

MONSTRANCE

A BAROQUE ONTOLOGY OF THE
PRESENT



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Abstract

This creative-critical project functions as a ‘baroque ontology of the present.’ Its ‘creative’ contingent is in the form of a poetry collection called ‘Monstrance.’ This collection calls into question notions of biography and confession, and explores the ways these concepts might be mobilized as forms of cultural production. Written in a baroque, cinematic style the collection asks its reader to consider the tension between the ‘openness’ of confession and the highly artficed structures of the lyric poem; presenting them in a *Caravaggist* formulation, enacting of kind of lyric chiaroscuro between ‘earnestness’ and ‘artifice.’

The ‘critical’ contingent is called ‘I Illustrate nothing by living’: a triptych of three polemical essays. These essays pick up the poetry collection’s various conceptual proposals and apply them within a theoretical framework. My critical project is similarly interested in notions of confession and experiments with the ways in which ‘confessional logic’ might be used within a queer-ekphrastic register. A critical inquiry into modern and contemporary queer lyric and visual cultures, “I Illustrate nothing through living” asks its reader to consider the means by which the inanimate world could be mobilized as a form of self-signification. It also functions as a genealogical inquiry into the nature of the ‘baroque’ and the ways in which that term has been applied by various thinkers. Special attention is paid to the poetry of Frank O’Hara, Mark Hyatt, John Ashbery, Sean Bonney and Bob Kaufman. These poets, I argue, make use of a deceptively artficed mode in their work. Finally, I expand on some of the biographical details initially presented in the poetry collection through autocritical analyses of Caravaggio, Kenneth Anger, and Francis Bacon.

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Monstrance

Monstrance

I'm working from memory here, but it was Walt Whitman who was kept behind a perspex observation panel for the first eighteen years of his life and who was unable to distinguish between himself the various solutions with which he was pumped thru

he was considered a total failure spat out into the world by a silver chute among a heap of medical waste and mecha junk, a translucent node in a school uniform, 'Ah

this beautiful, surly life' he said, which really meant:

'I am in pain and must convince myself that it means something, if I am to carry on.'
So off he crawled through the clammy streets of the post-industrial quarter smelt into that disneyland hipsterdom beleaguered by life before he even got there.

Near the cafe with wooden work benches, where the espresso tastes of cinders & they serve giant cinnamon rolls covered in green powder there is a new luxury housing development and less than five minutes down the road from that there used to be an urban gulf peppered with lumps of concrete and arid grass before that there was a large carpark which no one used it became more of an edifice to some half-remembered God of the motorway city. & before that there was a street of crumbling warehouses and a small bar where Monstrance would perform on Thursday evenings, though no one had ever invited her.

Before Monstrance there were some dead boy and some dreary memories rattling around a stranger's head and every other Thursday that stranger was Monstrance

& the memories were of the expected sort: foetid dormitories insubstantial meals

Al Anderson

gargoylesque seminaries and their vices

so, there was Monstrance every Thursday night

drummed up by ridicule

‘oh dear ladies no one told me the circus was in town!’

Monstrance, Cilla Black by way of a travelling friar on hard times, camp

the same way that the unsanctioned

umber, scarlett & paisley wallpaper

made psychedelic by a litany of air pockets

which took up every conceivable corner of her bedsit

was camp

but back then, it was just warm

& all in all

Monstrance was tolerated the way the mad sometimes are

if they are not physically threatening & Monstrance was just a little thing

a boy too beautiful turned croneish

& at the right time of night

after an appropriate volume of rum & coke

the wails of Monstrance hit like nothing else.

The Problem with The Self

circa five summers before cosmic pessimism was the rage
I teetered on some midland peripheral rehearsing a then
not so tired doomer-communist schtick to this dirty blonde
he made us egg fried rice & absolutely everything burnt
I asked if I should stick my tongue up his ass he said, sure
God, I wanted the stink of him forever: your first oyster & drop of tabasco
steam rising from a reddish-brown broth bubbling at the back
of the mind: the first time I read the word 'appetency', so embarrassing
the sun does its thing, I am always trying to remember
the appropriate manoeuvre the way mood
confuses memory & vice-versa, leaves floating in a swimming pool off season
all the sex that never happened, the best sex, nothing makes life so corny
and that's the problem with The Self, there's rarely enough of it
help me god I am an oyster held deep in a brackish estuary & yes
dreaming of the slide down your throat & the sea in you, now my hours
are spent struck down by morbid appetency, what does burnt rice smell like?
there's an ecstasy in the vacuity of terms by which I mean the soul is axenic
I refuse Polari: sometimes there's a clarity of expression that can only be called violence
honestly knitwear or prosody what's the difference I open my window
to the ram pushing up thru a heap of shit let's call that a heart

The Horses

a pocket of bile rests at the back of a toilet in the nearby town
a new animal has wandered out onto the motorway
waiting to grunt at the heart of my happening
there's a certain type of mouth
only understood by the index and middle fingers
and not in waspish lyrics, in-jokes and prefect badges
a Mall of America jutting out of historical Worcestershire
I searched out a pensive noun on the indoor rollercoaster
found instead a shard of decorative china bearing a tiger
kissed a stranger in that pale blue heartless light called rage
I am fifteen, a family friend has just asked if he can eat me; O
love is only real when it's someone who scares you
history is so limply sluttish, worrying at his girlish cardigan
a version of oneself no more grasped at than an aria
crawling from a squat built-to-rent
who knew a string of strangled notes could sing like that
of puke, of rolling out of bed any time after eleven
the way a dilapidated pigsty sings of thought
smoke from far away a person, horses; dead horses; syntax
a glint of angel face down in a sump of midland bog water
between the wheezes of a Chiltern sixty-eight
I love you, stranger
my muted thrill outside the food court
you credential me with your mutability
your work any idiot could do
keep me far away
from whatever dork last said
'I hate it here.'

Common Tendencies

despair so cute
I resigned myself to writing YA fiction
would that my face were passed thru
a thicc pane of glass says he
feasibly excreted forever summer
beneath this shawl we are all plain
scratching thru gravel
smell of overheating modems &
wank around in your latex near cops
drunk & lonely the good stuff maybe
maybe dreaming about it
I don't want luxury poetry
it's a novel about a tomboy
with something to prove
named Gilles Deleuze
perfume smelling of faeces
the same price as a second hand car
Gay lit, or gay for pay? I
promise never to call you dude again
which now I couldn't do anyway
elsewhere is bloomed into
obsession with self-worth
cherish that
the word droll used
more than is becoming
there's a nicer way of saying it
written in a not unpleasant draft
as tide comes around

Al Anderson

no one goes there anymore

clouds congealed

very little orgy here

just some gulls, ekphrasis

some other corny project

like intermittent fasting, spin class

karaoke by yourself

On the Baroque

you can never fully understand what it is you're looking at
you can measure it only against a vast syllabus of regret
frosted with grime in the window of a bedsit
San Sebastian, hands down his stained underwear
an incidental voyeurism, relegated to the bathroom mirror
head out, dear heart, a system of immovable phrases
 a face as a body of raw material
 wounds accentuated by not really being there
 a shroud over something that was never a corpse
 explaining this to myself as if I were explaining it to you to what
 you leave behind you
 a sweaty lactonic smell: spiced cheese and bergamot
it makes me want to take every great man in my mouth straight from battle
recreate the terms of his exile
fall hopelessly in love with a body unlike anything dead
move to the Hebrides
 flick cigarettes into the mossy ocean
re-rehearse every time I tried to explain this nausea & finally die
rain is hammering on the window, of course, rain is hammering on the window
rain is hammering on the window like a drunk neighbour

Al Anderson

and I'm trying not to think about when we knew each other better

you arrive a few minutes late understandably shaken

by last night's horror show

there are no friends with you

as you have no friends

you order a vodka

some pastel nihilist gets behind the mic & the room shifts

to a mood of grim resolve

you drink more, allow space to drop its sharper lines to the floor

someone asks what you made of the whole thing

it made you want to gouge your eyes out

but not in a good way

there's a lost Miró called *Reaper* or *Catalan Peasant in Revolt*

a librarian says shhhhhh in the nicest way possible

you encountered the signifying rupture in an urban garden

a little wood cloistered by Georgian tenements

where the choices of wine were 'um red, white'

you were heavily dosed on codeine

trying to shrug off the weight of lyrical antecedents

you'd a bottle to yourself

last night I dreamed of *Reaper* transfigured into

a huge tapestry draped across a loft wall.

a sickle.

Al Anderson

of spying on someone we knew at art school

who's a curator of some merit now.

One of the worst people you ever met.

I wake up ejaculating.

you say, o wow, as if I was there

as if you were, as if it was you

a hand floats above the room in a silk glove anchors itself

to the promenade via a golden rope tugs gently at a red curtain

which collapses

the rope, the glove, the entire room inhale as one

I so wish you were here

so that we may turn to each other and say

God, people with nothing to do are the worst

Reflections on the Gay Communist Style

What is a system? another beautiful boy
lying dead at the foot of a Judas Tree
A cliché in need of a little unpicking
rather than write anything
I ate thirteen slices of bread
I ate peanut butter
straight from the jar
got cranked
on schlubby fucktitude
invented poetry
& later got drunk it's
better than the quotidian dread
of taking oneself to town
to do the numbers, to chase
that minute dopamine rush
of shitting on company time
or whatever it is you people do
& yes, I knew him
spread galaxies of cheap speed
over his peachy ass
did to him whatever
it is you want me to have done
fictioned every part of him, darling
it was so awful
the blunt needle
of my own company
douching with room temperature

Al Anderson

strawberry la croix
a brutal gnosticism of
trying to get at something
between tv static and song
beyond the odyssey
of pretending the sex wasn't aimless
that freedom wasn't a dribbling catatonic murmur
that I'd leave him sleeping wherever he fell
go watch dawn tumble over an average English town

Living Death

gagged on affective exuberance
droopy smirk o'er Big Tesco
feed me, my feeble web-series
seep Lynx Africa into art
via the masculine confessional
am I wrong to be anxious?
trust a pseudo-mephistopheles
to pick up on the stink
of suburban boy-bards
bargains bred to be erstwhile
if lacking oomph
am I wrong to be anxious, lads?
look at us, so lyrically preened
ours is a choral charm, a locker room
of mordant tv presenters, alas
I am nothing short of a gorgeous cocksucker
parked at the edge of town
forever in soft focus
don't underestimate
the transience of vernacular
all the boys who called us faggot
are happy

Vampyr

last time I saw you
we watched a movie
about a tired vampire
I'd consumed almost
nothing solid that day
a couple tramadol
you appeared with
a bottle of vodka
nothing else
the years between us
were excruciating
you were a colour less stark
the longer I stared
a cum stain on black jeans
a distant galaxy
I laughed a lot, in a cold way
said I needed the bathroom
three times, when I didn't
time is a creature
some wallpaper
pulled down every few years
in lieu of wailing
a slim cut of winter, mid-spring
you've yet to know

Dasein

Yes, I'm aware of the ketchup stain on my jumper
It's there so that I don't have to tell you I'm struggling
The whole point of filter coffee was its bitterness that
It cost 80p & was drunk in the rain not served in a
Chemistry set & my eggs are cold
& twice as expensive as last week
This does absolutely nothing for the movie in my head
All I know is that today I was meant to write
My best ever poem about eating ass
But I've never felt so un-fucked
As by this avo on toast

Food

Orientated

Ontologies

I can't remember

What that means though have

A tendency to drop the phrase

At job interviews, and often considered

Founding a podcast called

Food

Orientated

Al Anderson

Ontologies

Where I talk about absolutely nothing

In my most serious voice

I was

Broke for three years

Because I never learned how to cook

Was sustained on coagulated ready oats & pizza

Now the hours are spent contemplating

Sesame roasted asparagus

I wonder if October sun

Still rolls over Telegraph Hill

If I am asleep somewhere

A pensive mayo stain all along

Beware them both

Hope & dread

Tenderloin

sleep & stream movies courtesy of a smartphone in Taiwan
metaphor rolled into a drain to die & you were the most tender thing for a while
inching thru history like it only happens to other people
I'm so in love with the tattoos you did on yourself you
text saying you lost your keys & an expensive chain & am crying
the recurring trauma of lost things isn't even thrilling, I want to say
let's not approach our memories with such creeping obsequiousness
limpid with yearning and snot in a stairwell late November
you called yourself faggot five times
what I'm saying is, don't wait too long
sometimes, so long is the waiting
it's not waiting anymore just
gaudy interior design
that would make friends think less of you
in the end every gesture means the same thing
I've lost my keys more times than I can count
poked my head into a stranger's flat saying, sorry
realism is to be made sparingly in day-to-day conversation
just enough to demean all the people stupid enough to love me
I miss the crack of my joints in your grip & beg
you wake to a bellyful of pining

Al Anderson

send me all your egregious selfies in fetish gear
Saturn, anxiously supped & doomed to dickless solitude
by which I mean a small room in a new build
memories of you already feel like a sales pitch
regret has the longest shelf life & is so cheaply reproduced
in dead sun, turned pink then pale pink, like anything minced
today is a song in the dry food section
less local, less like a man alone at a table
Saturn was never meant to leave the dining room
watch you so wing'd & embarrassed
queueing for popcorn on Thursday night
for those first few years of drifting
I never knew the guy
wish you'd have called yourself faggot
with a touch more bonhomie
spared my lexicon, 'faggy', altogether
what I'm saying is
hurt yourself
if you need to
just make sure it's going somewhere
your faggy trousers got me
so unsure which parts of myself are meat
which parts language, which to blame

