yet these roles seem to dissolve in the second half of the novel; the previously sublime Isabel becomes increasingly flattened into a caricature of a jealous wife, and Lucy seems to acquire a mystique—“a brilliant, supernatural whiteness” and “inscrutableness” (328) of her own.

³⁷ This image of restricted passage interestingly recalls one of Melville’s annotations of

which Pierre dramatically pauses “between the two outer doors of Isabel and Lucy” (358) (where the feminine figures are redefined as liminal sites—openings or thresholds rather than fixed or stable positions), Pierre’s attempt to write positions him in a “narrow strait” which likens authorship to claustrophobia: “Through [his] lashes he peered upon the paper, which so seemed fretted with wires.” Here the narrow straits are produced by Pierre’s own body, and the transformations it undergoes due to his agitated efforts at writing—negative encounters with language which render him a “most unwilling states-prisoner of letters” (340). Just as *Moby-Dick* stages the “unlettering” of “unlettered Ishmael” through his hermeneutical obsession with the whale as text, Pierre’s unhappy efforts at philosophical writing and reading lead to entanglement and exhaustion.³⁸

The “terrible vertigo” Pierre encounters in writing and women is consolidated in the figure of Isabel herself, as a site of textual negativity: “So perfect to Pierre had long seemed the illuminated scroll of his life so far, that only one hiatus was discoverable by him in that sweetly-written manuscript. *A sister had been omitted from the text.* He had

“The Poet” in his copy of Emerson’s *Essays: Second Series*. Responding to Emerson’s depiction of the “dissipation and deterioration” suffered by writers naturally prone to excessive indulgences, Melville comments, “Mr E is horribly narrow here. He had his Dardanelles for his every Marmora.” (The Dardanelles are defined by *Lippincott’s Gazetteer* as “a narrow strait between Europe and Asia, connecting the Sea of Marmora and . . . the Aegean Sea.”) Ironically, however, the “narrow strait” of Emerson’s view on the link between artistic temperament and “deterioration” is replicated in Melville’s characterization of his artistically-inclined protagonist’s own physical breakdown; one resulting specifically from his efforts at writing. See Sealts 275.

³⁸ See Rachman (*passim*) for a more extensive analysis of this exhaustion vis-à-vis American neurasthenia, and “as an image in which disease and literary understanding converge” (227).

mourned that so delicious a feeling as fraternal love had been denied him. Nor could the fictitious title, which he so often lavished on his mother, at all supply the absent reality” (11-12). As Priscilla Wald notes citing this passage, Isabel’s status as textual lack or nothingness places her as an “alternative discourse” to Pierre: “Devoid of primary [social] relationships, she is unformed humanity, the exact opposite of her pampered brother.”³⁹ Accordingly, throughout *Pierre* the adult Isabel speaks an excruciating infantile language—not far from the “two childish languages” she describes herself “chattering” as an actual child (117). (By the end of the novel, Isabel still refers to herself in the third person and in the diminutive: “Far, far away, and away. . . Bell must go!”[355]). This “singular infantileness” (140) is reinforced by Isabel’s association not just with images of amniotic fluidity, but of amniotic disruptions or disequilibrium suggesting birth; thus her entry into the symbolic order coincides with an “uncertain, tossing memory” of “the teetering sea,” in which “floors seemed sometimes to droop at the corners. . . and changefully dropped too, so that I would even seem to feel them dropping under me” (117). In a narrative strikingly similar to Augustine’s own account of learning words in the *Confessions*, (and one which similarly emphasizes the subject’s thrownness into the world), Isabel’s story of her arrival and acquisition of language in America brings this childlike quality to the fore:

³⁹ Priscilla Wald, “Hearing Narrative Voices in Melville’s *Pierre*,” *boundary 2* 17.1 (1990), 100-132. Quotation appears on 105.

There I was; just as I found myself in the world; there I was; for what cause I had been brought into the world, would have been no stranger question to me, that for what I cause I had been brought to the house [I was raised in]. I knew nothing of myself, or any thing pertaining to myself; I felt my pulse, my thought; but other things I was ignorant of . . . But as I grew older, I expanded in my mind. I began to learn things out of me; to see stranger, and minuter differences. (*P* 123)

Since the story of her socialization occupies three chapters and spans almost to adolescence, infantile Isabel's unusually *protracted* entry into the symbolic order also brings forth a relation to language strikingly different from that of Pierre's, though similar in its affective value. Whereas Pierre finds himself confused by "speechless thoughts," or an inability to translate pre-existing cognitions into words, Isabel attributes her own "bewilderings" to a form of thoughtless speech, or to the fact that for her language precedes all conscious activity: "I never affect any thoughts. . .but when I speak, think forth from the tongue, speech being sometimes before the thought; so often, my own tongue teaches me new things" (123). Seeming to inhabit, as it were, an entirely different signifying register, Isabel's socialization "from the tongue" is significantly facilitated by a euphoric encounter with an actual infant, an event which Isabel describes as endowing her with "the power of being sensible of myself as something human" (122), constituting a crucial phase in her development as a linguistic being. In a scene of identification not unlike Lacan's mirror stage, Isabel's face to face encounter with the baby inaugurates a sense of herself as a bounded self, and enables her to acquire the capacity for differentiating self from others. This capacity is strangely described in terms of the ability to differentiate persons from *rocks*. As Isabel puts it, "This beautiful infant

first brought me to my own mind, as it were; *first made me sensible that I was different from stones*. . . *first undid in me the fancy that all people were as stones*" (122, my emphasis).

Wald suggests that "Isabel points to a world *beyond* language, a chaotic world that lacks coherence and meaning in general" (111, my emphasis). Given that Isabel's own "singular infantileness" (140) does seem to set her apart from the highly cultured and socially privileged Pierre, who is, as Wald points out, fully indoctrinated into the symbolic order of language and patriarchal law, it is tempting to describe her "alternative discourse" as a version of Kristeva's feminine semiotic, and, accordingly, to assign Isabel's initial inability to distinguish humans from stones to the primordial signifying dimension which she seems to embody. Yet since *pierre* is French for "stone," and *Pierre's* eponymous protagonist (a "stone" who at one point inserts himself inside a precariously suspended rock called "The Terror Stone"), is later compared to (1) an anthropomorphically-shaped boulder thrown off the side of a patriarchal mountain and (2) a statue rotating on a pedestal, Isabel's original "fancy that all people were as stone" is less naive or farfetched than it seems. Far from being incoherent or meaningless, Isabel's "presymbolic" tendency to blur stones and humans together in fact anticipates her hyper-literary brother's own fantasies about *being* a stone. As we shall see, *Pierre's* overall preoccupation with human-like stones and stone-like beings will become central to its spatialized configuration of anxiety.

Melville's ongoing fascination with sites of nothingness, as evinced not only in Isabel's characterization as a textual absence, but in descriptions of the whale as the "naught beyond" a wall (*Moby-Dick*), the fantasy of an enclosed hollow within the

hollow of a central chimney ("I and My Chimney") or the "deadly space between" an office and a closet containing a corpse (*Billy Budd*), often takes the form of fascination with liminal spaces and structural voids. In *Pierre*, this preoccupation is brought to the fore in the eponymous protagonist's encounter with a "horrible interspace" formed by a massive and precariously hanging rock, an encounter itself constituting a site of in-betweenness in the novel's narrative structure as a whole. Positioned in the chapter entitled "Between Pierre's Interviews With Isabel," the account is given in an interval of waiting marked by Pierre's newly-acquired anxiety, a disequilibrium generated by the similarly vertiginous, "uncertain, tossing" history narrated by his newly-found, illegitimate sister.

As an account of how she acquired "the feeling of. . .humanness among the inhumanities" (123) through the acquisition of language, as we have seen, Isabel's story is fundamentally one of a subject's indoctrination into the symbolic order. Yet Isabel does not describe her socialization through language as an experience of orientation, as one might expect, facilitating awareness of her position with respect to others within the world, but as one of *disorientation*. Rather than involving a positive accrual of knowledge, learning language and becoming human become sources of radical instability, leading to what Isabel describes, in her typical unraveling language, as "the stupor, and the torpor, and the blankness, and the dimness, and the vacant whirlingness of the bewilderingness" (122). Formed by the caesura between Isabel's two stories of "vacant whirlingness," the narrative "interspace" in which Pierre encounters the rock is also one in which he suddenly finds his thoughts vacillating between extremes, his normal

domestic routines disrupted, and his physical being sleepless, agitated, and generally confused. The oscillation newly characterizing the male protagonist's mental processes "Between Pierre's Interviews With Isabel" thus comes to resemble the "teetering" yet suspended formation he encounters there as well. This formation is the site of paradoxically stabilized instability:

It was shaped something like an lengthened egg, but flattened more; and, at the ends, pointed more; and yet not pointed, but irregularly wedge-shaped. Somewhere near the middle of its under side, there was a lateral ridge; and an obscure point of this ridge rested on a second lengthwise-sharpened rock, slightly protruding from the ground. Beside that one obscure and minute point of contact, the whole enormous and most ponderous mass touched not another object in the wide terraqueous world. It was a breathless sight to see. One broad haunched end hovered within an inch of the soil, all along to the point of teetering contact; but yet touched not the soil. Many feet from that. . .the vacancy was considerably larger, so as to make it not only possible, but convenient to admit a crawling man.

Like the "souls [which] never touch their objects" in the universe of the Emerson's moody idealist, described as a dimension rendered "all outside [and] no inside" by the opening of infinite "interspaces betwixt atom and atom" (235), the interspace Pierre discovers is one similarly defined by objectlessness: located in an entity that "touched not another object in the wide terraqueous world." The language used to describe this site of "teetering contact"—a site defined by the apparent *absence* of contact—seems to teeter or waver as well. This stylistic effect is produced through a series of retractions and corrections ("pointed more; and yet *not* pointed") facilitated by the qualifying conjunctions *yet* and *but*, an anxious syntax foregrounding the male protagonist's own increasing vacillation between conflicting states or opinions. This co-presence of

conflicting states is mirrored in the image of the rock itself: a heavy, inertial, and formidable substance that at the same time appears easily toppled. Hence the rock formation becomes a source of dizziness, and associated with menace or threat:

Few could be bribed to climb its giddy height, and crawl out upon its more hovering end. It seemed as if the dropping of one seed from the break of the smallest flying bird would topple the immense mass over, crashing against the trees.

It was a very familiar thing to Pierre; he had often climbed it. . . climbing high up the neighboring beeches, and then lowering himself upon the forehead-like summit by the elastic branches. But never had he been fearless enough—or rather fool-hardy enough, it may be, to crawl on the ground beneath the vacancy of the higher end; that spot first menaced by the Terror Stone should it ever really topple.

Here the “terrible vertigo” which Pierre encounters at various sites of negativity (his writing, and in the “unraveling” language associated with Isabel and Plinlimmon) reemerges in his encounter with a head-like stone: a simultaneously human and inhuman presence which, like the silent colossus that comes to haunt Don Giovanni, will reappear throughout the novel (and, as in the case of Mozart’s opera, most notably towards its conclusion).

As an “enormous and most ponderous mass” under continual threat of collapse, the patriarchal rock also points to its own status as ponderous yet teetering *metaphor*, as if to suggest an equivalence between patriarchy and metaphor themselves. Like other symbols of male authority in *Pierre*, in other words, the “Mute Massiveness” he encounters seems *metaphorically* overdetermined to the point of instability, much like the stolid yet constantly besieged stone structure in “I and My Chimney,” the enormous object of an old man’s obsession. Claiming to have discovered the rock, which he

originally names the Memnon Stone (after the King of Egypt), Pierre ends up consulting a “white haired old kinsman” as to the source of its enigmatic initialing: “Who,—who in Methuselah’s name,—who might have been this ‘S. ye W.?’” This paternal scholar informs him that the writer was most likely “[King] Solomon the Wise” (133). The stone is also linked to mythologized authority figures associated with the New World and its ‘discovery’: Columbus and Captain Kidd. Given this superabundance of heterogeneous, mythological patriarchs, an explicit congruence is established between the “ponderous mass” Pierre apostrophizes with the massive rock formation to which Melville dedicates his novel: “The majestic mountain Greylock—my own more immediate sovereign lord and king.” In a not-subtle mirroring of Melville’s comically over-serious, rhetorical prostration before the Pittsfield, Massachusetts rock, also called Saddleback Mountain (“I here devoutly kneel, and render up my gratitude, whether, thereto, The Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock benignantly incline his hoary crown or no”), we find Pierre invoking and addressing, with similarly overblown rhetoric, the “Mute Massiveness” of Saddle Meadows’ Terror Stone:

. . .[E]yeing the mass unfalteringly. . .he threw himself prone upon the wood’s last year’s leaves, and slid himself straight into the horrible interspace, and lay there as dead. He spoke not, for speechless thoughts were in him. These gave place at last to things less and less unspeakable; till at last, from the very brow of the beetlings and the menacings of the Terror Stone came the audible words of Pierre:—

“If the miseries of the undisclosable things in me, *shall ever unhorse me from my manhood’s seat*, if to vow myself all Virtue’s and all Truth’s, be but to make a trembling, distrusted slave of me; if Life is to prove a burden I can not bear without ignominious cringings; if indeed our actions are all foredained, and we are Russian serfs to Fate; if invisible devils do titter at us when we most nobly strive; if Life be a cheating dream, and Virtue as unmeaning and unsequed with any blessing as the

midnight mirth of wine. . .*then do thou, Mute Massiveness, fall on me!* Ages thou hast waited; and if these things be thus, then wait no more; for whom better canst thou crush than him who now lies here invoking me?" (134–35, my italics)

Though Pierre's sense of menace or dread initially derives from the "horrible interspace" *within* the structure he encounters, his soliloquy displaces this menace onto the material structure itself—a shift prefigured by Pierre's act of renaming it the "Terror Stone." "Terror" thus becomes a property of the stone itself, rather than a emotion precipitated by Pierre's relation to a negative space within it. Reformulated as the terror posed by a ponderous *substance* ("do thou, Mute Massiveness, fall on me"), rather than the original danger posed by a nothingness or void, this reconceptualization of anxiety hinges on Pierre's act of rendering *himself* the "object" of the substance's gravitational force. Much like Scottie's encounter with the open grave in his dream, which immediately precipitates his fantasy of being hurled in space, Pierre's rhetorical self-transformation into an entity potentially crushed, crumbled, or "unhorsed" takes place as an aversive turn from negativity. In place of the objectlessness which originally confronts him, Pierre's substitution of himself as "object" thus enacts a form of symbolic dis-positioning mirrored by the numerous passive constructions, as Wald observes, used to characterize him as a victim of emotional dispositions or moods: "A sudden, unwonted, and all-pervading sensation *seized him*" (395); "a temporary mood. . .*invaded [his] heart*" (240); "the specializing emotion. . .*seized the possession of his thoughts*, and waved [a thousand forms] into his visions" (50). Significantly, it is in the very act of making himself this

“object” (through the act of addressing the stone) that precipitates Pierre’s fantasy of himself as being forcibly displaced or hurled from “manhood’s seat.”