Oysters

never mute the histrionics, O
all I want to write about is myself thinking
of you the adverb pathetically
such are matters as they currently stand spat out after a siesta
your perfume smells of flat sprite sipped out plastic teacups
I want to call you baby all the time sans reassuring sweetness
of affectation but with the permeance of damp of needing
we get so used to mourning sometimes it helps to get it out the way first
I didn't know you were happening as I was happening as things do
routine dialectic setting to room temperature a trampling cupid
a right stupid fucking lark it's dark again less a feeling more rhetorical
less myself it tells me hope we correspond every other evening
I mistook a dead satellite for a star imagined you dressed differently
in a photo I never took of you praying over a single bed
slow humid evening you were sweating a little
don't wait for me O don't wait for anyone so nude
but for the swell of you on a bridge of sweat of needing
the sky a fleshy permutation the city always smells this way
a predictable tragicomedy, spoke he; or you; in a; or this

Aubade

loneliness noses up through idle fantasy and
some days it's not worth sticking around for the afters
chatting shit, getting wrecked, some affectless homosex
hell is empty & all the theatre kids are here
hurrying out discourse, applying lipstick in the dark
when I say grindr demolished my imagination I mean
I was on the way to a hook-up when my phone died
& together we became an abstract of dualities
that hole separating immediate gratification & inconsolable loss
terrified by & yearning for strung out fuckboys strutting home in their joggers
we spied an angel exsanguinated beneath a judas tree
& were unable to distinguish between that & the coming day
you see, tomorrow is a solicitous, aw shucks
a shy, show me what you got
some strawberry blonde sunrise in a Slowdive shirt
craving one last hit on whatever most ruins you
an incompatibility of meaning, the act of
giving more love than you could ever take
otherwise called the end of things

see you space cowboy

I measure my life by the men I've loved
and how many blows to the head I can survive
from either tire iron or hollow smile
when I was seventeen I typed, please help me
pined for boys from everywhere; Perth, Shrewsbury
Begged for a sunset in the pale-yellow wastelands
behind the long-interrupted luxury housing development
which is another way of saying 'Shut up and spit in my mouth.
Fuck your cormorants and summer rain and childhood dreaming
sometimes central towns in August aren't even that lonely
who are you trying to impress?'

Al Anderson

Maybe it's divine providence, maybe it's a renewed sense of purpose
looking down at the person you think you'll want forever
having just excreted every possible fluid in an ASDA car park
THAT is devotion; ergo, every vision you ever wanted; chaffed between
a midland field & tight denim; obscene, devastating &c; a deep throb
in the hole of everything you will become.

Al Anderson

But, no. I am not waiting to throw myself in some wide navy ocean

I am not Hart Crane.

I will not wait for tomorrow as if tomorrow

isn't hiding around the corner

a back-to-school tang

bouncing off the boozy sweat, ergo: October

crusting at the rim of crimson sensorium

whatever party there was the party is over

the thinking

the thinking of you

somewhere else

somewhere smiling,

Avo on toast

on this bad old earth, eco-fascist
brewing hops in a shitbrown bathtub
this is kind of landscape we're working with, sis
the only child at a birthday party still dressed by its mother
I text you saying, Hug & mean
the reason the sky is beautiful
is its ashamed to be enjoying time without us
I drank red bull in my underwear at 10am
was a purple gash across the far wall
hit unduly by morning light
& this necessitated performance
most of all a deep throb
a pearl I find under my tongue
soft like anxiety at the tail of a joy spurt
most friends do not leave but fade
in a manner less compelling than memories
or like *God* he opined before
always do as I do
it gets me off

Al Anderson

Self-portrait in the Baroque Style

Hart Crane died so faggots could write poetry

and faggots have written poetry

climbing up the walls to that wee crevice

within which I stole a kiss

on the bedside table was a short volume of transgressive fiction

anaemic light crept up your awkward erection

late august afternoon burst out my arse

my name is not, nor has ever been,

Gregory Arthur Rourke

the fair eyed boy from Tuam

You fucked me in the top floor room of a once grand hotel

promised me pale-yellow milk, a boyish smile

I will die a September breeze never knowing why

You believed me to be

Gregory Arthur Rourke

Al Anderson

the fair eyed boy from Tuam

Ah, love!

The sun caught in streams of pale bile

from me unto the floor

beyond the town is an endless forest

I am not, nor ever will be,

Gregory Arthur Rourke

the fair eyed boy from Tuam

In the minutes leading to your death

you filmed yourself wanking, turned the camera towards me

Such is life, we said

always wandering toward a wound

Stuttering about Genet & a flick knife

English suburban scene or as ram refers to it
an Erotics of Regret
you cannot remember if the old museum
was an old museum or just
stuffed penguins through peach stained glass
O, yes heap of battered bent cane chairs
ground floor gently sloping into a brackish pool
it isn't to say anything to say the air smells of blood
the question is, where do oysters live?
& they live here, & still taste good
look the same in many ways but
a bit more wide a bit more tired
you miss the days when people worried about you
ram relegated to his coin operated light
O glaring at a pile of silver candlesticks
there was a photo of your grandmother
smiling with a group of other girls outside
swimming baths that are a carpark now
the smile is the decades before she knew you
you once made her a gin & soda, watched her sip it for forty minutes
she said, He never got out of bed.

Al Anderson

Not for the whole time I knew him.
she meant her father
who would have been dead two years
by the time of that photo
outside the swimming baths
that are a carpark now
Oyster Catcher cries
on strictly ideological grounds
electric pink against calluna
s' not moving through
soft slumber of a dead town
like drowning, taste of
late-night petrol station
they used to pretend they were
looking out to sea despite this
town being the furthest one from sea
we're a hyperabundance of gulls, said Oyster Catcher
pretend not to have heard
everyone asked him to talk louder
you were so small you two so essential
to this place and it's crude biology
ram in rain ramming down very hard
outside the cinema & you were the rain

Al Anderson

crumbling some foam in your fingers
not wandering, no, more, baby just life
the only people there a tiny little thing
spasmodic neon of the food stand
silent pressure special screening
hundredth anniversary of someone's death
vapours rising off the river music escaping
out of skylights on the walk home you said
life in this town is a fake yawn
it's less scary to stay in bed
your horns showing
you were
never invited here
no time for thought
think sewage
not five or six pm
late summer
sweat maybe
Oyster Catcher in rain
you didn't have time
for this, not tonight
the joy of being needed
all the quiet things

Al Anderson

between Ram & God

Al Anderson

Ram tonight a snake

sliding somewhere, slowly silent

your breath slips out of you

orange light across concrete

Oyster Catcher in rain

as if you'd just left

the knowing is all in the unknowing

the walls of a hot cave

thinking becomes what was thought

daringly poetic motif days at a time

without putting trousers on

it's either lovers or somewhere nice to die

a hundredth time would dare to be caught dead

maybe think of something else in the meantime

you ran out of things to say

the day you left him there begging

Oyster Catcher in rain

O bright pink weeping

no decorum

it doesn't have to be so painful, you said

sprightly despair

where could the word choke be applied

but everywhere

Al Anderson

sometimes you watch him online

being alive

diffused like light

thru frosted glass

sharing a cup of coffee

skin crushed

into the carpet

nothing carnal to it

just minutes & minutes

you first & only lover

a rock spattered with

forgetting & birdshit

a snake coiled on it

like a heart

Al Anderson

I.....Implement

Ram.....Fastidious Murk

You.....O Stark Lightning

built out mud

the person parts of mud

Ram parts forming on

the balustrade

pulling hair breathing hotly

full gushing heat

his stammering grace

which if nothing else

felt far too much like sea

Wednesday night, November

you bought him a postcard

left it under a pile of dvds

met his mother just once

when she found you

both curled up

he said, don't worry

rolled a cigarette

took it out to her

left the door ajar

dark gold light

Al Anderson

on your chest

took your hand

you dreamed

of dignity

more than

posthumous

c'est ok.

Al Anderson

My Movie

opens with Derson in bed facing

a large frame, a photograph of ruby light

cut to a tracking shot: kid in a library alone

night, vexed by strip lighting

you're in someone else's nightmare

he is called Alan Derson

the immediate temptation is to despise him

his favourite word is 'now' & we cut back

sunset drenched in monochrome

power is an ache, smells like BO but less determinate

Alan is fourteen

February crumbling into March cornered in the changing room

boxer shorts pulled off, this is things going to plan

the most beautiful boy there turns devastating pink & spits on him

elsewhere, when now was better, when it was a plan

now we are watching Derson at twenty-three in the library again at night

pouring over a book with blank pages

then another young man another library, 'somewhere else'

a pseudogothic affair typical of a 90s bildungsroman

his dark room shown perilously unattended

a shaft of light makes a child of itself

falls backwards into a drain

Al Anderson

I've named it *August mon amore*

so as to turn you off immediately

I'm telling you this in the hope it may suggest a plan

for my movie about August and September

Alan Derson all alone in a library at night

summer stretched to breaking point

Al Anderson

He lives in a slow room
in the library late at night with much pressure behind the eyes
then sleep until two, the café for five hours
gets to the library for 8pm or 9 pm & stays there
in my movie, I don't want characters, more
alienated obsessions, tedious nows
so tedious it makes me
think of slow afternoons, lawn chairs, throbbing heat
familial resentment, open flowers, smiling
say o! cut the melodramatics won't you! I've a headache
if I was just some softcore straight boy how easy
it'd be to write about my dreams
my movie is so young, a broken divan
aching months collapsing into each other
I've forgotten the secondary protagonist
other kid, other library
named something delicate like Lyric
I just don't know him at all
colour palette should be an
uncomfortable summer day
not at odds with the central theme
which looks like what? something distracting I

Al Anderson

enjoy movies that do the whole surreal-lite take on the horrors of life

The movie must not be a standard affair

soft lighting is a maybe

perhaps it could be set in a Swedish ashtray

Derson smokes a sexy cigarette

flecks of ash pirouette in 7pm sun

visual refrain is a blurred

shoulder in the corner of a shot

Alan, turning back

a bit more orphic pontificating

Alan, it's a beautiful morning

Alan, don't

My movie must have a lot of sky

Derson under a sky

the colour of red brick

of old wash cloth

silk pyjamas, smashed fruit

a filthy fish tank, cum stain

his big line is, fuck your lyric

the sky like vulgar wallpaper

he is too anxious to go to the party

lurks outside, hungry ghost

a sky the colour of sighs

brutalist angels

I have folded all my suicides into allegory

I'm a dyspraxic catholic

flat-footed and literalist!

an ingrained commitment to transubstantiation limits my capacity for interpretation!

Ah, life! A litany of ruthless codes

every dream is the first dream think you're over someone, yeh

home is much the same as it's always been drunk and bored and hostile

the occasional bittersweet pang of ash grey megalopolitan magick.

That, and endless development the landscape grows new corners every day
totally empty and shining. They knocked the library down a few years ago, built
a new one that looks like scenery from a crap sci-fi film circa two-thousand and seven

this city always finds some new way of falling behind.

brand new units rent only. I think that's all.

I still love you

The year the library got signed off I attended a lecture on Blanchot

and *the trace of what has not occurred*

but to be honest, I'm not thinking about that

I'm thinking about your dick

I don't think they even heard me

I was thrust from
somewhere
to hate men
the mom's basement fascists
the Mary Whitehouse anarchists;
the idiot brocialists and their tradwives
the LARPing Leninists
the sanctimonious small presses
the sexless queers and their stupid hair
the sub-sub-sub-surrealism that's not
surrealism
the self-serving radicalism
the socially awkward avant-garde
the "come and get involved" spirit
the "why aren't you getting involved" religiosity
and poem's about fatherhood are always mortifying
& marriage & boys
boys who are really men and men
and their horrible big smiles men and their self-deprecation
their awful poetry about boys
who are men
who hate men;
who hate me
who are asking "why aren't you stuck in"
and are telling me
to get involved

I wish you understood all great cities need rivers
of shit running thru them
as do people
cities survive their nations
and every person feels primarily
thru a murky line down the centre of it
for too long I've occupied the architecture of whatever bad dream kept you here
smoking under the Ringway Centre, rain came down in heavy sheets
like I'd written it
What indefatigable Augusts those were.
God, whatever.
I was playing at being the loneliest android in the lunar colony
no other city
works that mood the same way.
I find it astonishing the way a boy
can be drawn from negative space
tho Verlaine always was the better poet
I was torn up over you
whoever you happened to be that summer
I was sure it would kill me
nothing felt better
that was the year I first saw anti-homeless spikes for real

No one wants to read your polemic about brutalist architecture, **gayass**
the council has already erected scaffolding two weeks before the public consultation
I was shameless by which I mean I was all shame; you were hanging on a wall
streaming over a dusty screen
whatever: I would drink tequila & watched a
girl throwing up in some pigeon shit and a pigeon flew down to eat the sick
something rhymed with petrichor moving up through hot garbage
so you walked in
sometimes a version of myself but superior
other times composed of everything I considered missing
making you a distinctly separate person
I liked to pretend I was someone for whom things came easily
the smell of chemical toilets
cocaine that tasted like kerosine
loneliness
but the chic and inviting kind.
that simulacrum of despair
we so exalted back then
because we were children

the strain of centuries was yet to work its way through us
I've spooked myself I'm going to book a flight to Rome with money I don't have
oversleep miss it and write a novel where the autumn leaves are falling
for five hundred pages
the air around me is throbbing like a vexed diaphragm and I don't think much anymore
just feel traces everywhere
on the internet and under my fingernails
It hurts as you might have guessed.
The rent.
Knowing you're out there. Existing.
Wild pigs being a thing, after all; snouts deep into vitiated dirt
'twas night
deep summer
the eyes were big and yellow and indifferent.

We sowed our movements through forgetting and credentialed ourselves
with each sharp inhalation between confessions and important observations
and necessarily bitter comedy.
Interpretation ruined everything. I
t's the hottest day of the year.
I write "it is Autumn" and what?
"He" was "researching"
"Goya"
by which I mean you had pdf article about Goya on an open chrome tab
roughly the length of a fling, it made me laugh
Not many people existed then. You pushed your face to the small of my back.
Even the parts unseen you knew.
between us now is a vast sheer forgetting.
I said, if you start foaming off about Aristophanes' bit from The Symposium
I'm leaving. But I didn't.
At the exact centre of the ocean is an island.
The Symposium is the last thing on my mind.
Tho I know comedy when I see it.
On the island is a seraph with a spear made of light.
He tastes like the morning.

Mercy

String theory is a simple supplication
particle atoms are substantiated
with a trillion dirt roads
leading to a neon mountain range
& were, were we
to pretend this isn't a filler arc
lacking mud, zooish stink
daubs of troubled colour, eerily mechanical whirrs of the heart
in other words, no sort of life worth living, we
could bore up yellowish plastic & burnt grass
& dead lighters & a heap of fucking bluebottles
waiting to be translated by a sunbeam into a nameless
English interstice, O translucent palp
which hovers over every hour
waiting to need it into the
piercing chlorinated immensity of dead time
you drum up the worst of us
who will come for this drizzly midland
a bureaucrat in guy-liner droning on about Torture tv, bisexuality &c
we amuse ourselves with a guitar shaped swimming pool
in a dream, I am
a boy with a pearl of sweat running down his inner thigh
riding in the back of a Ford pick-up, with the others
Please, spare us the poetry
something has woken up
a heap of pinkish waste spat from a rusty chute
swaddled in memories seeping
through an amalgam of wounded affect

Al Anderson

bereft of all words but 'mercy.'

Al Anderson

Gosh, I adore the uncomplicated

the yearning to holiday

anywhere but myself

pale blonde peach fuzz half a centimetre off the scalp

a soft girlish nose

Trouble carved just below the jaw

I get a third finger up him behind the scuzzy newsagents

could care less about performativity, gendered or otherwise

I'm officially withdrawing my application to the sensitive boy's club

this is about the sublime, the barley perceivable distance between myself

& Trouble, the throbbing burgundy of his hurt

the great glutes, the panting

the insides of him

late August, shit

the underfunded satellite town

the litany of spit

the shamelessly exuberant stink of the linden

white wine, a nosebleed, a fart between

knotweed, tarmac and

vernacular

an over-radiated geiger counter

bereft of reading

wipe my fingers off, your tears away

with a nandos napkin

learn to love the vile instrument

thrumming inside your lower intestine

the very lack of you

left to unfurl

over this carmine hour

every cute boy who enjoys his hurt
carries in him a perineal dread
hurtling down the cream vortex
of bleach & steamed vegetables
somewhere deep I feel the echo of a queeny sob, alas
those of us who suffered most in sterile corridors
are damned to never leave them
teargas is the only honest conclusion an empiricist can reach
it's the nearest they get to song

little kickabouts and tiny cries
over quarks or other possible fictions

I just want to make E.P. Thompson and Althusser kiss

like two dolls held close
by a fruity little boy
in his last fun summer
before some inaugural beating
I name this praxis
Air, she is an endlessly persistent bog
where I wait out history's dusk
and submerge my head
linking me into some
manner of pedigree
we have little left
of the sacred
beyond a loaded silence
between two people
who want something
approximate to hurt
mercy, by any other means

A theory of the novel

Where were you when I was lonely?

The Engine of Unbearable Memories

is eating a peach on a balcony near the airport.

Was it love? a small private garden now obliterated

The mourning of bro code, the obviousness of concrete

rise like jaundiced smoke over

a sequence of tissues

each one a few inches less shy

of a wastepaper basket

a douche has been left in the sink which

is way of saying, there's no one else

never was anyone else

and you are free to read that

thru yearning or horror, either way

I wake up and there is nothing left

through the big window by my bed

I am too bound up in the comedy

Al Anderson

of all the places I could be

so all about this desert

the dissident real

thumbing thru history like

it's just another shaft

of light to step out of

the tap of footsteps at dawn

the deceit of memory

I drank two bottles of plum wine

an important face, from far away or maybe

an airport terminal cast in gold

I'll drink tonight when home

throw all the misery into

cheap booze from the corner store

get royally wrecked

retch into the early hours

crumple under the crude weight

of my body & feelings

doggie bag full of cinders

Al Anderson

clutched to his breast thinking

Fuck. How could you?

Oscar Wilde would have hated me

I don't speculate on the nature of the dead

though if I was that kind of person

I'd argue there could be no

Oscar Wilde born circa 1993

at least not one without an anxiety disorder

he'd write in a pensive voice

would limit himself to the production of short novels

the occasional undemonstrative opinion column

perhaps even a little fanfiction, under a pseudonym.

Most of his real income would come from his parents

and copywriting gigs and I think

he'd dread the winter

would spend much of it in bed, on grindr

filling himself with hopelessness and junk food and canned G&T

He'd be a nervous man

twitchy and weird — incapable of properly

Al Anderson

indulging himself in the necessary ways

and overindulged in all the wrong ways

spectral versions of himself quotidianly tessellated in blue light

and bitter years atrophied into quiet, desperate obsessions

And he'd leave our world

much like he did his own

but this time we wouldn't remember him

beyond a few barley anthologised microfictions

I need to stop with the drugs, says the rabbit.

That's just the drugs talking, says a boy

who arrived here in a mint scarf and pink beret

but is now undressed

and there is a fan oscillating

so slowly

it almost doesn't exist at all.

The boy is telling a story wherein

his mother consulted three separate paediatric psychiatrists

after she caught him wearing flowers in his hair

because boys with flowers in their hair are beautiful things

Al Anderson

and invite punishment.

He gets out of bed and picks a desiccated apple core

from the wastepaper basket

You need to get into the idea of *poetry as this*, he says

searching it out with his scarlet tongue

Redemption is the word of the hour, he explains

and it is

but that's only because the boy looks like an angel

with a perfect arse

and that must mean redemption, no?

I guess, says the rabbit

watching a membrane of sweat and dust coalesce in seven pm sun

he decided it's time to stop regarding himself in the third person

quit it, he says

quit it, he says

quit it, he says

an intellectual history of faggotry is easy

it's just three words

sweat and blood and shit

Al Anderson

everything else is a footnote

to sweat

or blood

or shit

or sweat and blood and shit

you write a complete saga in

the stuff drying on your sheets

and the sound of some stranger

closing your front door behind him and the

feeling that this must somehow be beautiful

it's no secret that history is a meat grinder

every epic abundant in extraneous fluids

identical to the feeling of faggotry

the gays don't want to exist

and the faggots exist too brilliantly

and from that extract their song

there's always a particular

shape lodged in the mind

I had ready an exhaustive verbal portfolio

Al Anderson

In it the shape of his hips, his arse, the dimensions of his belly button
the contours of his chest, the colour of his nipples, an overlong account
of his thighs and the distance between each shoulder and something nearing
a sonnet crown regarding the almost invisible galaxy of freckles
spattered across the ridge of his nose and cheeks. I wasted months
trying to capture a tiny brown mole half-way up the shaft of his cock
because I was so frantic in my need
to let you know exactly what I thought of it.

Hundreds of pages have been written on his smell alone
some approximation of rotting leaves and cinnamon and sweat and patchouli
his hands were slightly too big for the rest of him
his disconcertingly feminine face which elicited a nauseous
mix of yearning and suspicion in other boys and
saw to it that he was left totally alone.

But at the end of all that
the various bits of him ripped apart
still and slimy and dull in their various files, jars, and trays
I'm not even sure who this is anymore
whether these were the parts of a person

Al Anderson

or of several people or of no one in particular.

All you really need to know about the

person I'm going to describe over the

following pages is that he existed before the aeons

of being sick and tired of being sick and tired

that he a strange name and wore a clay medallion

in the shape of a woman with curly hair

and two wings protruding from her forehead

& became an avatar for all the things I put between us

sweat — Pale

blood — Gold

shit — Light

pale gold light

crawling over and over

with sustained and happy laziness

through the high-up slats of frosted glass

in the changing room

pale gold light

like The Word itself

Al Anderson

and the mysterious will that said it
anticipating all love and sorrow, birth and murder
neon light and processed food
the pale gold hairs of Sinster's navel
virtually invisible most of the time
he was there dressed only in boxers and mud spattered
about pale gold hairs on his calves
He called out to me, Rabbit, and began
running his thumb through his waistband
and gradually working it down.
confirming my gaze as beyond mockery
he pulled out his erection
and then turned around to show me his footballer's arse
of which he was always very proud
made abundantly clear by his melting
into a position, that in yoga is referred
to as the, 'cow pose.'
He slowly and methodically
began by sucking his index and middle fingers

Al Anderson

and then reached behind himself
to caress the cleft of his buttocks
until he found that pale brown crater
and inserted his middle finger
letting out an ecstatic
though clearly rehearsed
yelp!
It was too far back
in the mists
of what I estimate as my history
for the word 'faggot'
to have yet strode across the Atlantic
to enter our vernacular
but we knew what we were
unspeaking outside the sports hall at dusk
regarding his mother's second-hand Audi
parked half-way down a wide navy drive.
He turned to me
stuck his middle finger under my nose

Al Anderson

and trotted off with shameless ebullience

leaving me with that sense of pale gold light.

we became firm friends, as the English say and

I took to visiting his family home whenever I could.

which was typical of mid-England

neither new, nor old, neither big, nor small

you could have expected to find anyone living there

retired solicitors, builders, junkies, cultists, a murderer of children etc

Inside was little of note beyond a superabundance of Medusa.

Attached to the entrance of the dining room was the

particularly bleak and stirring Flemish effort, once attributed to Leonardo

which inspired Shelley

a stained photo of Bernini's sobbing bust guarded the kitchen

Rubens hate filled vermin hive lurked inside the downstairs toilet

Böcklin's dumb tragedy waited to greet us

with her devastatingly brain-dead stare

just outside the parents' bedroom

and Evelyn de Morgan had both her answers accounted for

the golden oil on board, snakes intertwined beneath her neck in a little bow,

Al Anderson

guarded the middle bathroom

and the stoic, handsome-butch articulation was reproduced in plaster-cast

and perched awkwardly on the upper landing

On the door to the attic conversation

that served as Sinster's bedroom

was Caravaggio's baroque defiance

with her effulgent snarl and shining eyes

daring you to call her dead

in the many faces of this particular Daimon

I understood history, my own and others

For all my current efforts, his mother remains no more to me

than an inky silhouette behind the wheel of a second-hand car.

In lieu of a father, I recall a collection of rusted medals and bayonet

s in a pine cabinet in the dining room

an account of Napoleon's doomed Russian campaign

eternally perched on the back of the toilet.

I recall tepid cups of jasmine tea, snippets of hissed speech

crawling from the scarlet crack of the living room door.

I can't really remember what me and Sinster did over

Al Anderson

all those endless late summer autumn afternoons

I watched him have a wank a couple of times

We didn't fuck, ever.

to fuck would ruin whatever it was

that lay between us

a thing we knew better than to ruin

would that it may return us to being

two distinct people.

I was woken one night to the sound of something downstairs

thrown against a wall and then an adult's voice

naming me as

'that fucking quiet thing you keep up there.'

I never returned after that, nor was invited.

Shortly after that night I dreamt of the many faced Medusa

I sought her counsel, believing that I could make an ally of her

and was turned to stone

we call this 'hubris.'

Sinster never got to sixth form, he moved to London

'to do porn',

Al Anderson

though in practice sustained himself off casual bar work

and an older man who worked as a supply teacher

alongside Sunday shifts at the Versace stand at Selfridges.

I learnt of this via a characteristically nonchalant text message ending with the words

‘bye, bum boy x’

All I’d been thinking about that summer was him

Everyone else in the world had collapsed into scenery.

Yet I still smiled reading his text, left to my cliches

in the rain, waiting for a bus

late September

locked into this

altogether new mode

of aloneness.

That night I began on my theory of the novel

a endless stretch of prose

about a period of seven-hundred years

where I failed to draw on a hopelessly abstract dialectic

of contempt and wanting.

The kind of thing he carried off so easily.

Al Anderson

He'd taught me I needed a life more profound

more subterranean

the colours

shit and blood

make on a stranger's bed.

Sinster's only principle was the certainty of his own beauty

mine is that I've yet to touch him.

Years later I was trying at a drug problem and a form of tiring self-regard

This too failed.

Sinster was out in Singapore working in I.T.

He would call occasionally to complain about things

new boyfriends, girlfriends

their irritating families, a desk chair he found, fisting, God.