Pierre’s reconceptualization of threat in his Terror Stone address thus culminates in a new definition of “anxiety,” as a form of *masculine* dispositioning based on the logic of “projectilism.” This particular spatial organization is brought to the fore in novel’s famous Enceladus fantasy, a dream which significantly follows one of Pierre’s failed attempts to write. Here the event of becoming a thrown “stone,” as the imaginary act anticipated or projected in the Terror Stone encounter, becomes realized in a fantasy caused by a state of disorientation similar to the “terrible vertigo” elsewhere associated with the novel’s two main sites of negativity: the “unknown, foreign feminineness” embodied in Isabel, and the “inscrutableness” of Plinlimmon and his metaphysical writing:

A sudden, unwonted, and all-pervading sensation seized him. He knew not where he was; he did not have any ordinary life-feeling at all. He could not see; through instinctively putting his hand to his eyes, he seemed to feel that the lids were open. Then he was sensible of a combined blindness, and vertigo, and staggering; before his eyes a million green meteors danced; he felt his foot tottering. . .he put out his hands, and knew no more for the time. (314)

The similarity between this state of mind and the “whirlingness” Isabel describes in her own account of acquiring language is brought forth in Melville’s description of the psychic conditions informing the act of writing under which Pierre nevertheless persists: “Against the breaking heart, and the bursting head; against all the dismal lassitude, and deathful faintness and sleepiness, and the whirlingness, and craziness, still like a

demigod he bore up” (339). In face of this vertigo (one characterized by a string of substantives almost directly corresponding to Isabel’s experience of stupor, torpor, blankness, dimness, whirlingness and bewilderingness), Pierre’s acts of writing become acts of *aversion*, much in the same way his encounter with the “horrible interspace” does—as if to posit language itself as an analogous site of negativity. This turning away is reinforced by Pierre’s physical gesture of averting his gaze: “Sometimes he blindly wrote with his eyes turned away from the page. . . he had abused them so recklessly, that now they absolutely refused to look on paper. He turned them on paper, and they blinked and shut. The pupils of his eyes rolled away from him in their own orbits” (340, 341).

It is precisely from this state of mind, one defined by an aversive trajectory arising specifically from a struggle between male subject and text, from which the Enceladus fantasy emerges: “[Once] again the pupils of his eyes rolled away from him in their orbits: and now a general and nameless torpor. . . seemed stealing upon him.” As the narrator proceeds,

During this state of semi-unconsciousness, or rather trance, a remarkable dream of vision came to him. The actual artificial objects around him slid from him, and were replaced by a baseless yet most imposing spectacle of natural scenery. But though a baseless vision in itself, this airy spectacle assumed very familiar features to Pierre. It was the phantasmagoria of the Mount of the Titans, a singular height standing quite detached in a wide solitude not far from the grand range of dark blue hills encircling his ancestral manor. (342)

In this hallucinatory return to the pastoral setting of Saddle Meadows and its rocky patriarchal ruins, the “baseless yet most imposing” configuration of Pierre’s fantasy

recalls the teetering yet ponderous structure of the Memnon Stone: the mass that eventually supplants the negative space it surrounds as locus of Pierre's anxiety or dread. Within the dream, Pierre explicitly identifies himself with "Enceladus," another anthropomorphic stone, named after the mythological son of Titan. This stone is described as hurled from the sides of the patriarchal mountain "Titan" and lying "shamefully recumbent at its base" (346). Scattered among other "recumbent sphinx-like shapes thrown off the rocky steep," the "American Enceladus" Pierre confronts in his trance becomes a mirror image of himself: "Enceladus! it is Enceladus!"—Pierre cried out in his sleep. That moment the phantom faced him; and Pierre saw Enceladus no more; but on the Titan's [dismembered] trunk, his own duplicate face and features magnifiedly gleamed upon him with prophetic discomfiture and woe. With trembling frame he started from his chair, and woke from that ideal horror to all his actual grief" (346).

Here the two "stones" from Saddle Meadows, the American Enceladus and the anxious *pierre*, become explicitly conflated. To nail an already explicit equivalence, Melville explains that Enceladus is not just the son of Titan, but of Titan's incestuous marriage with his mother Terra. Recalling Pierre's own quasi-incestuous, overdetermined intimacy with Mrs. Glendinning (one "Hamletism" among the many others self-consciously reproduced in the novel), the mythological association also serves as analog for two polarized and increasingly conflicting tendencies in the male protagonist: Pierre's desire for metaphysical transcendence through literary and philosophical endeavors (his "heaven-aspiring" mood [327]), and a desire for "earthly"

happiness; the social, material, and domestic satisfactions associated with the Glendinning manor and the bourgeois life he abandons upon leaving the valley of Saddle Meadows for his skyline garret in New York. Significantly, the mythological reference further intensifies this dichotomy of “low” and “high” aspirations by polarizing them in terms of gender. And more specifically, in terms of an unresolvable oscillation—not just between the “feminine” pole of bourgeois comforts and the “masculine” pole of literary bohemianism, but between the maternal and paternal:

Old Titan's self was the son of incestuous Coleus and Terra, the son of incestuous Heaven and Earth. And Titan married his mother Terra, another and accumulatively incestuously match. So Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an incest; and even thus, there had been born from the organic blended heavenliness and earthliness of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood; which again, by its terrestrial taint held down to its terrestrial mother, generated there the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him; so that the present mood of Pierre—that reckless sky-assaulting mood of his, was nevertheless on one side the grandson of the sky. For it is according to eternal fitness, that the precipitated Titan should still seek to regain his paternal birthright even by fierce escalate. Wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof he came from hither! (347)

The “mixed, uncertain mood” generated by this oscillation is similar to the vertigo initially propelling Pierre into his fantasy of being a “precipitated” stone. Yet the narrator seems to veer his emphasis towards the masculine, “sky-assaulting” side of the oscillation, rendering the mood less like a true hybrid than a disposition aimed at the restoration of a lost patriarchal continuity. In this manner, the “mixed” mood causing Pierre's initial sense of *disorientation* (eventually leading to his being “precipitated” from the site of paternal cohesion) is paradoxically reconfigured as a means of *reorientation*: redirecting him towards a “paternal birthright” once previously spurned. Initially defined

as an undecidable wavering or oscillation *between* poles, Pierre's anxiety is nevertheless resituated as a masculine inclination through his identification with Enceladus as "precipitated" object.

Thus while the Enceladus fantasy seems a reprise of Pierre's previous, waking encounter in Saddle Meadows with an enormous paternal mass, the structure he confronts seems to have changed in appearance as well as in size. For here the patriarchal structure seems to have regained its foundation: no longer "teetering," like the ponderous rock from Pierre's past, but anchored in a way that recharges the structure's power or virility. Melville reinforces this shift by describing the Mount of Titans as an entity *which actively imposes itself upon the subject*, rather than an object that the subject discovers, names, and addresses. Whereas Pierre exerts these claims on the Memnon/Terror Stone, the mountain in the Enceladus exerts its claims on the human subject, here universalized as the second-person "you": "A terrific towering palisade of dark mossy massiveness confronted *you*; and trickling with unevaporable moisture, distilled upon you from its beetling brown slow thunder-showers of water-drops, chill as the last dews of death" (344). The striking shift to second-person (used nowhere else in the novel) reinforces the objectification of the subject (no longer a discoverer, he becomes *discovered*), and reverses the structure of Pierre's earlier apostrophe in which he addresses the "Mute Massiveness" as *thou*. This grammatical shift corresponds to a simultaneous shift in the appearance of the "massiveness": whereas before it was "ponderous," a term suggesting heaviness but also the unwieldiness or clumsiness due to excessive weight or size, the Mount of the Titans seems free from this potential instability. What was once teetering or ungainly

now seems highly ordered like a military structure or formation: “A terrific towering palisade of dark mossy massiveness confronted you. . . the grim scarred rocks rallied and re-rallied themselves; shot up, protruded, stretched, swelled, and eagerly reached forth; one every side bristlingly radiating with a hideous repellingness” (344). Thus in the Enceladus fantasy, the “mass” from Saddle Meadows seems decidedly less “ambiguous” and considerably more *aggressive*: organized in the form of a fence of sharpened points.

This restoration of the paternal mass’s sovereignty, now *in spite of* its crumbling surface, is paralleled by a corresponding shift in the status of the “displacements of huge rocks” thrown from the larger substance. Altering the shape of the structure so as to enhance its imposing appearance (or, as we are told, in conformity to its second, regent-like name, “Mount of Titans,” rather than the humbler “Delectable Mountain), these displaced fragments seem to be larger versions of the thrown “stone” Pierre becomes in his first encounter with a similarly enormous but crumbling structure. Once again, the thrownness of the Enceladus rocks emerges from an anterior state of oscillation, or undulation, one which provides the unstable ground from which the displaced figures manifest themselves as such. Much like the slanting and sliding of surfaces characterizing Isabel’s acquisition of language as well as her ocean voyage to America (both experiences of social and symbolic initiation, or of arriving at the “new”), as well as Pierre’s subsequent efforts to write, the displaced rocks are first fully defined against a background defined by its flux: “Rising close up to the precipice’s base. . .the efflorescent grasses rippled against [the acclivity], as the efflorescent waves of some great well or long rolling billow ripple against the water-line of a steep gigantic war-ship on the sea. [T]his long

acclivity was thickly strewn with enormous rocky masses, grotesque in shape, and with wonderful features on them. . .” (343). Insofar as “strewn” suggests a surface covered with objects that have been randomly scattered or flung, rather than carefully set down or placed, the Enceladus fantasy presents another variation of an affective dynamic in which an initial state of oscillation (evinced in the “rippling” and “rolling” surface of the acclivity) produces, or reconfigures, the [male] subject as *thrown particle*. In an extension of the metaphor of undulant “sea-like sands” used above, Melville reinforces this point by comparing the strewn rocks to other small forms subject to violent trajectories of displacement, and by naturally vertiginous elements (wind and water): “Tossed and piled and indiscriminate among [the larger rocks comprising the unified palisade], like. . . great masts and yards of overwhelmed fleets hurled high and dashed amain, all splintering together, on hovering ridges of the Atlantic Sea,—you saw the melancholy trophies which the North Wind. . .had wrested from the forests, and dismembered them on their own chosen. . .ground, in barbarous disdain” (344). Wrested from a unified paternal structure, tossed, hurled, and finally dashed, these thrown stones are made manifest in a manner very close to the way in which Pierre refashions his identity as “stone” in the previous scenario. Yet while both vertiginous encounters culminate in scenes of projection, in Pierre’s dream the status of the objects seems once again to have changed, in a slight but crucial way. Instead of one solitary particle or “stone,” here there are many—and these impassive, “sphinx-like” entities seem larger and sturdier, hence less vulnerable than the crushable object Pierre imagines himself to be when inserting himself in the interspace. Here “throwness” remains figured as a state of male abjection,

notwithstandingly also as a sign of perseverance and fortitude under duress—attributes of the traditional male hero of the romance or novel: “Enceladus the Titan, the most potent of all the giants, writhing from out the imprisoning earth;. . .resisting with his whole striving trunk, the Pelion and the Ossa hurled back at him;. . . still turning his unconquerable front toward that majestic mount eternally in vain assailed by him, and which, when it had stormed him off, had heaved his undoffable incubus upon him, and deridingly left him there to bay out his ineffectual howl.” As this passage progresses, the initial characterization of Enceladus as a noble, “defiant,” and even “unconquerable” figure slides away quickly, undercut by Melville almost as rapidly as he establishes it. Thus the thrown-off rock’s sublime “awfulness” is immediately countered with its figurative castration or dismemberment, as well as the comic image of an unwanted but “undoffable incubus” heaved on top of its head. Finally “deridingly left. . .to bay out his ineffectual howl,” the abjectness of Enceladus as expelled particle (albeit a relatively large-sized one) is reinforced by a description of this figure as embarrassingly sunken in the ground or *stuck*, as from the very the impact of having being thrown (P 345).