I'd tell him I'm stacking shelves and working on a movie

The word you're looking for is mercy, he said

look out of the window

I promise you it's raining & this rabbit

takes too long in the shower

it doesn't matter under which sink

Al Anderson

he slumbered last night

the room is full of steam

a vexed capillary bursting into a season

a dead animal in a puddle cherry blossom

lovers come & go

like a bloated tragicomedy

the rabbit looking into a faded postcard

make enough plans with enough comrades

who hate each other sufficiently

it's the same as having no plans

the rabbit has so many plans

long hours dribbling into a drain before

you know what to do with them

walking in the park & sweating

steam rising from the pavement

so embarrassing to think

of this as The Scene

The Scene dribbling into a drain

The Scene rising off a pavement in August

Al Anderson

the rabbit packs his bags the fifth time this week

burying pages from an erstwhile confession

in unmarked graves around the city

we all know you're not calling back

The Rabbit's written a novella

every day this week

why haven't you?

he omits his recent evictions

the strange things one misses such as

whatever object is hit by light first

a cup of mold, for instance

an east facing wall

afternoons diffused

thru a frosted skylight

a lonely sea anemone

fingering its hole for rent

& the rabbit wonders

why no one told him how

lonely that would feel

Al Anderson

closes his account on ram.com

is too in love

with the hottest day last year

every night was spent up in some rafters

ingesting beetles & magick

piss steaming on the pavement outside

drunken arguments & caged trees

a faded postcard burnt like the rest

the soft scent of its song

the rabbit crushes coffee beans into mania

moth's wings into coffee

lifts two bottles of house red

from a petrol station

glorious sunsets wholly contingent

on all your shit thrown to the sky

the rabbit's ears are too eloquent

he heads to some ghost's birthday party

says happy birthday to halogen light

some dried tea leaves, a dripping sound

Al Anderson

inhales a bag of bargain rioja

this is someone's idea of beautiful

the rabbit listens to a wellness podcast

a former employer forced on him

it demands he centres himself

trust his dopeness

look out of the window

I can promise you it's snowing outside

the rabbit's devising a pitch

doped by a glum slurry of river

a rabbity reimagining of some egregiously

mistranslated myth

a Rabbit's Faust

no one's done that yet

he's in the money

a Mephistophelian origin story

the rabbit's eyes roll back in satisfaction

Mephistopheles

before he was Mephistopheles

Al Anderson

Mephistopheles on hold for four hours

& hating absolutely everyone

sadly wanking his way through

winter & sustained

off warm larger

& salty food

& Mephistopheles

a young rabbit

lonely fat & joyous

isolated on the school camping trip

some other boy calling

Mephistopheles's mother

a fat slut &

yes Mephistopheles

before he was Mephistopheles

when he was tears & snot

there is nothing erotic in tears, don't even try

says the rabbit, suddenly shaken

by the vastness of this economy

Al Anderson

little rabbit god

palpated verbiage

god of the airport travelodge

of lukewarm coffee & millennial torpor

of zombie architecture &

everyone to whom you money

a spatial diffidence

a vague depression

tessellated in office glass

the rabbit smiles

all you were tears, snot

outrageous paradise

a history with no history

to speak of

morning just left

a huge ram

his head in

your lap

run your hands

Al Anderson

thru him

a sequence of

ancient nouns

vapours rising

from a river

school trip

all you were

was tears, snot

a light shower

'been here before'

is what you say

to yourself

when scared

the air smells of

expensive perfume

& brine

stranger, the snake

& Ram god of

here, before

Al Anderson

Ram lifts

his manhand

rests his thumb on your chin

'been here before'

another way of saying

this fear isn't anything new

I wish I could explain it to you, properly

the feeling of Eden

howling fields leading down

dunes leading down to night

by which of course

I mean some kind of sea

and by which of course I mean it is night

and the river is flowing into the sea, into the night

by which of course I mean I just left

and you arrived or vice-versa

and we both lie dead

thousands of miles away

from wherever this could possibly be

Al Anderson

God, doesn't this feel so familiar

like a service station seen

from a car early morning

& it's not you

I'm just so sad, always so sad

that I'm not there, wherever it is

& I've got to go now

to miss you.

I Illustrate nothing by living

Introduction

Some clarifying remarks: this project was born from a concern with the tensions between artifice and confession and the urge to critique the idea of ‘selfhood’ as a capitalistic construction which is used cynically within visual and literary cultures. The following three essays attempt to expand on the concerns initially performed in my poetry collection, *Monstrance*. Like the poems, this essay is also intended as a performance. The baroque tendency which occupies so much of my thinking, is *enacted* as much as it is elucidated. My writing makes ornaments of its theses, demonstrating them through its form as well as relaying them through more conventional means. There is also a ludic element to my practice: I make use of long run-on sentences, provocative, and sometimes knowingly superlative, assertions and it is with great joy that my allegories and ekphrases run away from me and take on their own agency.

The phrase ‘baroque ontology of the present’ I take from Fredric Jameson. He summarises an ‘ontology of the present’ thus: ‘[it] needs to be an ideological analysis as well as a phenomenological description; and as an approach to the cultural logic of a mode of production, or even of one of its stages—such as our moment of postmodernity, late capitalism, globalization, is—it needs to be historical as well (and historically and economically comparatist).’¹

My attaching of the word ‘baroque’ to Jameson’s concept is to emphasise my theory of the baroque as it relates to practice of building an ontology of the present. I elaborate on this in the

¹¹ (Jameson, 2015)

essay, so will only briefly rehearse it here. For me, the baroque functions *both* as an historico-political concept, as well as an immediately recognisable 'aesthetic.' Like Walter Benjamin, I view the 'triumph of artifice' as an expression of cultural estrangement and therefore inherently melancholic. But also like him, as well as Nietzsche, I avoid casting this interpretation in moral terms. On the contrary, I believe that the melancholic mourning of absence which uses pure artifice as a means of working against itself is the most valuable cultural tactic we currently have. It is for this reason that my 'ontology of the present' is a baroque one: it is a highly artficed knowledge system which I use as a means of theorising the metaphysical absence at the centre of lyric and visual cultures.

As will become obvious, there are elements of social critique throughout this essay. I elect to use the term 'postmodernity' to describe our current socio-political epoch, as the term is elucidated and applied by theorists such as Jameson, as well as Jean Francois Lyotard. I use this term rather than 'Late Capitalism' or 'Neoliberalism'. I find 'Late Capitalism' a frustratingly vague and rather optimistic formulation, and do not favour its use for that reason. 'Neoliberalism' was a term initially used in earnest to describe a particular school of economic theory, which was interested in reviving 'free market' capitalism after the Social Democratic turn in Britain and America after the Second World War. However, in contemporary parlance it is used almost exclusively in a contemptuous way to describe the marriage between destructive laissez-faire capitalism and prevaricating politicians, whose only true purpose is to devise superficial rhetorical strategies to protect the free market (at great human cost). While I generally agree with this denunciation of 'neoliberalism', I feel like academic and journalistic literature on the topic does not go far enough in examining the public complicity in such a system and the means by which it is ideologically interpellated, even by those who nominally oppose it. 'Postmodernity', on the

other hand, is advantaged in its initially being devised as an aesthetic critique. Jameson's enunciation of the topic has been especially informative for me and it is to his definition I am most closely aligned. His genealogical inquiries into contemporary literary and visual cultures and the means by which these forms acquiesce or resist the temporal disjunctures of an increasingly interconnected, alienated, world are, in my opinion, the most useful historical inquiry we have into 'the way things are now.' The term's ostensible 'datedness' is also beneficial: having fallen out of common use among the managerial and commentary classes, means that it has accrued less ideological detritus and can be used without a myriad of clarifying statements.

Finally, I'd like to quickly comment on some of the biographical elements of this project. To paraphrase Lee Edelman, I do not call myself queer, that'd be boastful.² In the contemporary study of the humanities there is an inveterate and extremely forceful pressure to place emphasis on 'lived experiences' and the means by which those experiences might inform scholarship. This is particularly prevalent in practice-led projects. In the poems and essays contained in this dossier I seek to inhabit a certain affective register and it is one which fundamentally rejects notions of 'representation.' This project is not an exercise in marketing. The autocritical and lyric manoeuvres I am attempting here are done in the spirit of intervention, playfulness and resistance: they are certainly queer, if nothing else. More important than my homosexuality, which I would never pretend doesn't inform my creative and critical work, my psychic reality also had an unmitigated and far more profound influence on how I wrote, here. I am, for lack of a better term, 'neurodivergent.'

² Lee Edelman in conversation with Ralph Poole: '*Queerness, Afro-Pessimism, and the Aesthetic*' [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKAXKmjTT5I&t=188s). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKAXKmjTT5I&t=188s> [Accessed 29 Sep. 2023].

Michel Foucault writes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: ‘I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.’³ While it may seem paradoxical to embark on a project that draws so intensely on the autobiographical while, simultaneously, yearning to have no face, it was in fact the impersonality of the ‘confession’ that I was drawn to in the first place.

I accepted from the beginning that my own neuroqueer subjectivity was going to affect my work, though I did not quite anticipate the difficulties I would face; both from my own physico-cognitive idiosyncrasies and the means by which those idiosyncrasies would be exacerbated by the the cruel, bureaucratic managerialism of the contemporary university. I was never made to feel the ‘catastrophe of my personality’ more pointedly than when I was subjected to arbitrary ‘professional training’ regimes or made to fill out pages upon pages of paperwork, written in managerialist jargon, even in the wake of personal emergency. So, these experiences of the institution have inevitably fed into the autocritical style mobilised here. I am not sure whether or not a sense of ‘institutional critique’ can be derived from this work; that was never the primary concern. But even the most controlled and mannered artist must make room for some intervention into their practice from the outside and account for it accordingly. Frankly, I do not wish to go into anymore details concerning my history of diagnoses. I just wanted to make clear the phenomenological contexts which informed my work. Beyond that, I say again: ‘do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same.’

³ (Foucault, 1989)

I. Caravaggio: a baroque ontology of the present

A lot has been written on loss, memorial and elegy. An art propagated from a hole left behind by something. But what of art provoked not by the loss itself but by the anxiety of losing? What desperate songs are called forth on the way to tragedy's becoming? Is the boy, by which I mean myself, by which I mean all I lack, an act of translation? His arms are slightly too toned, more swollen than is congruous; a body familiar with work rougher than I'd prefer to imagine; maybe this whole "sickness" thing really is just his gimmick; a particularly idiosyncratic bit. It's generally agreed that the model's gaze is morbidly inviting. But inviting you to what? There's a song here; a kind of discordant grammar that works to close off the oblivion between the (either) rotten, or nowhere near ripe, grapes and the imperceptibly parted lips, evacuated of blood. You're invited to point out the obvious and connive some glib reflection on mortality. But there's a greater question, impossible to reduce to some remedial dualism, and which underpins the seduction's terror: *what is it you want, exactly?*

Does ekphrasis feel or feel for? It is, after all, a creaturely mode; its processes mimic those of the organic world; it adapts to its cultural ecosystem and thus accrues for itself a panoply of socially contingent functions. It contains within its logic both an unthinking urge towards reproduction and, especially within contemporary iteration(s), a self-defeating cognition, an acute anticipation of its inevitable failure. 'The verbal representation of the visual representation'⁴ is the

⁴ (Glavey, 2016)

closest a statement can come to an exact definition, but even this is subject to historical context. There is no static historical circumstance within which visual culture is received beyond the human compulsion to represent it within language. It is for this reason that ekphrasis, so simple by premise, has become a heaving mass of meaning, bursting with heroism and paranoia, jouissance, melancholy, murder and creation.

There are many historical examples of ekphrases that have come to stand in for the image they describe. Indeed, arguably the most famous example of ekphrasis is Homer's description of Achilles' shield in Book 18 of *The Iliad* which is so exhaustively explicit and specific in its description that the material reality of object 'itself' becomes a fundamental impossibility. Some artists tried to reproduce a version of the shield, using Homer's poem as a template. None has been successful in producing 'The mass and majesty of this world, all/ That carries weight and always weighs the same'⁵ (as Auden describes it in his poem after the passage). Ekphrasis, then, can be used to account for a particular kind of lack in the visual itself. Its genealogies are in a classical rhetorical zeal; wherein a speaker is aiming to be as specific as humanly possible. Yet this drive towards pure clarity produces a void between the linguistic construction and the object of its description. Ekphrasis is therefore an inherently speculative mode and one which is overly productive.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, *On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery*, describes a 'tempestuous loveliness of terror'.⁶ A key tenet of Shelley's Romantic project

⁵ (Auden, 1991)

⁶ However, it does not describe a painting by Leonardo Da Vinci. Rather it describes a painting of the *Medusa's Head* misattributed to Leonardo by Luigi Lanzi in 1782. The painting is in fact by an Flemish painter whose name is long forgotten and is from roughly 1600; three-quarters of a century after Leonardo's death. There is some speculation as to whether or not this painting is a copy of a now lost Leonardo. Then again, others have said that Shelley was never talking about

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is a certain kind of communication between the poet and those he regards as his romantic and intellectual antecedents. We could name this as a 'communion'. So, what does the added detail of misattributed authorship mean for this communion? Of course, these details don't detract from the strength of the poem itself. There's an unaccounted ambiguity at the core of the subject, a misattribution which has transformed itself into an absence, a hole for grieving. The poem suddenly finds itself haunted: what the reader assumed was a tangible material relationship between language and image is one of spectral imitation. This enhances a poem which so dialectically celebrates 'loveliness' and 'agony', 'horror' and 'grace'. The loss at its centre means nothing, and everything.