By the end of the fantasy, however, the object “wrested” and hurled from the precipice is eventually depicted as an object *which hurls itself back* at the paternal ‘mass’ with a force comparable to that with which it was initially violently detached: “No longer petrified in all their ignominious attitudes, the herded Titans now sprung to their feet; flung themselves up the slope; and anew battered at the precipice’s unresounding wall. Foremost among them all, [Pierre] saw a moss-turbaned, armless giant, who despairing of any other mode of wreaking his immitigable hate, turned his vast trunk into

a battering-ram, and hurled his own arched-out ribs again and yet again against the invulnerable steep (346). In shifting the American Enceladus from an object “thrown off from the rocky steep” to a “no longer petrified” entity capable of throwing itself *against* this steep, Pierre’s dream performs a redoubling of “projection” which culminates in the restoration of masculine agency, much as the corseted, thrown subject in *Vertigo* eventually regains his status as free man and active thrower of projections. In both cases, the male subject’s anxiety assumes this projective character in the act of averting or turning away from “horrible interspaces” or spots of radical negativity: occasions of discursive “unraveling” that simultaneously entrap and entangle. The feminine whorl or knot in *Vertigo*, and the philosophical text in *Pierre*, are two examples of these unraveling structures: like Carlotta’s animated bouquet of flowers in Scottie’s dream, which untwists into pieces that subsequently swirl around and bombard the viewer, or the sentences radically loosened from “Chronometrics and Horologicals” which surround and confuse Pierre, these sites are less locations than dis-locations, generating interspaces with no there there. Like the grave that marks an area Scottie’s gaze cannot fix itself upon or actually reach, and from which it can only turn away, or the “nothing-and-nowhere” in Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety that occasions Dasein’s fleeing or the aversive turning of its “sight,” the absence of a “there” to orient the male subject in the world around him provides the occasion for a dis-positioning that subsequently *delivers* him over to this “there” as thrown. Thus the redoubling or projection of projection in the Enceladus fantasy, as in Scottie’s dream and Heidegger’s philosophy, counters the directionless oscillation Pierre initially experiences in face of the “unknown, foreign feminineness”

embodied by Isabel, and the “floating atmosphere” of language associated with Plinlimmon and Pierre’s own philosophical writing, with a trajectory enabling the male subject to regain some form of situatedness in the world, albeit in the form of a precipitate object consigned to its being in the throw.

The crises of male intellectual agency occasioned by sites of unraveling in Pierre (‘feminineness,’ linguistic ‘nebulousness,’ and ultimately ‘patriarchalness’ [11]) are thus negotiated by a mode of projective dis-positioning that ensues from, but ultimately supersedes or replaces, the subjective dizziness or vertigo that is more conventionally anxiety’s signature, particularly in the tradition of Western philosophy. From Descartes’ description of the dizzying “whirlpool” raised by his doubt in the *Meditations*, to Kierkegaard and Emerson’s accounts of disorientation before an abyss and on a stair, images of “whirlingness” are often central to the kinds of metaphysical writing Melville’s narrator finds both seductive and repellent. Thus when the narrator intones, with exaggerated seriousness, that “Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft” (289), he seems to be overtly parodying the scene with which Emerson’s study of moods begins (“Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We awake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight.”) Yet while also recalling the “long winding passage” of stairs leading to the garret where Pierre tries to

write his own philosophical treatise, it is the *vertigo* with which Emerson opens “Experience,” rather than the staircase imagery, that seems the specific target of Melville’s irony. For by insistently subjecting the sentence’s key terms to modulation—a process that entails repeating the familiar maneuver of converting adjectives and prepositional phrases into substantives (thus “spiral” recurs as “spiralness”; “without any end” as “endlessness”)—*Pierre*’s narrator puts a deliberately dizzying grammar into play. This subsequently induces a stammer in syntax, so that the progression of terms, pivoting on the first conversion of modifier to substantive, folds back on itself: spiral, stair, shaft, no end, no end, spiral, stair, shaft.⁴⁰

Yet by foregrounding the spatial nature of its protagonist’s affective response to the “horrible interspaces” he encounters, *Pierre* reveals this “moody organization” to be a structure comprised of all outsides without inside, not unlike Emerson’s account of the modern intellectual’s universe as a system of surfaces formed by the unfurling of

⁴⁰ However skeptical Melville may have been of Emerson’s use of “vertigo” as metaphor for the modern intellectual’s condition (in a 1849 letter to Evert Duyckink, he announces, “I do not oscillate in Emerson’s rainbow” [Sealts 275]), there are significant ways in which their mood-preoccupied texts converge. In both cases, moodiness is linked specifically to a form of spatial dislocation or dis-positioning (“we . . . should not know our place again), and to language itself as a system of evasive distancing: “Man seems to have learned of the horizon the art of perpetual retreating and reference I quote another man’s saying; unluckily that other withdraws himself in the same way, and quotes me” (“Experience” 226). Much like the “sinking” world in Heidegger’s account of anxiety, the figure of language in perpetual withdrawal reminds us that the events of projection repeatedly staged in *Pierre* occur not in response to things which draw near, but as an evasion of objects already placed in recession or subject to unravelling.

“astronomical interspaces betwixt atom and atom” (“Experience” 235).⁴¹ The “projectilism” that comes to organize and inform this domain of exteriority, one less subjective than objective, calls the “subjectivism” of affectivity itself into question. In this sense, the narrator’s distrust of the expressive language associated with the romantic signifying conventions he exaggerates seems very much in attunement with the novel’s representation of Pierre’s state of mind as an external and externalizing *relation* (or as the text puts it as a form of “outward habituation” [177]), insofar as this representation poses a challenge to the conventional notion of “feelings” as interior states formed independently of and existing prior to being expressed.

While doing so, however, the projective character Pierre’s “anxiety” comes to assume, as a form of dis-positioning marked by an implicit movement from agent to object, center to periphery, performs a more conservative function as well. For, as is the case in Heidegger and Hitchcock’s similarly spatialized renderings of the male analyst’s distinctive mood, the externalizing trajectory which anxiety becomes secures this disposition as a form of *self-liberation* (albeit only as fantasy in Melville’s text), based

⁴¹ The unfurling or unravelling of a structure is, for both Melville and Emerson, the objectivity or truth of the subjective, in contrast to locating this truth as something the wrappings hide. *Pierre*’s narrator emphasizes this prevalence of surface over in a frequently cited passage: “The old mummy lies buried in cloth on cloth; it takes time to unwrap this Egyptian king. Yet now, forsooth, because Pierre began to see through the first superficiality of the world, he fondly weens he has come to the unlayered substance. But, far as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sacrophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there!—appaling vacant as vast is the soul of man!” (*P* 285)

precisely on the claim to “peripheral” status which this movement makes available. The way to freedom *via* projection, like Scottie’s pathway to becoming a free man, or the freeing of Dasein for its authentic possibilities through its disclosure in anxiety as thrown projection, occurs only in claiming an initial “surrender” to thrownness that registers in the form of impotence or passivity. In each case, the projective character assigned to “anxiety” enables it to function as a way of recovering the subject’s masculine or interpretative agency by propelling him up and away from the “horrible interspaces” which subject him to directionless oscillation, sites already placed in abeyance by being characterized as “nothing and nowhere”: a-signifying, unraveling or unreadable. As Heidegger’s text demonstrates in particular, in shifting focus from the *occasions* of this negativity (unraveling femininity in *Vertigo* and *Pierre*, forms of discursive a-signifyingness in *Pierre* and *Being and Time*), and relocating the threat to “nothingness” itself, which sheds its status as a property fixed to a specific structure or entity and becomes a substantive, “anxiety” acquires a strangely “basic” status as an affect without determinate object or target—as reflected in numerous descriptions by psychologists and contemporary philosophers of emotion of anxiety’s characteristic lack of “directedness” or intentionality. Greimas and Fontanille go as far as to suggest that anxiety presents a case of pure “phoria” prior to its polarization in terms of euphoria and dysphoria, as a neutral, value-free “protensivity” or “soft chaos of nonarticulated tensions” (*SP* 6). Yet contrary to being an “indefinite flatness” that suspends the assignation of values (*SP* 6), Melville, Hitchcock and Heidegger’s formulations suggest that anxiety is in fact object-

directed, but only in the negative sense: as an aversive turning “*away from*,” rather than a philic movement “*towards*.”

“Anxiety” nonetheless comes to assume its prominent role in structuring the “philosophically stylized” quests for truth, knowledge, and masculine agency featured in *Pierre*, *Vertigo*, and *Being and Time*, precisely as a way of rescuing the intellectual from his potential absorption in sites of a-significance or negativity. Whether created by the throwing of corsets, projections, or stones, in each these topology “anxiety” emerges as a form of dispositioning that paradoxically relocates, re-orient, or repositions the subject thrown, as Heidegger puts it, performing an “individualization” that restores and ultimately validates the trajectory of the analyzing subject’s inquiry. There is a form of “revolutionary uplift” which anxiety’s projective character makes available, in other words, that directs attention away from the less dramatic questions of “unraveling” structures and “sinking” worlds as quickly as it raises them, such that this moody organization might also be described as the aversion of aversiveness, or in terms of an immediate turning away from the occasion of turning away. If the question of aversiveness *to* negativity is precisely what “anxiety” veers away from or postpones, it may be that this form of distanciation plays some role in the affect’s auratic appeal and overall prominence in cultural narratives of intellectual life, and more specifically in its codification as the male knowledge-seeker’s distinctive yet basic state of mind.

Chapter Four

Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust

Shit has to be encountered in another way. It is now necessary to think of the usefulness of the unuseful, the productivity of the unproductive, philosophically speaking: to unlock the positivity of the negative and to recognize our responsibility also for what is intended. Kynical philosophers are those who do not get nauseated. In this they are related to children, who do not yet know anything about the negativity of their excrement.

How else could I refer to that horrible, brute raw matter and dry plasma that was simply there while I shrank back within myself in dry nausea, I sinking centuries and centuries deep in mud — it as mud, and not even dried mud but mud still wet, still alive, it was an ooze in which the roots of my identity were twisting about with an intolerable slowness.

Take, take all that for yourself, I don't want to be a living person! I disgust myself, I marvel at myself, thick ooze coming slowly forth. . . .

I had reached nothingness, and the nothingness was live and moist.

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembled nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.

Your civilization has big teeth, o fathers, so big that it ended by gobbling itself. Now, we must pick over the pile of shit

and each seek his piece of the tongue/language. No history,
everything's putrefied!

The point is Gee Whiz is excrement
and if you think you are going to drag all that mess into the
moment
"you" are another thing coming.

I'm happy to have a little waste.¹

Theories, poetics, and hermeneutics of "desire" abound, but there seems to be
something about disgust that resists engendering similar discursive formations.² In
contrast to the striking number of critical abstractions produced around the category of

¹ These epigraphs are taken, respectively, from the following texts: Peter Sloterdijk, "Concerning the Psychosomatics of the *Zeitgeist*," *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987) 150; Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. Ronald W. Sousa (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 49 [hereafter referred to as *GH*]; Georges Bataille, "Formless," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekel with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 31; Bernard Noël, "The Outrage Against Words," *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984) 192; Deanna Ferguson, *Rough Bush* (Buffalo: Meow Press, 1997) n. pag.; Bruce Andrews, *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up, or, Social Romanticism* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Books, 1992).

² Jonathan Dollimore, "Sexual Disgust," *Dirt: An Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference*, Harvard University, March 1995. This essay was largely inspired by the implications of this remark, as well as by Dollimore's immediately following comment that he did not intend to propose a "theory of disgust." It should be clear, however, that when speaking of "desire" throughout this essay, I am not referring to *sex* or *sexual practices*, but rather modes of textual production and reception based on libidinal theoretical paradigms.

“desire” which have strategically informed theoretical writing for the past twenty years (such as *jouissance*, polysemia, and libidinal economy), disgust has no well-known paradigms associated with it and has largely remained outside the range of any theoretical zone. This is surprising, considering this affect often plays a prominent role in structuring our responses to capitalism and patriarchy as cultural critics and readers. Its primacy in informing how we think and negotiate these systems raises the question of why our understanding of repulsion has been taken less seriously than that of attractions, specifically as a theoretical or literary concern. Even though disgust obviously impacts on questions of desire and vice-versa, there has been less motivation to examine how the former experience might inform the work of reading and producing texts. The goal of this essay is to investigate possible reasons for this critical skittishness, or squeamishness, and to imagine what a “poetics of disgust” would look like, were it to exist. To do so, I draw on recent work by contemporary United States and Canadian poets directly associated or strongly influenced by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and its post-Vietnam War tradition of leftward-oriented innovation.³ Ironically, it is this body of postmodern literature (noted

³ For anthologies of first generation language poetry and poetics, see *In the American Tree*, ed. Ron Silliman (National Poetry Foundation, 1986); *‘Language’ Poetics*, ed. Douglas Messerli (New York: New Directions, 1987); *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein; and *Poetics Journal*, eds. Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten. Also *Postmodern Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), and most recently, *Poems for the Millenium, Volume Two: From Postwar to Millenium*, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1998).

for its disjunctiveness, parataxis, and frequent refusal of explicit referentiality) to which libidinal poststructuralist theories would seem most fittingly applied.⁴

In the social and material world we inhabit today, it is arguable that potential objects of disgust (corporate ideology, bigotry, brute assertions of power and military force, all forms of institutionalized inequality) continue to balance if not outweigh those of desire. A poetics of disgust would begin with this basic position: that there are at least as many things to turn away from as things to be drawn to; and that this repulsion is worth thinking about seriously. That issues of repulsion remain theoretically undervalued or subordinate to issues of desire, then, is also surprising since the former tends to be a highly specific, identifiable phenomenon, whereas the parameters of attraction are notoriously difficult to locate and define. The problem of certainty is simply less relevant in cases of disgust, as an experience less open to epistemological questioning and doubt. This may be because the spectrum of what we call desires in our language is much broader than that of disgusts; or because the criteria for “being disgusted,” as a particular mode of response to an object, are limited in a way that the criteria for “desiring” that object are not. The language of consumer culture simply offers more ostensible definitions for desire, since it must accommodate so many permutations of this relation to persons and things. At the same

⁴ For notable examples of approaches to language writing as exemplifying libidinal poststructuralist themes, see Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention*; and Frederic Jameson’s reading of Bob Perelman’s work in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 28–31. George Hartley provides a solid critique of Jameson’s position in *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1989) 42–52.

time, middle-class morality imposes a limit on ways of expressing outrage against the dominant power structure, *has the effect of deliberately curbing our potential to articulate our abhorrence to it*, and thus the additional effect of curbing our potential to fully comprehend or theorize our response. This may explain why “desire” is commonly spoken of in pluralized forms (as polysemic, eclectic, or polymorphous), while disgust remains indissociably singular.

The fact that there are fewer ways of “being disgusted” than ways of “desiring,” which is to say fewer ways of *articulating* disgust, fewer terms available in the language of consumer culture to give it agency or voice, should foreground the question of the role it might play in a contemporary poetics committed to ideology critique. All the more so because the power of this affective response still manages to undermine attempts made to curtail its expression. In its specificity, certainty, and force, the expression of disgust maintains a negative insistence that cannot be recuperated by the “seductive reasoning” of global capitalism and its pluralist dynamics, in spite of all efforts to neutralize such utterances.⁵ In resistance to all-inclusive strategies, a poetics of disgust would thus take the form of a poetics of both exclusion and radical externality, based on outwardness and excess.

⁵ Ellen Rooney equates “seductive reasoning” with “the practice of pluralism” (57) in her rigorous critique of the ideology of general persuasion. See Ellen Rooney, *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989). Hereafter referred to as *SR*.

By describing “desire” in poststructuralist literary theory as polysemic, polymorphous, eclectic, and all-inclusive, I am deliberately drawing an analogy between its elevated status as a critical and aesthetic paradigm, and the logic of pluralism as a contemporary cultural norm. As many social commentators have noted, postmodernity and pluralism are virtually synonymous; Andreas Huyssen describes the former, for example, as “cultural eclecticism or pluralism”⁶ and Alex Callinicos as a situation in which “cultural life becomes more fragmented or pluralistic.”⁷ More than any other theory currently in circulation, political pluralism shapes our ideas of liberal democracy; pluralism or eclecticism in art has also been *de rigueur* for the last two decades. As Hal Foster notes,⁸

Art exists today in a state of pluralism: no style or even mode of art is dominant and no critical position is orthodox. Yet this state is also a position, and this position is also an alibi. As a general condition pluralism tends to absorb argument—which is not to say that it does not promote antagonism of all sorts. One can only begin out of a discontent with this status quo: for in a pluralist state art and criticism tend to be dispersed and so rendered impotent. Minor deviation is allowed only in order to resist radical change, and it is this subtle conformism that one must challenge. (*AP* 13)

⁶ Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern,” *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. Andreas Huyssen (New York: SUNY, 1990) 130.

⁷ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: a Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1989) 134.

⁸ Hal Foster. “Against Pluralism,” *Recodings* (Seattle: Bay P, 1985). Hereafter referred to as *AP*.

If aesthetic eclecticism and other all-inclusive strategies have the effect of absorbing argument and neutralizing critique, then the privileged role played by “desire” in both experimental poetry and literary theory needs to be reexamined. For the last twenty years in both cultural arenas, the libidinal as theoretical paradigm has been of unquestionable service by *generating* critique; but in the pluralistic form assumed by it today, it would seem to shut critique down—particularly due to the romanticization which so frequently accompanies its use. I place my examination of disgust against “desire” for this reason, not just because of the latter’s ubiquity in critical discourse, but also because the disproportional roles assigned to these affective structures masks the fact that two are often concomitant. Yet disgust seems most often at odds or in conflict with desire, functioning as its obverse or negation.

Moving Outside “Desire” as a Theoretical Model for Writing

Has seduction placated me so well? It
is, if I wish to know, quiet need of
extraordinary aim framed by tiny
voices.

—Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, “First.”⁹

⁹ Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, *Redactive* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1990)

What operates on the other side of the libidinal? The ready answer, as supplied by Kant, has been the law; but as Lacan shows in his readings of Kant, Sade and Sophocles,¹⁰ desire similarly posits obligations to be complied with and followed, to an extent that it becomes coterminous with social imperative: "The moral law, looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state."¹¹

To say that "desire" has its own system of discipline and thus its own set of legal parameters, including above all the injunction that the subject meet his or her demands for satisfaction, is to *continue* to raise the question of what happens when such an imperative (or any imperative within a dominant system) goes unanswered. Or is answered by the subject's *refusal* to answer. Clearly, "desire" by itself is not automatically resistance to censorship or the law. The libidinal threatens aspects of the symbolic order at times, its true; but we can see that the law has a way of prescribing if not instating these very desires, particularly if we follow Judith Butler in considering them inextricably intertwined with prohibitions. If desire and prohibition come into existence in tandem, then the "subversiveness" that tends to be *automatically* attributed to the libidinal and its discursive

¹⁰ See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W.Norton, 1992).

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 275. Cited by Slavoj Zizek in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, 69. As Zizek notes, "Desire and Kantian ethical rigor coincide here in their disregard for 'the demands of reality'; neither of them acknowledges the excuse of circumstances or unfavourable consequences, which is why Lacan ultimately identifies them" (68-69).

concomitants (jouissances, etc.), based on the assumption that it fundamentally opposes the dictates of the symbolic order, needs to be reconsidered—particularly since the libidinal is so frequently relied on as a convenient catchall in poststructural theories of language and selfhood for explaining all that transgresses the norm. With its privileged and generally unquestioned status as a theoretical paradigm, it currently exists as a ubiquitous frame of reference in postmodern criticism and theory, especially in the reading of contemporary texts.

What seems to lie outside the realms of both desire and the law is disgust: repugnance, abhorrence, revulsion, repulsion. Not a moving *toward* the object, either to possess it or be possessed by it, engulf or be engulfed by it (as in desire's familiar trajectory), but a turning *away*. If disgust cannot be fully assimilated or internalized by either the libidinal or the law, it becomes available to us as a crucial third term — one which is itself a term of exclusion, and thus irreducible to the current pluralism of “desire” as well as pluralist conceptions of the democratic state. To say that desire and democracy are commonly thought of today as pluralisms is to point out that both have been privileged as all-inclusive economies which, as Rooney notes, *paradoxically exclude forms of exclusion*—namely, marxisms and other materialist discourses which “challenge the theoretical possibility of general [consensus and] take the process of exclusion to be *necessary* to the production of meaning or community” [SR 5]. Throughout *Seductive Reasoning*, Rooney argues that pluralism manipulates the rhetoric of “consensus” and “understanding” in order to reduce oppositional ideologies to “monolithic totalitarianism[s]” (27), avoiding the problem of marxist theory in particular and “the urgent question it asks, the question of

exclusion” (26). Using various sources from newspapers and magazines which depict socialist movements as betrayals of pluralism, Rooney shows how “political pluralism, ‘American-style,’ is nothing but the exclusion of marxisms, both in domestic politics and abroad” (27).

What makes disgust an important force in contemporary experimental writing engaged with ideological concerns, as well in our methods of reading this work, is thus its negative potentiality as a figure of exclusion, the radical externalization it enacts in facilitating the subject’s turn away from the object. In this manner, the possibility of disgust as a political poetics resides in its resistance to pluralism and its ideology of all-inclusiveness enabling it to “recuperate any critical account (feminist, minority, marxist) that emphasizes otherness, difference, conflict, or discontinuity” (SR 5). As Bernard Noël writes in “The Outrage Against Words,”

Revolt acts; indignation seeks to speak. From the start of my childhood, only reasons for becoming indignant: the war, the deportation, the Indochinese War, the Korean way, the Algerian war . . . and so many massacres, from Indonesia to Chile via Black September. There’s no language to describe that. There’s no language because we live in a bourgeois world, where the vocabulary of indignation is exclusively moral. (190)

My aim is to show that despite cultural limitations, late twentieth-century poets in North America do have recourse to a language for articulating disgust; that there is a “vocabulary of indignation” not wholly circumscribed by bourgeois morality. That is, in fact, leveled against it.

A Parable of Repulsion

Buying a newspaper at a corner store in Brooklyn: I'm at the front counter when I hear a loud though muffled noise, something between a groan and a cry, from a man standing half inside, half outside the open door. It's an exclamation, but not of any recognizable words with recognizable meanings. My head automatically swivels to follow the direction of his gaze, but I can't make out what he's looking at. He's got his hand to his mouth, covering it. I say, "What is it?" Wordlessly again, he points. I walk closer to him and see he is looking at a piece of shit on the sidewalk. There's a roach on this turd, and the roach is eating it. We look at this for a while together. As if we were compelled to, fascinated in spite of ourselves. Then he makes that inarticulate sound again, hand still over the mouth, and turns his head away. As do I. After he has vanished around the corner, I realize that I am still standing in the place he just left, with my hand also positioned over my mouth, head turned away. As if I had followed or copied his exact gestures in order to take his place, continue a series in which the experience gets passed on to another stranger. Who might say: Buying a newspaper at a Brooklyn deli, I heard this woman make a noise . . . and so on. But eventually the shit dwindles into a stain, the roach crawls away and finds something else to eat or doo, the story expires. Objects of disgust have short shelf lives.

There are elements of this encounter I want to isolate, which requires that I strip down the narrative and shuffle its elements around:

That inarticulate sound.

Head automatically swivels to follow the direction of gaze.

Wordlessly points.
Fascinated in spite of ourselves.
Turns away.
In the place he just left.
Copied his exact gestures in order to take his place.

Of the above the following points should be stressed, in schematizing a possible grammar of disgust:

(1) *The negative utterance.*

An “inarticulate sound” made in response to the object. No words are used in the expression of disgust and thus the question of what words “mean” is simply irrelevant to this particular type of utterance. Yet an affect is clearly conveyed;

(2) *The gesture of pointing.*

With emphasis on its role in prompting (3) and instigating (4);

(3) *A negative fascination with the object.*

Not wanting to look at it, but staring nonetheless—for a limited duration;

(4) *The figure of the turn, or moment of exclusion.*

The movement *away* from the object, as if to shun it. This turn is mobilized by

(2) and (3);

(5) *The inclusion of the other in that act of excluding the object.*

The participation of the other in following the subject's previous gestures, both (2) and (3). A form of sociability or mutual attunement facilitated by the turn away. Paradoxically, the other is included in the subject's response of disgust *via* his act of exclusion, his shunning of the object;

(6) *The absence, void, or hole created by the turn away from the object.*

A negative space is created, or opened up, by the evacuation of the subject following his negative interaction with the object. The "place he just left," a [] into which the other steps;

(7) *The repetition that takes place in this void.*

Inside the [], the other copies the gestures made by the subject in excluding the object.

The rhetoric of disgust conveys an insistence or affective force mobilized by the sequence of events in its entirety: the inarticulate or "formless" utterance; the gesture of pointing; the subject's negative fascination with the object; his exclusion of or turning away from the object; and the other's assumption of the empty place defined by the subject's withdrawal. In the rest of this essay, I discuss the relevance of these elements independently, including the way each bears on aspects of contemporary postmodern writing, in order to show that there is a discursive logic to emotional responsivity; that expressions of disgust have their own particular grammar.

(1) Negative Utterances

Formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm.

—Georges Bataille

Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*, a hybrid of philosophy and fantasy which is also the narrative of a woman smashing and eating a cockroach, ends with the narrator's ecstatic depersonalization. This culminating event is brought about through her encounter with the cockroach and the "brute raw matter" of its guts oozing forth; a confrontation which in turn leads to the discovery of a new form of language: a means of paradoxically expressing her own inexpressiveness.¹² What the narrator calls her "condition of inexpressiveness" is a non-symbolic state of being that manifests itself only in response to the soft and formless matter gushing from the roach's body; a relation to the

¹² In striking contrast to the expression of inexpressiveness, a recent full-page advertisement on the back cover of *The New York Times Magazine* (March 7, 1999) announces, "For Every Expression There's a Toyota." The backdrop of this text is an image frequently deployed by corporate advertising in the age of global capitalism: a mosaic of smiling, expressive faces suggesting multicultural all-inclusiveness. In its flattening-out of multiculturalism as site of political conflict and struggle, this ad offers a perspicuous example of how easily pluralist expressivism can be yoked into making money for multinational corporations.

world that can be articulated only through a specific kind of hyperbolic utterance.