Ekphrasis is an inherently paranoid form of cultural investigation and melancholic production. Even as it attempts to mourn it gives birth. Baroquely, it intertwines a fundamental process of cultural grief into an act of creative impetus. Nietzsche was among the earliest thinkers to theorise the baroque (his use of the term preceded Heinrich Wölfflin) and he offered a startlingly proleptic understanding of the category that anticipated its later recuperation. For Nietzsche, there was no single 'baroque period' but rather a recursive cultural tendency: there have been many *baroques* and, similarly to the theory of the baroque Walter Benjamin would advance in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, Nietzsche's baroque is an expression of cultural melancholia and estrangement. The triumph of artifice is a simultaneous act of grief, which arises as a disconsolate postscript to a more heroic age. He writes:

A baroque style has already existed many times from the age of the Greeks
onwards - in poetry, rhetoric, in prose style, in sculpture, as well as in architecture

the painting once attributed to Leonardo, but had mistaken Caravaggio's *Medusa* with Leonardo's. Both are in the Uffizi.

- and, although this style has always lacked the highest nobility and an innocent, unconscious, victorious perfection, it has nonetheless satisfied many of the best and most serious of its age: which is why I called it presumptuous to judge it with contempt.⁷

A baroque *structure* (this word can be used both metaphorically and literally) resembles one of Piranesi's imaginary prisons: an immense conformation that is astonishing in its scope and completely disconcerting, a precise and decisive geometry which gestures endlessly towards loss and discombobulation, that intuitively immensity precisely to contain its own force of feeling. Writes Nietzsche:

He who knows that he was not born or educated for dialectics and the analysis of ideas will involuntarily reach for the rhetorical and dramatic: for in the long run what he is concerned with is to make himself understood and thereby to acquire force, it being a matter of indifference to him whether he conducts sensibilities towards him along a level path or overtakes them unawares - either as a shepherd or a brigand. This applies to the plastic as much as to the poetic arts; where the feeling of a lack of dialectics or inadequacy in expressive or narrative ability, combined with an over-abundant, pressing formal impulsion, gives rise to that stylistic genre called the baroque...the baroque style originates whenever any great art starts to fade, whenever the demands in the art of classic expression grow too great, as a natural event which one may well behold with sorrow - for it means night is coming - but at the same time with admiration for the substitute arts of expression and narration peculiar to it. To these belong the choice of material and

⁷ (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1996)

themes of the highest dramatic tension of a kind that make the heart tremble even without the assistance of art because they bring Heaven and Hell all too close: then the eloquence of strong emotions and gestures, of the sublime and ugly, of great masses, of quantity as such: the glow of twilight, transfiguration or conflagration upon such strongly constructed forms.⁸

Nietzsche's baroque, by which I mean the very particular baroque he felt himself to be living through, was a species of vitiated romanticism. Napoleon, Beethoven and Byron, all three of whom Nietzsche admired to varying degrees, died in the 1820s (within the same 5 years, in fact), circa twenty years before Nietzsche's birth. They took with them a particular heroic sensibility, which could be thought to belong to the 'Napoleonic' variety; synonymous, in the mind of Nietzsche and others, with Romanticism.^{9,10}

A baroque period denotes an epoch that has interpellated the technical, intellectual and aesthetic innovations of a preceding epoch, perhaps even perfected them, but has found itself estranged from the conditions that allow these innovations to take place. Baroque poetics is inherently haunted, then, informed by half-forgotten philosophies and a tendency to over stylise its own sense of catastrophe.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ (Fraser, 1976)

¹⁰ It was in a letter discussing Byron's *Manfred* that Nietzsche, barely out of adolescence, first deploys the term 'Übermensch', in a description of the poem's protagonist (he later turned on the work, though retained coy admiration for its author, writing: 'I cannot see in Byron's *Manfred*, which I almost venerated as my favourite poem when I was a boy, anything but a madly formless, dreary absurdity'). It was Beethoven to whom Nietzsche unfavourably compared Wagner (a true 'brigand', by Nietzsche's reckoning). As for Napoleon, Nietzsche's contemporary Karl Marx offers a pretty succinct summation of his cultural legacy, not once but twice: first, very famously, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he remarks on the grotesque and embarrassing tribute act that was Napoleon III, but also in his unpublished work *Scorpion and Felix* where he compares Napoleon to the reinstated French monarchy: 'Every giant ... presupposes a dwarf, every genius a hidebound philistine.... The first are too great for this world, and so they are thrown out. But the latter strike root in it and remain.... Caesar the hero leaves behind him the play-acting Octavianus, Emperor Napoleon the bourgeois king Louis Philippe.'

I am interested in the ways in which we could make this understanding of the baroque work *now*, on the other side of modernism, with all its innovations and cataclysms, and after the cultural and economic domination of neoliberal ideology. I am writing after the covid-19 lockdowns and during the early months of what is promising to be another devastating economic recession and so it is hard to dispute temporality's current discordance. Our epoch feels particularly depressive: the hours have not only lost their clock, but the centuries their purpose. Today, our cultural gestures are hopelessly, perhaps willingly, amnesiac; any sense of the antecedent recedes into a murky pool of uncertainty and paranoia. We cannot even seem to recall if there was there was ever any singular 'meaning' to begin with.

While the socio-historical conditions of what we may approximate as 'postmodernity' have been theorised for sixty or so years, its bite feels more pronounced now more than ever. While my instinct is to state that we are currently living through another baroque I cannot do so with any confidence, as that would necessitate conceding to a comforting, linear, historicism that simply cannot be recognised as viable any longer. It's true enough that we are not living in an age of heroes and innocence, but one of technical and scientific advancements that would have been inconceivable a century ago. However, we also find ourselves locked into a period of intense cultural poverty where much of art and literature is largely performative, having been reduced to a series of empty cultural signifiers and market values, without any emphasis on technicality or 'skill' that would qualify the period as baroque in the historico-philosophical sense. Whether or not we name this age as neoliberal or late capitalist (though I've always found the 'late' to be rather presumptive) we can likely agree that it is one defined by disharmony, amnesia and confusion.

If we are to revive a 'new baroque style', then, the term cannot come to describe an incidental development in historical circumstances but must denote a more self-aware tendency.

Lisa Robertson characterises the poet as an ‘amateur’ working ‘only in the company of language’s ghosts’.¹¹ She is speaking, in part, of her methodology as both a poet and translator of an essay of Simone Weil about Occitan troubadour poetry. She has also translated the poems Weil speaks about and presented them as a sequence at the end of the book. She is remarking on the inexactitude inherent to the translation of poems from an oral tradition, that were never ‘written’ down at the time of conception, but later on by historians. Working from Weil’s neo-stoicism, Robertson understands an aesthetic pleasure taken from ‘intellectual uncertainty and deferral, which can open the moral spectrum of existence to forms of experience that can’t be quantified by market censors’.

She’s referring here to what I term an erotics of mystery. A work’s aesthetic impetus is placed on an unknowability and/or un-achievability inherent to its structure. It is an exaltation, of sorts: an exalting of the wound that separates language and the subject or object it hopes to denote. As Rilke writes in his fourth letter to the young poet: ‘Be patient to all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue’. I am hoping to be so grand as to call for a new mode of literary thinking, one which is shamelessly grandiose and which eschews any feeble notions of self-consciousness that attempt to bubble up through its methods. Indeed, it acknowledges its own contradictions by way of celebration. It is violent thoughts made exuberant and exuberance brought down into pensive melancholy. This is how it formulates itself as both poetry and critique and is the reason why, for me, notions of the ‘creative’ and ‘critical’ as neatly separated, compacted genres fail.

Why do I feel the need to say this now? An undoubtedly familiar interrogation to anyone who has found themselves sat before a psychotherapist, had to put in a funding application or been

¹¹ (Robertson and Weil, 2022)

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at the mercy of a glitching online interface frequently employed by psychotherapists and funding bodies. It's the kind of subtly hostile question which has enthralled the managerial class, in its demand for quotas, timetables and performative enthusiasm. It takes as empirical the outmoded philosophy on which it is premised, assuming the production of knowledge to be linear; a single intellectual project contingent on episodic 'breakthroughs', pencilled in on some divine rota, with a few minor revisions along the way. Those at the mercy of this question find themselves ventriloquizing what they imagine to be the desired answer.

As I have already mentioned, among the earliest known instances of ekphrastic writing is the description of Achilles's shield. There is also in the Hellenistic tradition the mirrored shield given to Perseus by Athena, to aid him in slaying the gorgon, Medusa. To look upon her own reflection negated Medusa's powers of stupefaction (of turning people to stone with her gaze). Upon Medusa's decapitation the reflective shield, now mounted with the Gorgon's head, was returned to Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, and is often represented in depictions of her. Ekphrasis came into being through efforts to verbally approximate protective artefacts.

With this history in mind, I do not strictly aim towards a 'critique', so much as protection; specifically, the modes of spiritual protection both lyric and prose writing may afford me. Poetics remain, if anything, and perhaps somewhat tragically, as the final recourse we have for protective magicks against the psychic-linguistic onslaught of postmodern capitalism. Conversely, protecting oneself, by means of deflection, against the mobilised institutional stupidity of an overly bureaucratized system can work as a robust and muscular critique. As Michel Foucault, interviewed by Didier Eribon, stated: a

critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar,

unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest. We must free ourselves from the *sacralization* of the social as the only reality and stop regarding as superfluous something so essential in human life and in human relations as thought. Thought exists independently of systems and structures of discourse. It is something that is often hidden, but which always animates everyday behaviour. There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits. Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practising criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult.¹²

If I am to play this game, and make difficult the facile gesture of assessing the ‘research output’ of a ‘practice led’ project, ‘I’ must work to locate *itself* within the institutional confines to which it has submitted itself. Somewhere in the syntax of image, Capital and the ghosts of thought which calcify as language is the glorious failure of ‘myself’. To whatever reader is now encountering this text, I want them to know it was born from the failure to meet an initial premise. Whatever efforts I offer up now are inevitably haunted by this failure. Paradoxically, I discover in failure a strange kind of affirmation and new form of conceptual enunciation. I had been working in a kind of subconscious ekphrasis; my critical writing lost in the effort to adequately represent what I regarded as the force of a particular image; whether this be a painting or something plucked from memory. I seek to demonstrate scholarship's innate function as an aesthetic form for which

¹² (Foucault , 1988)

the mode of expression is often as important as the argument itself. Indeed, in certain cases, my style supersedes argument.

I could gesture, polemically, to recent developments in the 'lyric essay' or 'autocritical' genres which less honestly formulate their non-critiques in a similar way to which I formulate my hyper-critique. An earlier version of my opening chapter was written in a parodic style intended to lampoon the more bloviating and portentous tendencies to have emerged from these genres. This strategy was better abandoned. The increasingly vituperative register I was inhabiting defeated the comedy and embarrassed me more than those I sought to criticise: there's nothing worse than bad satire, especially when it betrays some insecurity on the part of its author. Style, as Lacan said, is the man himself.

Instead, I shall lead into an ekphrases. Before doing so, a quick reflection. The creator of one of the Medusas theorised as having possibly moved Shelley towards ekphrasis was Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio. On 24 April 1604 at roughly 17:00hrs Caravaggio struck a waiter in the head with a plate of artichokes, scarring him just above the moustache. The exact motivation for this attack remains a mystery; generally agreed on is this particular waiter's famous aggression, both of the passive and active variations. He had brought a plate of artichokes in butter, rather than oil, to the artist's table; a gesture which, in Rome at that time, could be read as suggesting the man the dish was intended for was a crude, unrefined philistine.

Caravaggio's paintings are a vital conceptual resource to this project; it was through lyric engagement with his early baroque style that I developed a schema. I rehearse the above episode because, for all the lyric pontificating I shall be embarking on through following pages, it is vital we do not forget Caravaggio's violence and that, in the beginnings of a baroque tendency, is a figure totally enslaved to his anger. The triumph of artifice begins with stark, bright rage.

Consider the anhedonic Bacchantae. In the absence of an immutable God the need for devotion has found itself with nowhere to go. We search out idols, but also ritual and the sense of purpose that ritual engenders in our inner lives. ‘All my life,/since I was ten,/I’ve been waiting/to be in/this hell here/with you;/all I’ve ever/wanted, and/still do’.¹³ So goes Alice Notley’s famous ode to the poetry recital, the hell which no one enjoys, and yet all poets seek out with unfailing dedication. The logic of the encounter which Notley so ruthlessly enunciates here could be applied to any manner of contemporary social phenomena. The night club, for instance, with its warm and overpriced drinks and terrible music. The post-work pint in a streetside pub with no seating where you permit yourself to fall into a dissociative fugue surrounded by people you dislike, complaining. The casual sex with strangers totally lacking in erotic fulfilment, the eerie, sweaty mechanical fucking done only so one may have something exciting to talk about with one’s friends. I may be, to borrow a term from the halcyon days of Gay Liberation, ‘outing’ myself here as a premature curmudgeon. However, I’m aware that the experiences relayed above are not unique to myself and that many of my contemporaries have felt similarly disaffected by the vacuous performances of debauchery that seem expected of us. Not that such disaffection has done anything to inhibit its happening

The production of an image is itself speculation, and it is a speculative force which is often lost. The reception of an image, within a given episteme, is a separate speculation. ‘He is a young God./ Mythologically obscure,/ always just arriving’¹⁴ is how Anne Carson describes Dionysus in the introduction to her translation of *The Bacchae* (which she calls *Bakkhai*). Carson’s project works as an ekphrastic exercise after Dionysus as a sequence of semiotic notions. She works to

¹³ (Notley, 1985)

¹⁴ (Carson, 2017)

reconcile his historical roles and rites with his contemporary reception. For this reason, there is a distinctly Nietzschean spectre haunting the work, at play in both her ludic approach to historicism and translation (albeit, an approach lacking the true boldness of a Nietzschean genealogy) as well as her tacit exalting of the force of will, personified in the Young God. There is, within our epoch, a social mode of re-configured Dionysiac frenzy. Not to become too Derridean, but it is a frenzy lacking in frenzy. The feral joy of the original rites, as they were recorded in Greece, by a zombie-like vacuity. The distinctly creaturely, and chthonic God, Dionysos is locked into a system of joyless rot.