Inexpressiveness is also, G.H. suggests, a social condition that can be expressed through certain kinds of innovative artistic production, including poetry.

At times—at times we manifest inexpressiveness ourselves—in art that is done . . . to manifest the inexpressive is to create. At bottom we are so, so happy! for there is not just one way to enter in contact with life, there are also the negative ways! also the painful ways, even the all-impossible ones . . . And there is also at times the exasperation of the atonal, which is a profound happiness: exasperated atonality is flight rising—nature is *exasperated atonality*, thus it was that worlds were formed: atonality became exasperated. (135, my italics)

A text may thus bear witness to its creator's articulate expression of his or her own inarticulateness, or to his or her potential to not-express, or not be articulate. This negative potentiality exists only for the work of a poet who knows that the laws of the symbolic order will always determine certain things in advance of what any individual means to say. Acknowledging this and confronting it directly, the writer takes her text *beyond* the traditional goal of poetic expression or representational thinking (thought that has form), in order to realize what Lispector calls the “happiness” of an inexpressiveness inspired by formless matter. This is the negative potentiality of representations of representational impotence. As Giorgio Agamben might say, the agency of these utterances resides in their syncretism of an ability to express *as well as* not-express: “Only a power that is capable of both power and impotence, then, is the supreme power . . . The perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act [of unfathomable potentiality]” (CC 37).

Only the poet who recognizes the negative agency of exasperated utterances, their ability to not-express or not-articulate, is able to paradoxically express her own inexpressiveness and give form to what is formless. Lispector: "When art is good it is because it has touched inexpressiveness, the worst art is expressive art, the kind that transgresses the piece of iron and the piece of glass, and smiles, and the shouts" (136). In doing so, the poet strains the limits of even modernist atonality, the logic which radically transformed musical theory. Applicable to language as well as music, the atonal is a system in which there is no central key or referent; only a series of relations or differences between terms. A semiotician might describe this impartial chromaticism as metonymic: signifiers endlessly referring and deferring to other signifiers rather than designating unitary signifieds. Yet metonymy, which Lyotard describes as "the avant-garde of capital," is *also* a systemic logic effecting the same dematerialization of the sign done by systems of centralized reference or metaphorical substitution.¹³ Though atonality enables us to go beyond the referent privileged in tonal music, as a system of slippages between terms it similarly delivers a "message" or fulfills a representative function; i.e. the import of the operation lies in something other than the terms in their material embodiments:

See what you have done, the material is immediately annihilated. Where there is a message, there is no material. Adorno said this admirably of Schoenberg: the material, he explained, in serialism *does not count as such*, but only as a relation

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Indianapolis: U of Indiana P, 1993). Hereafter referred to as *LE*.

between terms. And in Boulez there will be nothing but relations, not only between pitches, but also between intensities, timbres, durations.
Dematerialization. (44)

The paradoxical expression of one's own inexpressiveness takes the form of what Lispector calls "*exasperated atonality*"; an atonality that, strained to the limit, gets fed up with itself. "Fed-up" in the sense of the once-radical system eating or turning on itself, but also suggesting strained limits or surplus: the rhetorical excess paradoxically produced by the poet's foregrounding of his or her lack. It's the articulation of this negative potentiality in language that most strongly informs the politicized writing of North American poets Bruce Andrews, Kevin Davies, Jeff Derksen, Deanna Ferguson, and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk. Disgust with capitalism and its subject-centered reason compels these writers to take the impartial chromaticism of language to the extreme:

Help defeat your country —power faults keep cranium
free of lint wrench to choose from a mind as free as
Republicanism: late as silk, backstabbers, drop your
mental candy bars, the ascension of the cookies womb,
swank accommodation for that coathanger:
train your friends to shit on newsprint

(Bruce Andrews, "Help Defeat Your Country" 102)

The exasperated atonality of these utterances suggests that negative potentiality itself (manifest in paradoxical expressions of inexpressiveness) is not just an abstract signifying operation, but an agency realized through a particular affect: utter repugnance. This affect is amplified in Ferguson's work; consider this moment of disgust from "Still Life, with the

law” (*Rough Bush*, 1995) which seems to offer an implicit commentary on techniques used to articulate the experience:

Rebellion hallowed, hollered, These magic games aren’t fun anymore,
aren’t [dead] addicted—only want to make a buy. Used words and phrases that apply
part of an esoteric jargon of grunting and straining—woo, braah, phonographic
recall retched sounds from bathroom splashes, formal off the road (n. pag.)

“The esoteric jargon of grunting and straining,” “retched sounds from bathroom splashes”; in expressions of disgust, language becomes *formless*. As with the inarticulate sound made by the subject in our parable, the poet’s expression of inexpressiveness thrusts the base materiality of language into the foreground: “woo, braah.” Here the question of what a word means (the form it gives to a pre-existent thought) *as well as* the question of how it relates abstractly to another word in the system (form deferring to form) becomes secondary to its simply “being there,” in all its insistence and affective force.

Even when comprised of articulate sounds, the expression of disgust counteracts both referential language and purely relational language, relying instead on more stolid formations. Formations that continue to trouble certain conceptions of language, but are nonetheless part of it: “brute raw matter that [is] simply there” (Lispector, 35), flows and outpourings, noise. This is where Saussure’s anxiety about onomatopoeia and interjections comes in. For disgust’s utterances are not propositions, or assertion-like in structure, but more like *sounds and exclamations*. They are, in this sense, “empty”: []. The “inarticulate sounds” of disgust are expletives and obscenities: like onomatopoeia, these are units of language that seem less to ‘mean’ than to simply ‘be.’ At the same time, however, these

exorbitant forms are “indissociably singular” and do not refer or defer themselves to other signs. Nothing may be contained within the brackets, but the brackets themselves cannot be budged. In their insistence or intensity, expletives and onomatopoeia resist *both* the potentially endless movement from one signifier to another *and* the fixation of signifier to signified.

Discursive raw matter is what is simply and irreducibly there; it neither instigates a horizontal voyage from term to term (which is a dynamic Lacan attributes to “desire” in “Agency of the Letter”), nor does it bring forth a vertical fixation. In this manner, the discursive materials that make up a grammar of disgust resemble what Lyotard calls tensors; referring to the tension in a sign that exceeds this semiotic dialectic of condensation and displacement: both the metaphorical fixation of word to concept (the drive towards a unitary, pre-established designation or meaning) *and* the “interminable metonymy” of slippage from word to word (desire’s polysemia), in which “we never get anything but cross-references, signification is always deferred, and meaning is never present in flesh and blood” (*LE* 41).

As forms of the tensor, expletives and onomatopoeia counteract the dematerialization of language that occurs in *both* cases; a dematerialization which is very possibly “equivalent to the work of capital in the affairs of sensibility and affect.” For while the later instance, that of metonymic slippage or polysemia (“avant-garde of capital”) is frequently privileged by innovative writers over the substitutive or representational logic of metaphor (in Stein’s work, for example), it belongs to the same semiotic value system which annihilates the materiality of the sign. Unlike Lacan, who imputes that there is a

freedom in the postponement and displacement of signifiers (“what does man find in metonymy if not the power to circumvent the obstacles of social censure?”¹⁴), Lyotard argues that even metonymic slippage produces the same dematerializing effects in language as metaphor, that it is equally intent in turning matter into abstract relation, if not direct reference:

For we moderns, for whom the thought of metaphor is absent, and who glory in substructural metonymic substitution, the object of the search is no longer God or truth, but the search *itself*. . . the search for a discourse that can produce locatable, predictable, and controllable metamorphoses, search, then, for discrimination. The voyage of this search is not the drift of the mad and the plague-stricken, nor the transpatial exodus of the uncanny, it is the well-prepared flight of the explorer, foreshadowing that of the priest, then the soldier and the businessman, it is the avant garde of capital, which is itself already simply capital insofar as it is the perpetual activity of pushing back its frontiers, the incorporation of yet more new pieces of the band into its system, but incorporation with a view to revenue, to yielding a return. (LE 45)

Since the Objectivists, metaphor has been somewhat out of fashion in experimental poetry, attacked for affirming the values of official verse culture or the representational status quo. But for Lyotard, metonymy is similarly circumscribed by the institutionalized logics of capital. Though one term seems to freely lead to another, one will “always need to work to determine the terms to which, in a given *corpus*, the term under examination can and must lead” (45). According to this claim, even polysemia (“signification constituted by signs alone”) cannot accommodate the intensities of affect informing and exceeding the sign:

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud,” *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton 1977) 167.

here, its true, “there are only divergences, and if there is any meaning, it’s because there is a divergence”; yet this proliferation of divergences is itself systemic: “there is . . . not any old divergence of course, we don’t move from one element to the other in any old way, on the contrary it is a journey organized from one term to another, and involves the extreme precision of a system or structure” (*LE* 44).

Woo, braah. In their insistence, exclamatory and onomatopoeic words and phrases manifest the tension in the sign that prevents this annihilation. There’s an irreducible materiality to them that cannot be found in language which refers vertically (metaphorically) or horizontally (metonymically). If exclamations and onomatopoeia just “are,” rather than substituting or deferring, it’s no surprise that Saussure singles them out as potential threats to his theory of the arbitrary sign.¹⁵ Raw matter clogging up the system: the threat needs to be quickly neutralized with some structuralist drano:

Onomatopoeia might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier is not always arbitrary. But onomatopoeic formations are never organic elements of a linguistic system. Besides, their number is much smaller than is generally supposed
Interjections, closely related to onomatopoeia, can be attacked on the same grounds and come no closer to refuting our thesis. One is tempted to see in them spontaneous expressions of reality dictated, so to speak, by natural forces. But for most interjections we can show that there is no fixed bond between their signified and their signifier. (*CGL*, 69)

¹⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

A handle is turned, the material is flushed. But what is by definition “simply there” remains in the pipework. Though Saussure shows that these kinds of language ultimately conform to his model of the sign, they clearly posit some potential of instability within the system. Enough to merit their marginalization, as the “outside” of language that persists within it—barely: elements which are “not organic” and exist in “much smaller” numbers. It’s important to note the possibility that these marginalized formations pose the greatest threat to structuralist theories of signification *because they cannot be divorced from their insistence* — the affects they convey or the noises they make. “Get thee outta the ball park, onto the marsh — freeze over morass! Hell yes we will talk. World enough & unbearable though detextable. Picky Picky” (Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, “Oral Tragedy”). It could be said that onomatopoeia and exclamations are the most “passionate” forms of linguistic expression, written or spoken, and thus the problem they pose to traditional semioticians makes sense: the question of affect (and its effects) has been generally avoided by those concerned primarily with language as a set of neutral, objective, or purely mechanical functions, unrelated to social or cultural factors. Here affect is viewed as remaining “outside” the text’s “internal” signifying machinery, its system of tropological operations, metaphors and metonymies.

Early in *Philosophical Investigations*, at a point roughly corresponding to the point in *Course in General Linguistics* where Saussure finds it necessary to mention the aspects of language that offer possible exceptions to his rules), Wittgenstein also singles out

interjections as formations within language that resist its dominant impulse towards referentiality (§27).¹⁶ But he does so to challenge the boundaries of the referential system:

“We name things and then we talk about them: can refer to them in talk.” —As if what we did next were given with the mere act of naming. As if there were only one thing called “talking about a thing.” Whereas in fact we do the most various things with our sentences. Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions.

Water!
Away!
Ow!
Help!
Fine!
No!

Are you inclined to still call these words “names of objects”? (13e)

Disgust’s utterances are thus made of language’s base materials: things that “are,” or exist in their material embodiments, versus things that have a greater purpose or refer beyond themselves. Lispector: “And then, the cockroach: what is the only sense the cockroach has? attentiveness to living, *inseparable from its body*.” A poetics of disgust would therefore relies on the use of such raw matter: words with insistence or “attentiveness to living, inseparable from their material embodiments” as letters on the page. Language’s raw matter (flow, gush, outpouring; inarticulate sound; “something between a groan and a cry”; ow, help, no; woo, braah; smiles and shouts) does not seek to be evaluated

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1958).

epistemologically or symbolically as one might evaluate a proposition, for the truth-value or representational value of the assertion it makes. Its rhetorical force comes from elsewhere, and is perceived differently: as that which solicits a *response* from the other in the form of pure affect or noise.

Consider, for example, the extra force conveyed by the all-capitalized words in Lusk's poem "Oral Tragedy" (*Redactive*, 1990), which function as a cross between an exclamation and onomatopoeia. "Matter really never will WHAT?" [13]). Assuming the role of a shout, a woo or braah, these words sit as raw matter in the poetic line: "Utterance STUFFED in a history of tissue adhesions" (17). As a variation or species, perhaps, of @#\$%!!—or any other utterance ending in exclamation point. Even if that exclamation point is suggested implicitly, through the gush of flowing matter:

& shall interference come between me? Jar down
mine own gritty polish & wonder when saliva
segues patina. You get what you are left. While
distinction make pleasures own device or fucking
doesn't—hitched to mine caboose maraud or
don't. ("Oral Tragedy" 11)

Self disgust, social disgust: the poetic utterances provoked by such experiences, to recapitulate, are marked by a particular set of discursive traits: (1) reliance on linguistic raw matter; (2) "exasperated atonality"; (3) a dramatization of the poet's impotence, with the unexpectedly powerful rhetorical *force* accompanying such articulations of negative

potentiality or lack. In considering these enumerated characteristics, it may be useful to again bring up the work of Andrews — where *every utterance exists as onomatopoeia or expletive*. This preference for language's "heterogeneous matter" comes across most vividly in a text like *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up* (1992), a title suggestive what of one might say to another behind closed doors of adjoining bathroom stalls:

Clamp symp
how exact? — hey baby, but fuck it
goose egg salvo tempus figit, I love accomplishing
things because it feeds my ego! Besides, no one asks
our opinion — loose spunk, the propless failure; it is
normal for twins to hate each other

("Cerebellum Replaced By Joy Stick," 54)

What's at stake here, as with the noise made by the man pointing to the shit being eaten by the roach, is a kind of formlessness within the world of language. The "formlessness" (which is not exactly or necessarily the same thing as absence of form) of pure noise and raw matter; of inarticulate but insistent sounds (onomatopoeia and exclamations); discursive flows, gushes and outpourings. That these types of utterance would play a predominant role in expressions of disgust comes as no surprise; as Bataille writes, "*Formless* is a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form [concept, referent, representation]. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm" (my italics).