Beauty finds itself today submitted to a fundamental paradox. I am convinced of its existence; the same 'beauty' written about by Plato, Kant, Hegel and Shelley (and thousands more) can be accounted for and is not contingent on social and historical factors. However, it is a phenomenon that can be measured only through the minutiae of an individual psyche and this dictates that the means by which it is regarded, and the stimuli through which it arises, change century to century. To paraphrase Nietzsche (talking about Dionysus) I look to and learn from that great philosopher Caravaggio, whose painting 'Young Sick Bacchus' I must summon.

The Dionysian is commonly misunderstood as an aesthetic exalting of, or surrendering to, chaos. This isn't strictly true. What is true, is that inebriation, sex, theatre and poetry, and their attendant pageantries, are central to the Dionysian rites. They are not, however, constituent of a kind of disorder but rather a different kind of order to the commonly received understanding of that word; this is especially true now, in our current Anglo-American socio-political sphere enthralled as it is to a version of, albeit bastardised, logic propagated from protestant theology.

As tends to be the fate of surviving Gods, the cult of Dionysus has enjoyed many revivals, some serious, some less so, over the centuries, but the exact meaning and purpose of his divine

charges have been subject to subtle variation; modulated and tweaked so as to better complement, or provide adequate opposition to, certain historically contingent positions. There is a unifying thread flowing through his various iterations, however, and that is his foreignness; he is a God ‘always just arriving’, an eternal stranger. He’s speculated to have arrived in Greece via an Eastern tradition.¹⁵ He is foreign even to his own Pantheon. Like Herakles, his mother is a mortal woman impregnated by Zeus. He is zapped from her womb by lightning and sewn into Zeus’ thigh so that he can be brought to term, after which he is taken away and raised in barbarian lands not returning to Greece until adulthood (we can see mythos at work, here, accounting for cultural idiosyncrasies).

Nicholas Hawksmoor famously demonstrated a proclivity for pagan imaginings in his architectural practice. This is most evident in the six London churches he designed and built after being commissioned by an Act of Parliament in 1711. Out of all the various ancient cults made reference to in Hawksmoor’s work, Dionysus features most prominently on the south-front of St George’s, Bloomsbury which quotes directly the Roman Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek, Lebanon. This church honours the ferocious poetry of the wine-god’s nature; imposing, yet mysterious, generous but brutal; an iteration harmonious with Euripides. In her admirably anti-social, if tenuous, *Sexual Personae* Camille Paglia identifies Dionysus as a chthonic god. He is rooted to the Earth, to the soil and is a god of the subterranean, whom she relates, among other things, to ‘male homosexual elitism’ and ‘Decadent aestheticism’, which she characterises as ‘a visionary idealism, asserting the primacy of beauty over all modes of experience’.¹⁶

¹⁵ As Anne Carson points out, however, the name ‘Dionysus’ appears in Mycenaean Greek too, on tablets from the 12th century BCE.

¹⁶ (Paglia, 1992)

Anne Carson decorates her portrait of the god with her own interventions and observations as to the problems of translation. Her Dionysos has an address with no corresponding lines in the original text, where he points out to the audience that he is ‘not exactly god, ghost, spirit, angel, principle or element –/ There is no term for it in English./ In Greek they say daimon – can we just use that?’¹⁷ In his version of the play Wole Soyinka defines Dionysos against the human mind, ‘that dark mountain whose caves/ Are filled with self-inflicted fears. Dionysos/ is the flame that puts such fears to flight, a flame/ That must be gently lit, or else consume you’. There is, too, of course, the progenitor of contemporary Dionysism himself, Nietzsche, from whom all subsequent artists and writers work from, or against.

Nietzsche famously uses Dionysos as metaphor in his self-repudiated book *The Birth of Tragedy* but the daimon recurs throughout his oeuvre, notably in *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Anti-Christ* and as a moniker used by Nietzsche to sign off a series of distressing letters to friends and political figures, written during the first weeks of his breakdown. The Greeks called the god ‘twice-born’, in reference to the weird nature of his birth and to denote him as a being belonging to both the divine and mortal worlds (or neither). But we should not mistake Dionysos as a God of middle ways, of moderation, of the centre. His role in Modern imagination(s) as a proto-Christ are well documented and early translations of *The Bacchae* would tend towards labouring the parallels between Dionysos and Jesus. Christ does represent a middle way: he comes as divinity wrapped in flesh so as to act as a bridge connecting the parallel worlds of divinity and flesh. Dionysos, on the other hand, is a creature of ineffaceable cracks, a God of interstices, between worlds, languages, cultures, the human mind and its creations etc. Nietzsche regards him as Antichrist; the opposite, and only true equal, to Christ. In a Nietzschean account, Jesus was anticipated not only by the

¹⁷ (Carson, 2017)

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Israelite prophets, but by his own contradiction; whose cults had risen and fallen and risen again, several times over, by the time of immaculate conception.

I picture a vaguely central corner of a city and a boy sitting in a corner of an otherwise featureless room. He's a weird kid dressed as the Greek god of wine. He's jaundiced and loving it, flaunting as if the pale-yellow blush of his cheeks was indisputably erotic. He simply will not die, and it is in his undying static deathliness that he becomes cute. His sickly cuteness folds back on itself ad infinitum. There is no theory of death here; by which I mean conclusion, the path to some fundamental horizon. Don't anticipate *la mort et l'amour* thought experiments. Instead, Thanatos and Eros find themselves at the mercy of baroque syntax; no longer two halves of a bifurcated whole but a monstrous Solomonic column edging towards some estimate of heaven or hell, depending on which corner of this room is hit by light first. Why do you feel the need to say this now?

So what can we name this God pulled into death? He wears a Bacchante costume, but in a distinctly narcissistic gesture crawls towards the problematics of self-enunciation. Is desire the mechanism by which the self is folded into language or vice-versa? There's always some weird kid folding you into his gaze. Even through my recalling him I enact a partial obliteration; little more than a glint of angel reflected in a sump of Midland bog water. Even fantasy finds itself stringently mitigated; nakedness relegated to nudity. Any theory advanced here is nothing more than confession. To what end?

The confessional mode's dominance has produced a contemporary fixation with projecting the personal onto absolutely every aesthetic construction, so what is the self now but glib procedure? György Lukács identifies philosophical discourse around the Fin de Siècle as homesickness: a longing for a home to which it is impossible to return, that modern philosophy

‘mourns the absence of a pre-subjective, pre-reflexive anchoring of reason’.¹⁸ Just over a century later, we find ourselves at the mercy of a similar conundrum. The Narcissist compulsion towards identification has been crudely supplemented with a tacky simulacrum: an apparently endless process of crawling from one unsatisfactory category into another.

Nominally unerring heat so easily collapses under September and à la Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* the subject find himself at once ‘on the way’ to somewhere but can only get there through a sequence of increasingly troubling static images; mainly himself miles away from any part of the city he knows, mainly himself as viewed from the other side of a stranger’s kitchen, or bedroom, always under some variation of unforgiving light. He is a figure spectralised by enunciation, darting through discourses like shafts of light but speaking only for himself through the ambiguous gesture of a smile.

In the year before he died at sea, the age of twenty-nine, Percy Bysshe Shelley published *A Defence of Poetry*. The essay is idiosyncratic, by contemporary standards, in so far as it doesn’t operate the way its title may suggest. It contains little reflection on technicality, for instance, and avoids delivering aesthetic edicts on the material or spiritual nature of good poetry. His argument is intensely bound up with affirming Platonic conceptions of intellect, morality and beauty. He refutes the scientism of his day by arguing that civilisation cannot reasonably find itself deracinated from beauty. This is because it is from the cognitive ability (to use a contemporary formulation) to recognise beauty that civilisation grows, not vice-versa. He was offended by the idea that poetry could be reverse engineered; that intellectuals must dedicate themselves first to advancing the scientific method so as to bring about an idealised, egalitarian society and from there the luxury of poetry be allowed to bloom.

¹⁸ (Lukacs, 2006)

Shelley takes a holistic view of knowledge and its production, maintaining a conception of ‘beauty’ as the raw, primal current from which all culture and language flows. When he wrote his essay, ‘beauty’ was no abstract category; its discussion necessitated no caveats or self-conscious quotation marks. This same period was also a zenith of imperial growth; *A Defence of Poetry* was conceived, in part, as response to a light-hearted polemic by Thomas Love Peacock, one of Shelley’s closest friends and a senior executive in the East India Company. I make this observation not in the service of any particular ideology, or school of historical thought, but to acknowledge the now far more complicated understanding of what to Shelley were self-explanatory categories. At the same time, I have no desire to apply postmodern judgement to Shelley and (at worst) villainise him or (at best) cast him as naive, or even primitive, in his philosophy. He was also, of course, an outspoken abolitionist and socialist at a time when those positions were by no means publicly or politically expedient, as attested to in the weeks after his death, by some gloating obituaries in the British press: ‘Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry, has been drowned; now he knows whether there is God or no’.¹⁹

On 25th of December 1882 a depressed Friedrich Nietzsche wrote to his friend Franz Overbeck yearning for alchemy: ‘Unless I can discover the alchemical trick of turning this muck into gold, I am lost’. It was in the days after this sending this letter that he began work on the text that would become *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.²⁰ If you will forgive my sentimentality, it would seem he discovered the alchemical trick that was needed to transfigure the base material of his despondency into a product of unprecedented cultural importance (whether or not you approve of it).

¹⁹ (Worthen, 2019)

²⁰ (Binion, 2016)

I do not know if the 19th Century Prussian philosopher experienced ‘depression’ in the same way that many people living today experience what is medically termed as ‘major depressive disorder’.²¹ It is largely accepted that his depressive episodes, as well as his final psychotic break, were the product of neurological damage brought on by syphilis (contracted as a student). A diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder does not preclude neurological damage, however, as a complete or partial cause. I like to believe that Nietzsche was, in part, one of depression’s inventors. His iconoclastic interventions into the history of ideas, his polemics on the foundations of the axioms which had come to define the judicial, aesthetic and psychic remits of his civilisation created a gaping wound in pervading intellectual cultures. Where before there had been meaning, and therefore purpose (however servile), there was now simply a question. What if it’s all nonsense? All of it, everything. What if I’ve been wasting my time? What does it mean to write ‘depressively’, if not to give oneself over to an ultimately futile descriptive force devoted to the impersonal gulf lying beyond the veil which at one time may have been named ‘God’?

In *Experience and Poverty*, Walter Benjamin gives a couple of paragraphs of rumination to a then recent addition to cultural hegemony, Mickey Mouse. Within Benjamin’s thought, MM becomes symbolic of the finality of our epoch’s estrangement from that ever more elusive delineation, ‘the natural’. The animated, anthropomorphic mouse sedates the vicissitudes and brutalities of the organic world by epitomising its double, a version free from finality. To Benjamin, the anthropomorph is a representation of the capitalist tendency to de-personify representations of experience. It is an abject expression of a visual culture absolutely alienated from the human subject. Mickey Mouse is a de-humanized human or, a human without the mess:

²¹ (Bains and Abdijadid, 2022)

We have become impoverished. We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another and have often left it at the pawnbroker's for a hundredth of its true value, in exchange for the small change of "the contemporary."²²

Similarly, the *Sick Bacchus* is a reconfigured Dionysian logos, the bacchante revelries of the ancients are supplanted with a crude depressive imitation. Simone Weil said of the saints, that they 'are more exposed than others to the devil because the real knowledge they have of their wretchedness makes light *almost* intolerable'.²³ In her own idiosyncratic way, Weil frames innocence as an antagonism to 'grace'. The mark of a saint is an acute awareness of one's own 'wretchedness', which, by her logic, is indistinguishable from the experience of humanity itself. Today was are half-saints; painfully aware of our wretchedness, but without the resolve to truly interrogate or confront it. It's not so simple as feeling nothing. It is a feeling, and a deeply intense one. It's like one's brain is being licked at by tongues of cold fire and like the blood in the veins has coagulated into viscous, gelid paste. It's a mode of inveterate self-disgust so vivid and unerring that, at its height, it simply becomes impossible to consider oneself as something living.

Walter Benjamin writes of the baroque in Germany:

During the Baroque, a formerly incidental component of allegory, the emblem, undergoes extravagant development. If, for the materialist historian, the mediaeval origin of allegory still needs elucidation, Marx himself furnishes a clue for understanding its baroque form. He writes in *Das Kapital* (Hamburg, 1922), vol. 1, p. 344: "The collective machine ... becomes more and more perfect, the more the process as a whole becomes a continuous one — that is, the less the raw

²² (Benjamin, 2006)

²³ (Weil, 1963)

material is interrupted in its passage from its first phase to its last; in other words, the more its passage from one phase to another is affected not only by the hand of man but by the machinery itself. In manufacture, the isolation of each detail process is a condition imposed by the nature of division of labour, but in the fully developed factory the continuity of those processes is, on the contrary, imperative.