Linguistic raw matter, like the kinds of formless matter terrorizing the middle class in American horror films (*The Stuff*, *The Blob*, *The Thing*), inspires both negative

excitation and negative fascination. The entities from the films, usually threatening white suburban residents in privately owned homes, are construed as horrific by the very fact of their shapelessness or irreducible materiality; because they invoke a bourgeois disgust (one shared by right-wing ideologists) of base matter and all forms of materialism. Yet it is also disgust which inspires the materialist poet to deliberately incorporate *linguistic* 'entities' (raw matter) into her text. Here the disgust is not moral squeamishness or the bourgeois' disavowal of his own waste, but a disgust *with* this disavowal. In order to express her disgust at *genteel* disgusts, the writer strategically chooses to utilize linguistic forms that resemble or replicate the formless entities that threaten middle-class property and proprietorship.

Yet a poetry of abjection is not necessarily a passive one. The expression of disgust aggressively *insists*. Its insistence or agency is that of negative potentiality, the paradoxical power of one's impotence (squashability) articulated in expressions of inexpressiveness. The writer who continually writes his or her potential to *not* write, according to conventional ideas of what the act of writing entails. Bataille's idea of formless is thus a similar paradox: it doesn't designate the absence of form or representation, but the particular kind of representation that represents its own lack or failure to meet to expectations of a representational ideal. Accordingly, "formless" is a term we use to describe the *particular* form or appearance of shit and vomit. Or in poetry, to describe the particular shape or body assumed by writing that relies on "heterogeneous matter" or linguistic sewage. The kind of form unique to disgusting matter, alluding to its shapelessness, its lack of cohesion,

its self-deterioration. What Lispector might describe as the form that paradoxically counteracts form, that breaks form down; the form taken by overflowing matter:

I had reached nothingness, and the nothingness was live and moist.

It was then — it was then that the pulp started slowly to come out of the cockroach I had smashed, like out of a tube.

The cockroach's pulp, which was its insides, raw matter that was whitish and thick and slow, was piling up on it as though it were toothpaste coming out of the tube.

Before my nauseated, attracted eyes, the cockroach's form, as it grew on the outside, kept slowly changing. The white matter was slowly spreading across its back, like a load set for it to carry. Pinched in place, it was increasingly carrying on its dusty back a load that was in fact its own body. (GH 54)

Lispector's preoccupation with the tendency of living matter to spread and flow recalls a similar motif in Thoreau's *Walden*, where it is used to suggest a particular picture of reading and writing.¹⁷ Here, Thoreau's comparison of the "excrementitious" forms made by melting sand to a poetic text (as well as his description of how he used his newspaper after a meal!) situates reading in the context of a fantasy of waste and excess, imbuing it with the kind of negative fascination associated with other gushes and outpourings:

Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down on them . . . brains or lungs and bowels, and excrements of all kinds. It is a truly *grotesque* vegetation The whole bank, which is from twenty to forty feet high, is sometimes overlaid with a mass of this

¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

kind of foliage, or sandy rupture, for a quarter of a mile on one or both sides, the produce of one spring day. What makes this sand foliage remarkable is its springing into existence thus suddenly. When I see on the one side the inert bank, —for the sun acts on one side first, —and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me, —had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about. I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body This phenomenon is more exhilarating to me than the luxuriance and fertility of the vineyards. True, it is somewhat excrementitious in its character, and there is no end to the heap of liver lights and bowels, as if the globe were turned wrong side outward; but this suggests at least that Nature has some bowels, and there again is mother of Humanity. (329)

Let's follow Thoreau's account of his response to the sudden manifestation of an overflowing and "excrementitious" mass with an excerpt from Bataille's "The Language of Flowers":

There can be no doubt: the substitution of natural forms for the abstractions currently used by philosophers will seem not only strange but absurd. It is probably fairly unimportant that philosophers themselves have often had to have recourse, though with repugnance, to terms that derive their value from the production of these forms in nature, as when they speak of *baseness*. No blindness interferes with defending the prerogatives of abstraction. This substitution, moreover, threatens to carry one too far: it would result, in the first place, in a feeling of freedom, the free availability of oneself in every sense, which is absolutely unbearable for the most part, and the troubling contempt for all that is still—thanks to miserable evasions—*elevated*, noble, sacred . . . Don't all these beautiful things run the risk of being reduced to a strange *mise en scène*, destined to make sacrilege more impure? And the disconcerting gesture of the Marquis de Sade, locked up with madmen, who had the most beautiful roses brought to him only to pluck off their petals and toss them into a ditch filled with liquid manure—in these circumstances, doesn't it have an overwhelming impact? (VE 14)

Bataille's world is notoriously comprised of natural forms meant to invoke disgust: dismembered body parts, dirt, flies, spiders, intestines, blood, spit, urine and shit. The linguistic equivalents of these being exclamations, obscene outcries, expletives, profanities, onomatopoeia. Combine them and you have a text that might resemble the work of Bruce Andrews. Though it is hardly inappropriate to think of Bataille as an excremental philosopher, as he was described (with intention to insult) by Breton, it may seem a bit odd to consider Henry David Thoreau in the same light. Yet the passage from *Walden* on forms and designs produced by a defecating Artist (in Concord, Massachusetts!) nicely illustrates the fact that, contrary to assumptions made by Breton in his attacks on Bataille, there is a discursive logic or *grammar* to excremental flows or outpourings; that a philosophy of disgust is thus not necessarily opposed to reason.¹⁸ Interestingly, the forms created by the thawing mud are said to resemble not only fecal matter, but the organs in the body ("bowels") that process and expel it. Thus in Thoreau's writing, excremental products cannot be disassociated from their sites of production; what is "excremental"

¹⁸ Breton: "M. Bataille's misfortune is to reason: admittedly, he reasons like someone who "has a fly on his nose," which allies him more closely with the dead than the living, but *he does reason*. He is trying, with the help of the tiny mechanism in him which is not completely out of order, to share his obsessions: this very fact proves that he cannot claim, no matter what he may say, to be opposed to any system, like an unthinking brute." From Allan Stoekel, "Introduction," *Visions of Excess*, xi. As Stoekel notes, "Breton specifically dismisses Bataille because he sees a profound contradiction between Bataille's embrace of the heterogeneous—animality, flies, excrement—and his tendency, in spite of all this, to *reason*. . . . Thus in Breton we see a certain configuration of values that he opposes to Bataille: *the refusal of the interpenetration of reason and bestial unreason*" (xii, second italics mine).

about *Walden* is not just the objects or landscapes it describes, but the grammatical operations at work in their description.

Significantly, the fact that excremental excess might be considered *organic* to the text that describes is what leads Thoreau to consider the *poetic* dimensions of this excess. In other words, the converging of excremental form with excremental content (“There is nothing inorganic” [*Walden*, 332]) seems to directly facilitate the writer’s realization that what emerges from this is a transformational poetry; a poetry that revitalizes practice and demands to be read on its own terms:

These foliaceous heaps lie along the bank like the slag of a furnace, showing that Nature is “in full blast” within. The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but *living poetry* like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth: compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. Its throes will heave our exuviae from their graves. You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into. And not only it, but the institutions upon it, are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter. (330, my emphasis)

Consider that for Thoreau, “the earth” is not just a space covered with flora and fauna, but always a complex network of social and political relations, and the link he establishes between excremental forms and poetry in reanimating that earth brings us back to the “good doodoo”¹⁹ of Ferguson’s sonnet sequence “Rough Bush”:

¹⁹ This phrase is taken from “My Body Lies Over the Ocean,” another poem in the collection *Rough Bush*, n. pag.

Bent blossomed round sound
more and dents threaded sources of poor
exulted by turns amid inconsistent times.
Revolution and all its results.
Get back in the house.
Some sort of secret class some
secret of class sort some
class of secret soreness . . . (n. pag.)

As the gradually intensified alliterative slippage and syntactic loosening in this passage demonstrate, raw matter is also formless because it tends to spread. The stuff-blob-thing won't stay in one shape for long, it loses its cohesion, its structural integrity. (Lusk: "Matter really never will WHAT?" ["Oral Tragedy," 13]) And this happens to disgust's utterances: they break down, they start to flow, and in doing so they threaten the very structural integrity of the conventional sign system. In the case of Andrews, as pure affect or insistence — cultural despair as aggression. Provoking nervous laughter. And anxiety. (As Catherine Clement has noted, laughter and anxiety are usually the same thing.²⁰) The emphasis here, as with the passionate utterance or other perlocutionary speech acts, is on how each utterance *demand*s a response from the other, rather than epistemological evaluation of its assertions. The insistence of disgust, of language's raw matter, is this same insistence of "bang" and "boom," and of "Water!" "Away!" "Ow!" "Help!" "Fine!" And perhaps

²⁰ Catherine Clement, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 119.

most of all: “No!” In Andrews’ book, variations of this exclamation abound: “Gestalt me out!” “OK, tush hog!” “Cream on my righteousness!” “Do I have a receptacle for you!” Language used “to cover a space rather than uncover a meaning”²¹ — but in order to do so, the poet has to be unembarrassed to squat. Down, and low.

(2) The Insistence of Pointing

This: a flaw that I talk like: This

—Dorothy Lusk, “The Worst”

According to our parable above, a gesture is made concomitantly with the subject’s utterance of disgust, one which dramatizes the inadequacy of representational language in sudden confrontation with raw matter (feces on the sidewalk, Lispector’s cockroach entrails, Bataille’s spider or spit, etc.). The grammatical correlate of this gesture is the deictic: “the use of words which have no content or independent reference at all, only a deictic or pointing function, referring backward (or forward) to other words.”²²

²¹ Vito Acconci, quoted by Bruce Andrews in “Index,” *Paradise and Method: Poetics and Praxis* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996) 3–5.

²² Seymour Chatman, *The Later Style of Henry James* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972) 54.

Figuring prominently in the work of the poets discussed above, this stylistic device also dominates the later writings of Henry James, to which the preceding quotation by Seymour Chatman (in his rigorous study of James' technical difficulty) refers. Chatman describes the deictic nouns so excessively predominant in the typical late-James sentence as "almost empty words" (54). The emptiness thus attributed to deixis recalls the role played by expletives and onomatopoeia in the rhetoric of disgust, as discursive formations in which a similar representational lack is articulated. Again, to say that utterances of disgust are nonrepresentational or formless is really to say that they are paradoxical representations of their nonrepresentationality, formations of the formlessness within language that threatens the stability of reference or semantic fixation. The gesture of pointing also constitutes part of disgust's rhetoric for similar reasons, particularly when *the object implicated by deixis is excluded or negated*. In other words, when grammatical pointers are dutifully pointing, presumably to an object, but the identity of this object pointed at is deliberately obscured or withdrawn. When the object is purposely made difficult to find, paradoxically by the very condition of being pointed at, or when it can't be found at all.

This paradoxical situation (of pointers pointing, but to no readily discernible or identifiable object, or an object already in process of being lost) is what makes late James so difficult to follow. Consider this moment cited by Chatman in *The Wings of the Dove*: "Whatever it was it had showed in this brief interval as better than the alternative; and it now presented itself altogether in the image and in the place in which she had left it . . . that depended more or less of course on the idea of the thing—into which at the present, however, she wouldn't go." As Chatman notes, "No mercy for the poor reader who

cannot remember what 'it' is" (55); i.e. the object of reference. As in our initial parable of disgust, where the subject's gesture of pointing becomes exaggerated or even melodramatic in his attempt to express his inexpressiveness, the use of deixis in the work of James is deliberately overdetermined. In sentences crowded with adjectival pointers (*this, that, these, those, which*) and deictic nouns (*it, thing, matter*), the gesture of pointing becomes so insistent, repeated over and over again and always aiming at more than one direction, that it actually robs the object it implicitly designates of its identity. What makes late James (and contemporary innovative writing) "difficult" is the fact that his deictics seem to point at once forward and backward; each directing the reader back to a referent preceding it while simultaneously anticipating referents yet to be revealed.

In this manner, the gesture of pointing when overdetermined becomes a way of dramatizing negation, loss or lack, calling attention to the absence of the object rather than its presence or self-identity. In order to articulate his experience of having been rendered *inarticulate* by disgust, the subject points to the object as an exaggerated gesture of *refusal*. This insistent action (hand to mouth, arm dramatically flung outward, index finger stretched as far as possible from the rest of the hand) immediately precedes his final action of turning away. In this manner, the very act of pointing at the object paradoxically becomes a means of repudiating it—a *political* gesture of exclusion.²³ Similarly, in his exaggerated use of deixis, James points to his objects (referents) precisely *in order* to lose

²³ As evinced in the use of pointing in activism: the demonstrator aims her index finger at the homophobe while yelling "Shame!".

them, to turn away from them, to make them withdraw or disappear. Staging the exclusion of the object by pointing to it ("it") or *insisting* on it, he reveals the rhetorical power of overdetermined deixis as a negative power similar to that of the expression of inexpressiveness. Just as the "empty" or formless forms in the vocabulary of disgust dramatize a representational lack within language, its own negative ability to not-refer or not-represent in its marginalized formations (expletives and onomatopoeia: raw matter), the deictic or grammatical gesture accompanying exasperated utterances is similarly expressive of a lack; the deliberate effacement or exclusion of the representational object, and thus the deliberate obstruction of representational expression.

Though pointing at an object would seem to be create a pathway *towards* it, or provide means of drawing nearer, in disgust it actually produces a movement in the opposite direction: a withdrawal or deliberate turning away. Consider, for example, Heidegger's account of how pointing establishes the trajectory of an exclusion,²⁴ calling attention to the radical exteriority of any sign from itself:

What withdraws from us, draws us along by its very withdrawal, whether or not we become aware of it immediately, or at all. Once we are drawn into the withdrawal, we are drawing toward what draws, attracts us by its withdrawal. And once we, being so attracted, are drawing toward what draws us, our essential nature already bears the stamp of "drawing toward." As we are drawing toward

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

what withdraws, we ourselves are pointers pointing toward it. We are who we are by pointing in that direction—not like an incidental adjunct but as follows: this “drawing toward” is in itself an essential and therefore constant pointing toward what withdraws. To say “drawing toward” is to say “pointing toward what withdraws.”

To the extent that man *is* drawing that way, he *points* toward what withdraws. As he is pointing that way, man *is* the pointer. Man here is not first of all man, and then also occasionally someone who points. No: drawn into what withdraws, drawing toward it and thus pointing into the withdrawal, man first *is* man. His essential nature lies in being such a pointer. Something which in itself, by its essential nature, is pointing, we call a sign. As he draws toward what withdraws, man is a sign. But since this sign points toward what *draws away*, it points, not so much at what draws away as into the withdrawal. The sign stays without interpretation. (*WCT* 9-10)

“Since this sign points toward what *draws away*, it points, not so much at *what* draws away as into the withdrawal” (second italics are mine). This is exactly how the deictic functions in our parable: what the man outside the deli points at is less the object than his own withdrawal from it. It is also how the deictic functions in James; “it” points to the *effacement* of the referent (insofar as “it” is what stands in for it, occupying its position), more so that it does to the referent itself. There is an insistence in the gesture of pointing, but where this insistence is placed is not on the identity of the object pointed at, but on its loss or exclusion. And on the outwardness of the gesture itself, with its emphasis on what is external to any subject or object’s self-identity.

It may seem strange to bring up grammatical concerns endemic to James’ highbrow fiction in relation to the poetry of Andrews, Ferguson, or Lusk. But perhaps less so if we notice what he does with language *to* language in his stylistic excess, particular in his hyperbolic use of the deictic, and the implications of the effects this produces. And even less so if we consider the possibility, with Chatman, that what’s at stake for James in his

excessive deixis is his preoccupation with relations. The writer's awareness that "behind every petty individual circumstance there ramifies an endless network of general, moral, social, and historical relations" is what motivates his effort to "relate *every* event and *every* moment of life to the full complexity of circumambient conditions."²⁵ This overwhelming task is none other than that of describing that which simultaneously informs the subject's individual consciousness and yet is always radically beyond it. The dilemma becomes that of being a small subject inscribed by a big System, say "capitalism," who tries to pit herself against the System while fully aware of how it defines her. One is easily threatened by terror and paralysis in the face of this vast interconnectedness of relations, a network so complex it seems ungraspable in its entirety. But then one runs the risk of approaching capitalism as sublime, when its effects are all too concrete and very much unsublime in daily life. The writer's strategy in interrogating this network of relations without being subsumed by them in their enormity, is to refuse them as abstraction. To *name* them, as James does, "by ransacking grammar and lexicon," turning them into deictic nouns or things. *That, what, it*. This may seem like a mere process of reification, but here the deictic is actually used to achieve the opposite effect; to demonstrate that abstract relations are experienced palpably, as well as to show that in pointing beyond itself, that "a thing is not a thing it is a relation"²⁶; i.e. that a thing is always extrinsic to itself. The externalizing

²⁵ Ian Watt, cited by Chatman, 78.

²⁶ From the poem "Impossible." Dan Farrell, *Thinking of You* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1994).

function of *that, what, it* and other deictic entities is what allows them to escape reification, as ‘things’ that bear witness to their own extrinsic natures; pointing (or referring/deferring) not so much to self-identical objects or things, but to their exclusion. In order to foreground relations and conditions, the social and political spaces *between* subjects in a discursive network, the writer finds herself relying on rhetorical devices that materialize these “intangibles” without simply objectifying them. Discursive matter with the ability to designate the particular form of formless: as [], a constitutive lack or structural void. As the poet Kevin Davies writes, “All members of society contain []”.²⁷

In the previous discussion of raw matter, I mentioned expletives as one of these devices. Here it might be useful to note that “expletive” connotes not only exclamatory words and phrases, particularly those which are obscene or profane, but also those which serve as mere grammatical slot-fillers. The expletive indicates the identity of the object (the grammatical subject or object of a verb), and thus paradoxically effaces it, by occupying its position in normal English word order, and anticipating/deferring a subsequent/previous word or phrase supplying the needed meaningful content. To call attention to the *place* preceding any object that might occupy it, or the positionality, the identity of the object must be subordinated. The expletive is thus doubly materialist in function; like heterogeneous or base matter, the only service it performs is to fill up

²⁷ Kevin Davies, *Pause Button* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1992).

vacancies in a sentence or metrical line without adding to “the sense.” What is the primary function (and thus the social problem) of shit or waste? *Shit serves no function other than taking up space.* “To cover a space rather than uncover a meaning.” It comes as no surprise that the generic formula for the expletive or profane utterance, @%#!?!!, is made of units of punctuation and iconographic symbols divorced from the contexts that determine their functions. It could be said that the expletive in this sense is another form of linguistic raw matter intrinsically deictic or externalizing in function; always pointing to what is outside or beyond it, designating something in the farther environment which it paradoxically excludes through the very act of designation. It takes up space and makes the identity of referential objects irrelevant by occupying their positions—this positionality being what is really at stake.

Like *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*, and *it* constructions, exclamations and onomatopoeia seem to inhabit the space between deictic and expletive functions. Like a sign grammatically pointing to the *place* preceding the object that occupies it (or that is evacuated from it), such devices simultaneously materialize the formless (as ‘it’), and paradoxically making the object disappear *through* that materialization, through its very act of becoming ‘it’. This use of deixis provides a way of refusing if not excluding that referential object, when the poet in his desire to materialize relations wants it placed in a more distant or subordinate position—as subordinate to the process of materialization itself. Here I am thinking of Kevin Davies’s use of deixis and expletive in his book-length poem *Pause Button* (1992), where the insistence of *this/that/it* constructions makes abstract relations under capitalism lived and concrete. These constructions are also used, at different

moments, to relentlessly stage the disappearance or exclusion of the referential objects they point at. In such cases, the exclusion of the referent itself is what gets materialized: “—The trembles.//A bank on every corner & a [] in every pot” (22). Davies’ incorporation of the brackets containing nothing in his lines exemplifies this fact, that what the deictic/expletive enticizes is not the representational object but its exclusion:

] & have received the letters in the
mail.
Beauty of flashed light on
even the most ravaged face.
Born in a barn, died in a kennel.
Cars whipped by & their
contents.
As a woman I am a [
] & have posted the correspondence. (11)

The [] sliding all over *Pause Button* is itself raw matter, playing the same role as expletives and onomatopoeia do in Andrews’ work: as expressions of inexpressiveness, stagings of the negative potentiality of lack. The formless utterance is a [] — this is the form it assumes, a picture of what it might look like. The [] is also a *deictic*: these brackets point or call attention to what is contained by them, but what that is is not an object, but the very absence of exclusion of one. The insistence is on the place of the object, or its surrounding context, rather than the object itself:

— experimental pigeon between two towers.

That’s what happens
when you give a [] a [] & tell it to start shooting.

Flash of light along
suburban horizon. (28)

If the grammatical gesture of pointing has the ability to both materialize that which is formless as well as make the referential object pointed at disappear, to paradoxically exclude or refuse it, it seems to perform the function of other linguistic raw matter in the grammar of disgust. As in the case of expletives and onomatopoeia: formations which are simultaneously presence (“being”) and absence (“not-meaning”), positivity (material embodiments) and negativity (non-representational). In breaking down these oppositional dualisms, the deictic [] again performs the function of the tensor, that “intensity” counteracting the dematerialization of language occurring in both unitary designations of meaning and in the pluralist economy of polysemia. The intense gesture accompanying expressions of disgust, in its paradoxical materiality and affective insistence, thus remains exterior to a semiotic value system stuck between two poles, the metaphorical fixation/metonymic slippage, meaningful/meaningless dichotomy.

Lyotard’s favorite example of this deictic is the proper name. Because the proper name “refers in principle to a single reference and does not appear to be exchangeable against other terms in the logico-linguistic structure: there is no intra-systemic equivalent of the proper name, it points towards the outside like a deictic, it has no connotation, nor it is interminable” (*LE* 55), it blocks both the movements of both semantic fixation and endless postponement/deferral, retaining the material that informs and exceeds the sign. In

other words, the proper name exerts, paradoxically at the same time, both the potential to refer and defer, and the potential to not-refer and not-defer.

This is how the proper name functions in Andrews' *Shut Up*: "Fassbinder was sucking the Hegel out of Habermas" ("Blab Mind Blab Body," 33). Just as Whitman, America's first self-professed materialist poet and speaker of blab, wrote poems excessively filled with signs "pointing to the outside," such as Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff (also Hoosier, Badger, Buckeye; Kentuckian, Louisianian, Georgian; Vermont, Maine, and Texas), Andrews' incorporates the tensor into every exasperated utterance: Mao, Santa Claus, Mr. Sorrow, Davy Crockett, Hardy Boys, Calvin Coolidge, Marie Antoinette; Korean, Marine, Black Nationalist; Beirut, Vietnam, Nebraska. If we take the base materialist writing of Lawrence Sterne as an 18th-century precursor for a poetics of disgust today, it comes as no surprise that an entire section of *Tristram Shandy* is devoted to the theorizing the work of proper names. (With its chamberpot humor, digressions into the art of cursing and the length of noses, and emphatic anti-profundities, Sterne may be of more use to us as a model than Sade; Sterne's work is not just excremental in content, but also in form). For proper names, among the other "indissociably singular" and thus anti-pluralistic components of our grammar of disgust (deictics, expletives, onomatopoeia, and [s]) are *externalizing* signs; signs that "have that property of attracting to themselves phrases belonging to different regimens and to heterogeneous genres of discourse." Rather than substituting for concepts or endlessly differing from and deferring to other terms, the singular insistences or intensities particular to disgust's grammar are signs which *generate* other signs. Each tensor (proper name, expletive, deictic) has the potential to release more

heterogeneous matter into discourse. The poet who writes out of his or her disgust thus shows a preference for 'things' (expletives, pointers, etc.) that generate words, rather than words that stand for things or words that diverge-defer to other words. To rewrite one of Deleuze and Guattari's catchphrases from *Anti-Oedipus*, "~~Desire~~ Disgust is what causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows."²⁸ What flows and obstructs flows here is a material quantity and not spiritual current: the grammar of disgust, being comprised of raw matter, generates more raw matter.

- (3) Mutilated Utterances**
- (4) Excluding and Externalizing**
- (5) The Space Opens Up for the Other**

OUT OF ORDER signs won't work
Someone will piss in it anyway

— Kevin Davies, *Pause Button*

A poetics of disgust, one that accommodates the subject's negative potentiality in impotence or lack, can only emerge from poetry built from linguistic raw matter. In focusing on disgust's characteristic expressions of inexpressiveness, it becomes apparent that the terms of this affective grammar share the common attribute of always pointing beyond themselves. And, paradoxically, that this outwardness (the exteriority of a sign to itself) is

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) 5.

precisely where the materiality of the sign is preserved and resides. The deictic, the expletive or onomatopoeic phrase, @#\$%!!?!s, brackets containing nothing, proper names: these forms of formlessness are strategically utilized by the writer against the dematerialization of language occurring daily in the communicative circuits of capital. Above, I mentioned Heidegger's interpretation of the gesture of pointing as an example of how its outward or externalizing function reveals the subject's own radical exteriority from himself—and how that subjective exteriority *becomes the basis for a new definition of the sign.* This is what a sign is: something extrinsic to itself. Man is a sign without interpretation *insofar as he points.* But importantly: insofar as he points not at an object, but at the process of its becoming lost. What the deictic 'insists' upon is this very operation of withdrawal or exclusion, not the identity of the object excluded. What is "simply there" (as material) is simply there only insofar as it remains always exterior to itself.