In Benjamin's thought, similarly to Nietzsche, but with a few crucial departures, the 'baroque' is a kind of conceptual readymade. When the Romans left Britain and the peoples that we today call the Anglo-Saxons arrived, they were astounded by the technicality and scale of the ruins they found there. They had believed that they must have been built by 'giants' (in the Germanic pagan tradition 'Giant' didn't necessarily mean 'gigantic' so much as semi-divine). While this mode of decontextualized cultural inheritance is largely anecdotal and more linear and clear-cut than what Benjamin, via Marx, describes, it does help elucidate a clear picture of baroque cultural procedure works. Imagine a hermit crab in a shell of Rococo porcelain.

Who are the barbarians today unthinkably interpolating the vitiated symbology of expired epochs? To return to Benjamin's evocation of Marx, we could even examine the means by which 'communism' has enjoyed a re-excitement of interest among downwardly-mobile university educated millennials. The systemic and historical processes which provoked Marx's theories have, as he predicted (though not *entirely* accurately; which was the standard position of most serious Marxists after World War 2, I hasten to add), mutated into new forms of socio-economic domination which, to a man of his time, would be confounding and virtually unrecognisable. The 'alienation' he describes is still very much a part of everyday life, but is now more deeply ingrained in the collective unconscious of the citizenry. The heartless mechanic brutality of the factory, however, has disappeared from the global north and been supplanted by a psychic brutality. More

often than not, self-described leftists have interpellated the logic of capitalism and, even in their denunciations of it, are unwittingly ventriloquized by its ideological mechanisms.

Are 'we' who inhabit these thought-structures, which were so contingent on conditions now long lost, any different in our wondering than those innocent heathens climbing from their longboats onto a strange, spectral isle? As Derrida observed in *Spectres of Marx*, the spectre of communism is a universal one; it haunts the imaginations of communists as much as the bourgeoisie. Baroque procedure, then, is one of inhabitation. Its emblem is conceived as a perennially half-destroyed product which has been converted into 'a monument by the process of destruction...the real triumph of the Baroque emblematic, the chief exhibit of which becomes the death's head, which is the integration of man himself into the operation'.²⁴

The baroque 'emblem', then, is the hyperstitionally restructured 'symbol'. The symbol which denotes a once 'eternal' signifier which has become estranged from the cultural contexts which engendered it, yet remains behind as an ambiguous image concept; an allegorised trace of former 'being'. It is a concept which is survived through the transmutation of divinity into allegory; it is an ancient image subordinated to human agency. Crucially, the evocations of human agency here are not intended as gesturing towards the democratic recuperation of symbols, but rather the hysterical process of grasping at shattered cultural detritus. As Eliot's Anglican-dystopic laments in *The Waste Land* remind us, there is little left of a true spiritual life beyond 'A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter'.

How might we extract from the inanimate world, the interrelations between language and objects, some means of describing our current moment? How do I give it a voice? It does not speak through living, as people do. Indeed, it can only truly illustrate to us the problems of our own time

²⁴ (Benjamin, 2006)

through its dying and attendant confessions. An English poet whose work in recent times has enjoyed resurrection is Mark Hyatt, who committed suicide in 1972. He was working class and mixed-race, a self-described ‘diddikai’ (half Romani) and was illiterate until adulthood. Becoming part of the Soho scene, he met people from different backgrounds to his own; something characteristic of the London gay scene of that time was that men of radically different class backgrounds would mix with one-another. His friends, particularly the artist Cressida Lindsay, nurtured him, and taught him to read and encouraged his writing. Towards the end of his life, after a failed relationship and living alone in a bedsit in Manchester, he wrote mainly on, or around, his desire to end his life. Throughout the writing of this project, there has been a particular line of his I’ve been unable to get out of my head: ‘I said to myself feeling petty for life/ “I Illustrate nothing by living”’. The lyric formulation ‘I Illustrate nothing by living’ works as a double entendre. An initial reading provides a clear meaning: the poem is relaying the loneliness and isolation of someone who is considering committing suicide as an act of vengeance against their ex-lover. There, in a sense, is a profound courage in acknowledging the power a suicide might give a person over the lover who has abandoned him; the statement thereby illustrates bleak agency. But there is a further reading one could make too. In the poem’s penultimate line, the speaker yearns for the inanimate, saying: ‘O to be a stone’. There is here an aesthetic thesis as well as a moral one, an assertion in power of the inanimate and the artificial.

To regard oneself aesthetically is to regard oneself in a state of *inanimation*. In Frank O’Hara’s *Mayakovsky* he writes: ‘and I’ll stare down/ at my wounded beauty/ which at best is only a talent/ for poetry’. To regard the ‘self’ within an aesthetic structure is an act of dissociation, of ‘staring down’ upon a profile; which is never ‘dead’, per se, but is not alive, either. Let us turn to

the most famous example of ‘staring down’ at one’s own face, in one of the earliest tales of self-signification. From Ovid:

There was an unclouded fountain, with silver-bright water, which neither shepherds nor goats grazing the hills, nor other flocks, touched, that no animal or bird disturbed not even a branch falling from a tree. Grass was around it, fed by the moisture nearby, and a grove of trees that prevented the sun from warming the place. Here, the boy, tired by the heat and his enthusiasm for the chase, lies down, drawn to it by its look and by the fountain. While he desires to quench his thirst, a different thirst is created. While he drinks he is seized by the vision of his reflected form. He loves a bodiless dream. He thinks that a body, that is only a shadow. He is astonished by himself, and hangs there motionless, with a fixed expression, like a statue carved from Parian marble.²⁵

An ear pokes out from honey-blond tresses, like an awkward boy. ‘Roses that wear roses/Enjoy mirrors’ writes Jack Spicer, fully aware of the volumes of ambiguity that word, ‘enjoy’, can hold. The modern Narcissus is no sort of hunter, but ‘the hunt’ is a concept he clings to, in the way that all of us today cling to our concepts, like empty beakers. My Narcissus, unlike his mythical antecedents, retreats from the version of himself he sees staring back and does not allow himself to get sucked into the dark pool of self-signification. Instead, he is trotting, as swiftly as he can, down a concrete stairwell, less than five hundred yards from the city’s great mediaeval cathedral. Roses that wear roses enjoy mirrors, but mirrors can be uncanny, and, without warning, don you with the countenance of a stranger. The modern Narcissus is a list. At the moment, he is a list of spatial criteria, exiting the excessively hot student accommodation complex into brilliantly

²⁵ (Ovid, 2004)

cold November air, he is a list of things verifiably real: the smell of 900-year-old limestone mounted over a flint and mortar aggregate, emanating from the cathedral, and which is not dissimilar to smell of poorly maintained built-to-rent accommodation which is only a few degrees of separation from the smell of shit, though he got nowhere near it tonight. Perhaps these fecal imaginings are some manner of corporeal gratuity, emanating from the desire to inject a sense of the body into a narrative which is currently cerebral, excruciatingly so. It was always about getting away from himself and the *incident* is now part of his canon, and has been for at least three or so minutes. What was meant to be a short and enjoyably anonymous erotic encounter was lost somewhere when, greeting him at the top of the concrete staircase, staring out at him from a field of soft-gold was a stranger with his face. He will attempt to excise this memory for several years but find it powerfully immovable. Over the coming months, and then years, he'll recount the story to various acquaintances without knowing why, because who on earth would be interested in such an embarrassing and bathetic story? He sows in a few fictions; the hook-up now appears with a 12-inch dildo, in one iteration, the modern Narcissus can see past the anti-lover into a dingy little kitchen where there's a skinned rabbit hanging from a rusty hook. The story changes with every new telling, its language modulated, its narrative tweaked, its pathos re-orientated; these changes are contingent on the audience and he comes to understand horror of the encounter is purely retrospective. Narcissus has crafted for himself an emotional feedback loop: an act of remembering where the remembering itself has been pulverised into an abstract permutation of images and attendant feelings whose relationship to the 'event itself' are increasingly tenuous. An act of remembering which, in its being spoken, does not gesture towards the memory it claims to reproduce, but towards the multitudinous ways in which memory can be aestheticized.

What is often occluded in modern discussions of the Narcissus myth, or its representation in art, is that Narcissus is not, in fact, in love with himself. His curse is to become enamoured by an incomplete enunciation of himself. Even the most ‘mirror-like’ pool is still a body of water, and does not yield a perfect reproduction of the person who gazes into it. What Narcissus sees is a disembodied approximation of a ‘self’ receding into dark waters. More than anything else, he is drowned by a yearning for conceptual impetus: the yearning for yearning itself.

In a small room, in a cheaply built house, lost somewhere in a crude suburban cosmos, my Narcissus keeps his mind far away from his reflection, while the cold white light of LED street lamps probe at him through closed blinds. He consumes some crude attempts at philosophy, or ‘video essays’, as their creators prefer to call them; sometimes entertaining, always unduly confident and usually plain wrong. A video titled ‘Why you’ll never find true love’ makes use of a poem by Rilke, which speaks to the new Narcissus in a strange and interesting way. It is among Rilke’s most popular poems, a late, untitled work. In the first published English translation it opens with the line: ‘Beloved,/lost to begin with, never greeted,/ I do not know what tones most please you’.²⁶ In the internet age, a very different translation of the same poem has become popular. This version begins: ‘You who never arrives/ in my arms, Beloved, who were lost/ from the start,/ I don’t even know what songs/ would please you’.²⁷ The poem’s ‘theme’ does not require much elaboration and is characteristic of the poet. A note in the first edition of the *Selected Works* says ‘It is impossible to decide whether or not this poem was written before or after the Benvenuta episode’.²⁸ ‘Benvenuta’ being Rilke’s nickname for the pianist Magda von Hattingberg, with whom he exchanged a series of passionate letters. The two translations actually present distinct

²⁶ (Rilke , 1960)

²⁷ (Mitchell)

²⁸ *ibid*

narratives. The older translation, by J.B. Leishman, begins with a more stoic observation: 'Beloved' is perched on her own line and then followed by the truth of the matter, that she is 'lost to begin with, never greeted'. The later translation, by Stephen Mitchell, decides on a more Romantic address: 'You who never arrived/in my arms'. 'Beloved' does not appear until the second line. Leishman's translation is more direct: 'beloved', the 'true love', is acknowledged immediately as an impossibility, whose loss presupposes her own 'start'. Mitchell, on the other hand, begins with a 'You who never arrives', and so the ultimate acceptance of the loss, and the tacit understanding that the loss is 'the point', is endlessly suspended. It's not that she doesn't arrive, it's that she *never* arrives; there is always an eternal hope that one day she might. Leishman's translation acknowledges the poem's yearning as itself a worthwhile aesthetic experience, whereas Mitchell's performs the exquisite agony of the speaker's self-deception as he keeps himself eternally hopeful that one day he will meet his beloved.

Of all the Narcissi, Caravaggio's representation gets closest to the myth's semiotic ambivalence. His *Narcissus* is a famously anxious one. The boy is depicted in the seconds after self-capture. You can see the psychic disarray of sudden erotic infatuation; his lips are parted, leaving his mouth hanging open and his brow is furrowed with an abstraction of arousal and worry. He looks to be an overly serious youth, flummoxed, perhaps, by the violent, and ultimately fatal, yearning that has been suddenly thrust upon him by the Gods. The experience of this yearning is also one of estrangement, from the experience of himself.

'Bottom, bless thee. Thou art translated', exclaims Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* after the pompous weaver cum amateur thespian Bottom has his head transfigured into a Donkey's by the devious fairy, Puck. Like Bottom, Narcissus is subject to translation, albeit of a more onanistic sort. He is translated into a stranger and an object of self-infatuation; he becomes

obsessed with a profile that is both him and seductively alien. But it is not in this act of self-signification where Narcissus ends, it is where he begins, where he builds himself.

Mieke Bal writes extensively on the painting in her monograph, *Quoting Caravaggio*, a book whose thesis is two-fold: arguing that Caravaggio's influence on contemporary art is, among all the 'great masters', the most profound, and secondly, this influence has yielded what she names as a 'contemporary baroque' turn in late 20th century art. Bal reads the Caravaggio *Narcissus* not as a representation of 'self-admiration' but a meditation on the 'melancholic mourning of absence'²⁹ and alienation from notions of 'the self', fundamentally as an early expression of the aporia which would come to define so much of the modern epoch and successive ages. Bal notes that dates attributed to the painting's creation would mean it was contemporary to the trial and burning of Giordano Bruno, a particularly vociferous philosopher, who made claims about the nature of space and matter which were at odds with the sanctioned view. As well as suggesting that the universe was endless and so had no centre (which could hold the world; this suggestion being a famous *bête noire* of the church) he also critiqued notions of Eternal Damnation, The Trinity and the virginity of the Virgin Mary. In other words: he was asking for it. The Roman Inquisition was particularly iniquitous in dealing with well known intellectual dissidents, as these people held profound sway over the cultural landscape of the city. There were many such executions during this period, as the church sought to crush anything even resembling doctrinal dissent as swiftly as possible. Bal summarises Bruno's position as 'materialism that endowed matter with potential form, beyond the ancient Aristotelian matter-form opposition'.³⁰ Caravaggio, she argues, enacts a visual 'Brunism' through a 'substantialising' use of colour, rather than

²⁹ Bal, M. (1999)

³⁰ *ibid*

geometrical perspective. In his *Narcissus*, form anticipates matter; ‘depth’ is drawn from the use of colour; a boy’s body illuminated among a pitch black void. He never painted a single candle. Looking for the points of illumination in Caravaggio’s paintings draws the viewer’s attention to the greater mystery his work enunciates. We see light bouncing off the sharply illuminated pleats of bodies and fabric but we see it in the shadows it creates, but we never see the ‘source’ of the light itself. Often, as in the case of his *Narcissus*, it is the bodies themselves that appear to be luminescent. It is the substance of the bodies, rather than the lines, that delineate their beginnings and end and which bring them into relief. It is for this reason that Bal says his paintings are possessed of a ‘sculpturality’; they are a negotiation with space as much as they are flat, arbitrary depictions of scenes.³¹ Caravaggio’s background is pitch black and the boy’s body is built from layers of white paint endowing the human form with an incandescence, in turn this creates what Bal refers to as a ‘spatial emergence’. Rather than the body emerging from space, the reality of space emerges around the body, it is enunciated by the irruption of human form. Just as the bible describes all creation as a void transmuted into reality by form (brought about by The Word) so is ‘space’ distinguished from ‘nothing’ by the bodies which move through it.