If the real "object" of a deictic is thus not the identity or ontological consistency of any object but its withdrawal or exclusion, then the materiality of deictic utterances is one based on non-identity. In other words, the deictic materializes or gives form *to that which is formless.* Along with the more familiar forms of deixis (thises, thats, and its) found in *Pause Button*, Davies' use of [] fulfills this function of giving form to formlessness, or of materializing "outsideness". Another example of such unusual deictic construction is Jeff Derksen's use of the maimed statistic in the poem "Interface" (Dwell 1993)²⁹:

²⁹ Jeff Derksen, *Dwell* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1993).

“Jeanine is a living example of
Noranda’s attitude to employees.”

China 6.3%

This train.

The residual anger resides here [points
with right hand] and accumulates
here [points with left hand], I’m still
looking for the spigot. (8)

In another instance:

Anxiety punctuated by time.

West Germany 5.4%

“I’m a man—spell it *I apostrophe M.*”

Patience dispersed through the legs
lead me to “I become my job” now
I’m pulling together like white blood
cells. (10)

Like @%\$#!! and [], other negative utterances or expressions of outrage, the brute number (“West Germany 5.4%”) functions as semiotic raw matter, insisting on the disappearance of its referent while at the same time refusing to defer to other terms. It won’t coagulate into a unitary meaning and it also won’t move; it can’t be displaced. This statistic only covers a space; the reader cannot fix it metaphorically, assign a concept to it, nor send it on a metonymic voyage along a chain of other terms. There’s no substantive meaning, yet there’s also no possibility of polysemia: West Germany 5.4% doesn’t budge.

It only sits there, in its material embodiment, its stolidity. The reader can only act upon it by not acting on it, by turning away — just as the maimed statistic itself turns away from its implicit referent, excluding it. This unit of information is OUT OF ORDER: raw matter is sitting in the poet's lines — a deliberate obstruction of the semiotic system's machinery, yet nevertheless a part of it.

The effect of the mutilated statistic in Derksen's work recalls a moment from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*,³⁰ where the most commonly relied-on expression of disgust, the expletive, is itself mutilated or chopped in two due to bourgeois censorship of its articulation. Two nuns, a novice and an abbess, are trying to make their mules go up a hill. When these modes of transportation stubbornly refuse to move, the nuns find themselves forced to rely on the material productivity of crass utterances:

My dear mother, quoth the novice. . . —there are two certain words which I have been told will force any horse, or ass, or mule to go up a hill whether he will or no; be he never so obstinate or ill-willed, the moment he hears them he obeys. They are words magic! cried the abbess, in the utmost horror—No, replied Margarita calmly—but they are words sinful—What are they? quoth the abbess, interrupting her: They are sinful in the first degree, answered Margarita, —they are mortal—and if we die unabsolved of them, we shall both—but you may pronounce them to me, quoth the Abbess of Andoüillet—They cannot, my dear mother, said the novice, be pronounced at all; they will make all the blood from one's body fly up into one's face—But you may whisper them to me, quoth the abbess. (411)

³⁰ Lawrence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (New York: Signet Books, 1962).

Yet the horrid words are *not* pronounced in their entirety in the text. Instead, they are maimed: halved in the nuns' attempt to get to their destination without violating a prohibition laid down by the symbolic order:

Now I see no sin in saying, *bou, bou, bou, bou, bou*, a hundred times together; nor is there any turpitude in pronouncing the syllable *ger, ger, ger, ger, ger*, were it from our matins to our vespers: Therefore, my dear daughter, continued the Abbess of Andoüillet—*I will say bou, and thou shalt say ger, and then alternately, as there is more sin in fou than in bou—Thou shalt say fou—and I will come in (like fa, sol, la, re, mi, ti, at our complines) with ter. And accordingly the abbess, giving the pitch, set off thus:*

Abbess, Bou — bou — bou

Margarita, —ger, — ger, — ger

Margarita, Fou — fou — fou

Abbess, —ter, — ter, — ter.

The two mules acknowledged the notes by a mutual lash of their tails; but it went no further.—'Twill answer by an' by, said the novice.

Abbess, Bou- bou- bou- bou- bou- bou-

Margarita, —ger, ger, ger, ger, ger, ger.

Quicker still, cried Margarita.

Fou, fou, fou, fou, fou, fou, fou, fou, fou.

Quicker still, cried Margarita.

Bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou.

Quicker still—God preserve me! said the abbess—They do not understand us, cried Margarita—But the devil does, said the Abbess of Andoüillet. (411-412)

Even when mutilated by censorship, deformed or rendered “out of order” by bourgeois social or religious prohibitions, the expletive (Fuck!) continues to serve its externalizing/exclusionary function as linguistic raw matter. Like a worm that seems to become two worms when chopped in two, both pieces wriggling away, the formless form

@#%!?! achieves the same grammatical effects when halved. “@#%!” “%!!?” Yet these effects are achieved only for a certain kind of reader; one who inhabits the diabolical subject position constituted or made available by the very use of the expletive. In Sterne’s parable, the broken expletive remains ‘understood’ only insofar as *a third receiver is posited*, one who is neither nunish or mulish. The very articulation of the expletive, even in mutilated form, introduces this other into the discursive scenario: the other who, unlike the donkey, has the capacity to understand. Lispector: “The unexpressive is diabolical” (92). In other words, the expletive (expression of outrage, expression of inexpressiveness) has the potential to clear a space for an other who might not otherwise be present.

The expletive *externalizes* in making room for this other who is devilishly other; it does so by *excluding* the donkeys. Similarly, in our parable, we witnessed *the inclusion of the other* (the narrator who witnesses) *in the disgusted speaker’s act of excluding the object*. This act of exclusion, of turning away from the object, creates an absence or void *which becomes the space for the other to step in*. The outwardness of the subject’s gestures of exclusion, in other words, is what enables the mutual attunement between him and this other—this other who plays the role of the devil in Sterne’s story. To be attuned to the work of Andrews, for instance, requires that one occupy the subject position the work itself creates; paradoxically, one is included by the very act of shunning or exclusion performed by the writing. If, as Sterne’s parable suggests, as readers or users of language in the economy of disgust, we are all either nuns, donkeys or devils, who wouldn’t want to be a devil?

Disgust Obstructs The “Seductive Reasoning” of Pluralism

We have also seen how the grammar of disgust ‘insists’ on exclusions through its strategic deployment of linguistic raw matter (onomatopoeia, expletive, deixis, proper names, [], @\$%!!?!); as well as how the psychosomatics of disgust, or its corporeal grammar, does so through the bodily equivalents of such discursive figures (cry or groan, gesture of pointing, the turn away from the object, the creation of an exteriorized space for the other to step in, her attunement with him in doing so). *The dominant mode of disgust is thus one of exclusion.* As such, disgust deliberately interferes with a reading practice based on the principle that what is at stake in every textual encounter is a hidden object, one that can be discovered by the reader only if he or she reads deeply enough. But in persistently and insistently re-enacting the turn *away* from this object, whether it be a signified/referent or another signifier/term to which the present terms might defer, the grammar of disgust poses an obstruction to these normative modes of reading. By relying on linguistic elements that interfere with both metaphorical fixation (assignment of concept to word) and interminable metonymic slippage (word referring to other words in a horizontal, linear chain), actively counteracting the dematerialization of language occurring in both cases, disgust as externalizing exclusion suggests a form of textual engagement other than what is ordinarily described as “close” reading. Because the force of its utterances is aimed outward rather than inward, the social attunement between subjects disgust *does* achieve is paradoxically effected by a distancing. One ordinarily thinks of the “face to face encounter” as achieved through a process of drawing closer. But in disgust, the opposite

trajectory makes this ethically important moment happen. Pulling away from the object in revulsion, you're suddenly in front of the other who unlike the others is attuned to you, who stands in the space you've prepared for him though that act of withdrawal. Paradoxically, in the economy of disgust, it is by means of a originary *exclusion* that the textual encounter is made intersubjective.

The grammar of desire is essentially, as Lacan suggests in relating it to the potentially endless movement from signifier to signifier, eclectic, polysemic and plural, all-inclusive of the differences it produces. Thus desire is not merely pluralistic, but a figure *for* pluralism. "Desire" includes everything—all forms belong, everyone participates; what desire *is* is precisely this all-inclusiveness. On the other hand, because the primary mechanism of disgust is exclusionary, because it insists on exclusion as the very *means* for enabling inclusion, disgust is *not* pluralistic and *cannot be a pluralism*. While the language of consumer culture permits us to conceive of desire as polymorphous or even "polymorphously perverse," it simultaneously limits and inhibits both our common concept of disgust (the criteria by which this affective response is identified and defined) as well as our means of expressing it. Thus while the category of desire is plural, polysemic, eclectic, etc., the category of disgust can only accommodate a highly specific, rigidly defined type of experience. Desire is a *trope* of inclusion, since it depends on a drawing-nearer to objects, to engulf or be engulfed by them, whereas disgust, as a mode of withdrawal and exclusion, is logically excluded from all-inclusive systems.

Despite capitalism's curtailment of potential ways of articulating abhorrence without moralizing it, disgust in its irreducible singularity, in its specificity, certainty, and

insistent force, continues to undermine attempts to neutralize its negative potentiality.

Like marxisms, a poetics of disgust “theorizes the necessity, indeed, the inevitability of exclusions” (SR 63); that a community may be defined by members who refuse to engage in “open dialogue” with a universal anyone, regardless of their political stance or affiliation (SR 5). Both discourses assert that “the process of exclusion [is in fact] *necessary* to the production of meaning and community . . . that it is the definition of a field which, by ‘excluding what it is not, makes it what it is’ ” (Rooney citing Althusser, SR 4–5).³¹

Because pluralism in its all-inclusive ideology excludes exclusions, Rooney argues, the exclusion of marxisms becomes theoretically essential to it. This exclusion of marxisms from political and cultural pluralism bears directly on the relationship between disgust and desire; there’s no coincidence that among other political theories, marxism stands out as the one in which disgust is most explicitly and forcefully articulated. Disgust is intrinsically exclusionary; in its function of articulating a profound disgust with capitalism, the rhetoric of marxism is also exclusionary, and thus neither marxism or the disgust it expresses can be recuperated by pluralism.

Thus the poetry of disgust, I would argue, again making an analogy with marxist theory, *deliberately excludes* “the general reader” in order to make the space for the devil, or a reader *willing* to occupy the externalized place of radically other. Which makes the disgusted poet inevitably unpopular as well as antipopulist, easily labeled or morally

³¹ The Althusser quotation cited by Rooney is from Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1979) 27.

dismissed as an elitist, dogmatist, or preacher to the diabolically converted. But: implying that the diabolically converted should *not* be addressed?³² What lies behind the fantasy of all-inclusive readership, and the condemnation of “prescriptiveness” it supports?—particularly when the demand that none be excluded is itself a prescription? This is exactly the way political pluralism in western liberal democracies treats marxism, Rooney argues, harnessing the rhetoric of “consensus” in order to reduce socialist movements to *betrayals* of pluralism (SR 27). As Hal Foster notes, “In a pluralist state art and criticism tend to be dispersed and so rendered impotent . . . Here pluralism becomes an overtly political issue, for the idea of pluralism in art is often conflated with the idea of pluralism in society. Somehow, to be an advocate of pluralism is to be democratic—is to resist the dominance of any one faction (nation, class or style). But this is no more true than the converse: that to be a critic of pluralism is to be authoritarian” (AP 30).

Foster goes on to suggest that pluralism in postmodern art and criticism replicates the logic of multinational capitalism as a mode of “false resistance” to its hegemonic structures. Like Rooney, Foster points out how pluralism resists theory, as it exists “without criteria of its own” and “seems to dismiss the need of a critical art” (AP 17).

The “lack of cogent discourse” in postmodern art and criticism, he suggests, is perhaps “*the*

³² “Even if a [critical or aesthetic position] has public implications, must it conform to the rhetoric of a common reader?” I am rephrasing questions asked by Barbara Johnson in “The Alchemy of Style and Law,” in which she examines a reviewer’s criticism of Patricia Williams for addressing academics rather than a general public in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*: “But does this mean the academy should not be addressed?” See “The Alchemy of Style and Law,” *The Feminist Difference* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) 176.

signal of the concession to pluralism" (15). Moreover, "the problem of critical methods (like demystification) rendered conventional, emptied of meaning, is fundamental to the problem of pluralism, for pluralism is a condition that tends to remove art, culture and society in general from the claims of criticism and change" (26). A similar critique of this social logic is provided by Rosemary Hennessy,³³ who identifies the postmodern intellectual sphere as a site in which "the dominant mode of reading is eclecticism":

Eclecticism uncritically links explanatory frames without making visible the contesting assumptions on which they are often premised. Underlying this easy mingling of contesting problematics is a pluralist social logic in which the production of knowledge is seen as consensual. Such a social logic underlies many "new," "postmodernized" narratives which use terms like "discourse," "subject," and "positionality" but without engaging the assumptions upon which these concepts are founded. (15)

It's not true to say that "desire," as one such 'postmodernized' narrative, *resists* theory, as achievements in critical thought from the last two decades prove the very opposite. But *as a form of pluralism*, as an eclectic, all-inclusive critical discourse or signifying economy, "desire" falls short as a materialism. What disgust may have to offer us as a poetics is precisely this capacity to function such, as evinced in innovative work by writers who remain committed to the dirty work (as Ferguson might say, "the good doodoo") of ideology critique.

³³ Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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