There is an erotic triangulation here; this is the core of the painting’s intimacy. He is too involved in the beautiful stranger he has become to notice that he is not alone; that you are there watching him watching him. The onanistic formulation of his own becoming is quietly interrupted by an unknown audience: you gaze upon him as he does upon his reflection. Bal reads the painting as an expression of empathy, arguing that the painting of *Narcissus* becomes a kind of mirror for the viewer. I don’t *necessarily* disagree, but if there is ‘empathy building’ at play here, I wonder if it is occurring from a more amoral landscape that words such as ‘empathy’ may suggest. Any

³¹ Ibid p.241

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‘solidarity’ here is not so much with the boy himself, rather than the punishing ambiance which embraces him: ‘we’ are the dark forest, the trees, the soil, the twitch of a rabbit’s eye and perhaps the cold, sadistic gaze of the Gods themselves.

Contemporary dismissals of, and apologetics for, ‘Narcissism’ tend to describe what might be previously referred to as ‘solipsism’. In psychiatry, for instance, if an excessively violent and antisocial person also demonstrates an ‘exaggerated sense of self-importance’ alongside a sufficient ‘lack of empathy’, that person is possessed of ‘Narcissistic Personality Disorder’. Older, more emphatic and sophisticated psychological philosophies (if not without their own flaws), tended to ascribe homosexuals as narcissists for a juvenile failure to progress beyond the ‘mirror stage’ of their childhood development (the stage at which an infant recognises themselves for the first time). Freud’s view on sexuality generally was complicated, and his views of homosexuality were non-judgmental, and he viewed its criminalisation as an injustice. He maintained that bisexuality was innate to every person and that *certain types* of homosexual behaviour were redolent of developmental and narcissistic factors, though he used both these terms outside of moral strictures. Unlike the Solipsist, someone who believes only their self to be verifiably real, the Narcissistic impetus is organised around a lack, it is a drive premised on a necessarily unreachable object (something the psychoanalytic account acknowledges, and the psychiatric one does not).

Derek Jarman quotes Caravaggio several times throughout his cinematic career. The *Narcissus* is evoked directly as a means of characterisation in Jarman’s adaptation of *Edward II*, by Christopher Marlowe. Edward (Steve Waddington) is contrasted against a dark background, gazing into a still pool made conspicuous by the character’s primary obsession: his reflection. Jarman’s allusion to the homosexual-as-narcissist construction is made apparent when Edward

delivers the play's most famous soliloquy: 'Two kings in England cannot reign at once/But stay awhile, let me be king till night/ That I may gaze upon this glittering crown'. The second of the 'two kings' alludes to Edward's lover, Piers Gaveston, but Edward rehearses the lines to his own reflection. Interestingly, the connection between Marlowe and Caravaggio is hardly anachronistic: the two were contemporaries, though never met. Caravaggio's development of a 'dramatic' realism in painting corresponds directly with similar developments on the English stage. Shakespeare and Marlowe's tragedies, especially, made efforts to dramatise a character's inner life, their psychic and spiritual disarray and contradicting emotions. Caravaggio and Marlowe both contributed to the invention of the human as an object of aesthetic contemplation.

Derek Jarman had been trained as a painter at the Slade during the sixties and openly celebrated Caravaggio as a stylistic influence in his cinematography, making numerous visual comments on his work throughout his career. His only 'mainstream' film was named *Caravaggio* and was released in 1986, which was the same year as the first major retrospective of Caravaggio's work, alongside that of his acolytes. It was during this time that the AIDS crisis was starting to become more obviously a plague, with the death-rate among gay men increasing dramatically month by month.³² The film serves as an interesting point of discussion on the matter of personal signification between one artist and another. It presents a purely fictionalised biography of the painter: Caravaggio is portrayed, of course, as an affable rogue; bisexual, hotblooded, a heavy drinker, leaning on a Piaggio Ape while smoking cigarettes, and the murder he commits (based, presumably, on the real murder of the pimp Ranuccio Tomassoni, in 1606) is reframed as something semi-justifiable. This film is clearly derived from a deeply personal reading of Caravaggio's biography, by an artist who empathised with the figure of the artist as much as he

³² (Winship, 1985)

did with the work that artist produced. In their book *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit commented on Jarman's ability to grasp the 'politically explosive potential in Caravaggio's implicit insistence that we recognize the present in the reconstruction of the past'.³³

To return to Edward performing to his reflection: Jarman relies on a pre-existing knowledge of Caravaggio, of chiaroscuro, as well as more amorphous stimuli like the speculative homosexuality of Marlowe's Edward, Edward II himself, Marlowe himself and Caravaggio. Several ideas are simultaneously folded into this image: the old post-Freudian dictum that homosexuality is an expression of narcissism (a failure to progress past the mirror stage), but also certain thematic interpretations of Caravaggio's painting. Bal, on the other hand, imagines the painting as a dialectic: an expression of certain philosophies of its own time, of spatial emergence and signification and, in current contexts, as a troubling of typically associated themes (that come along with the Narcissus figure).

Caravaggio was the first queer. In his biography of the artist, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred And Profane*, T.V. art-historian Andrew Graham-Dixon winds himself up around several rather ludicrous propositions to do with Caravaggio's sexuality. The notion that Caravaggio was an 'early martyr to the drives of an unconventional sexuality,' is decried as an 'anachronistic fiction'.³⁴ Indeed, 'Caravaggio, the gay rights pioneer' is a genuinely ludicrous notion; I've yet to come across anyone who makes it in earnest. Even Derek Jarman, in his film *Caravaggio*, heterosexualises the artist more than is historically accurate. Graham-Dixon is not alone, among art historians, in getting oddly prickly around questions to do with Caravaggio's sexuality. Most amusingly, in the 90s, the Yale Professor of Art, Creighton Gilbert, 'tensed with masculine vigor'

³³ (Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, 2001)

³⁴ (Graham-Dixon, 2011)

(as Leo Bersani put it) at the very notion that Caravaggio could have been motivated by a homosexual erotic: 'Caravaggio's youths are "boasting of [their] sexual success in naked pleasure" (Creighton invokes the heterosexually heady atmosphere of the locker room in contemporary American high schools), and Caravaggio's Cupid is for Gilbert "cheering on heterosexuality.'"³⁵ Graham-Dixon at least concedes that Caravaggio was 'likely' to have had sex with men, but he simply refuses to acknowledge this as something that had any bearing on the artist's work; unable, as he is, to liberate himself from a discernibly Anglo-Saxon erotophobia.

I make this brief foray into a more conventional mode of art historical writing so as to avoid apologetics for the incoming argument and to promise my reader that I am not on the cusp of formulating some tedious metaphor. I am not squinting at Caravaggio through a particular lens, nor working to enunciate his historical presence through any particular rhetorical mode. I do not mean this claim to be true only if one is to perform the necessary mental gymnastics and to doll up their ideological hunches as scholarly observations and reduce the whole history of knowledge itself to a question of 'affect'. I certainly hope I am not performing a predictable routine here, favored by the institutionalized faggot: unwittingly and tirelessly dedicating myself to Capital and its recuperative projects under the illusion that this is somehow liberatory. Cleaning up a troubling and often contradictory subject, getting him ready for the pride circuit: giving him the Oscar Wilde treatment. Happily, Caravaggio can be differentiated from Wilde by virtue of being a complete thug (though Oscar had his moments). He was a violent and deeply unpredictable man, a criminal and genius painter who fucked a lot; men, and boys, and probably women too, though this has less bearing on his work, which is fundamentally informed by a homosexual, or pederastic, erotic. Vitally, he was queer and queer in the proper sense of term. He was made queer by his enemies:

³⁵ (Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, 2001)

who used his sexual history to discredit him by imbuing his paintings with a sense of retrospective obscenity. Not even a hundred years after his death he was dismissed by Poussin as a vapid pornographer hiding behind shock appeal and technical ability.³⁶ In his own lifetime, Giovanni Baglione constructed a visual attack on Caravaggio through his painting *Sacred and Profane Love*. The painting depicts an angel in regimental dress (Sacred Love) interrupting a tryst between a young, naked and more libertine colleague (Profane Love) and a dumbstruck, animalistic devil, whose facial features would have been immediately recognizable, to everyone who mattered, as Caravaggio's. There was a long-standing animosity between the two artists, arising, in no small part, from accusations of plagiarism levelled at Baglione. To have been superseded by a younger painter who was morally lacking, and then to be accused of borrowing that painter's style, was an indignity Baglione could not abide. He dedicated much of his career thereafter to Caravaggio's ruin. (Indeed, to give credit to Baglione [often cast as the primary villain in Caravaggio stories], *Sacred and Profane Love* could be viewed as an early example of postmodern irony. The painting is as *Caravaggisti* as possible, so much so that in the past it has been mistaken for Caravaggio's own work, albeit from the weaker, or perhaps unfinished, end of the catalogue. It has also been credited as the product of an admiring student [not a wholly inaccurate attribution]. To paraphrase a poet's famous remark: it does not borrow but doesn't quite steal, either. The chiaroscuro, the mannerism, the sluttish cupid: it's all there; there's almost an element of the metacritical to it; an excruciatingly self-conscious anticipation of criticism). Fortunately for Baglione, there would be no agent more enthusiastic in Caravaggio's ruin than Caravaggio himself. After killing a notorious pimp, with whom he'd brawled many times previously, Caravaggio fled Rome and lived in exile

³⁶ (Graham-Dixon, 2011)

for the rest of his life. He continued to work in Naples, Sicily and Malta, before dying (of, or of something approximate to, sepsis, syphilis, accidental or deliberate poisoning).

To return to my opening claim: Caravaggio was certainly not the first historical figure to have had their sex life mobilised against them, judicially or socially. As the pervading discourse would have it, his life was too distant from our own epoch for contemporary identity categories (such as 'gay' or 'bisexual') to be applied. Yet, the episteme which produced him had already established legislative protocols against 'sodomy' (which included, among other forms of non-reproductive sex, sex between men). As Foucault, whose concepts I'm broadly working from here, might observe, these sexual categories were *purely* legislative: a conviction for sodomy had no real bearing on an individual's sense of identity. Someone fined or imprisoned for being caught in a homosexual encounter may be poorly regarded socially, but this was not an identity in or of itself; nor was it a status the accused would ever seek to 'reclaim' or 'inhabit'. (It's worth noting that homosexual acts, while illegal, were treated far less punitively, in both legal and social terms, in 16th century Rome than they were in 19th century London, to use a pertinent example).

Despite all this, Caravaggio's life and work corresponded with an important historico-social juncture in the European world and it was from this juncture that, among many other things, the contemporary faggot emerged. After the High Renaissance, a period of exceptional aesthetic and intellectual development, centred in southern Europe, Catholicism faced the single largest threat to its hegemony since the Umayyad Caliphate in the form of a rival thought system, Protestantism. The Protestant crisis provoked the nineteenth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Trent, which lasted for eighteen years. Led by the Jesuits, the Roman Church was mobilised into devising for itself a more uniform liturgical, visual and intellectual system as means of counterattack against the Lutheranism: the Counter Reformation. Legal, political, visual and

artistic notions of sexual difference were coalescing into new sexual ontologies. After Caravaggio's death the first biography that was written about him was by Giovanni Baglione. Beyond rather undignified, but predictable, attacks on Caravaggio's method and skill, Baglione went further in insisting that Caravaggio's work itself was morally reprehensible and had a particular appeal to those possessed of 'evil minds'. Caravaggio was made queer by Giovanni Baglione. One is never queer by choice, it is only ever 'lived as' an imposition, and if not experienced as such, the queerness is an ornament, like a faux pearl. The word in no way reflects an interior life, it is a category only imposed from the outside. As Judith Butler has observed, many times, 'identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes' and attempts at reclamation, while understandable, are ultimately facile.³⁷

Alchemy's true sciences lies not in material manipulation, the transfiguring of one base material into another, but in manipulating perception; of re-formulating the means by which a material is perceived. Today any literary project approaching 'Existential' territory is met with deep suspicion. Concerned as that movement was with the radical potential of introspection, its influence as an aesthetic mode is unmissable, even if the radicality has been decisively drained through cultural exsanguination, and the rhetoric itself transposed into an expression of reactionary hyper-individualism. We live today in a perversely monastic society where the human subject has had its own sense of interior being weaponized against it. We are harried into losing ourselves down psychic whirlpools of agitated, paranoid cogitation. Our lived experiences are everything, and are only ever self-aggrandising or self-loathing, or self-aggrandisement posing as self-loathing or vice-versa. The textual lack, the psychic relation to a world outside of one's own head, constitutes itself through pure volume.

³⁷ (Butler, 2009)

To crudely paraphrase a remark of Adorno: the practice of contemporary cultural production is a practice of forgetting. A collective cultural 'forgetting' is understood not as the collective mind's inability to recall event (an atrocity, for example) so much as it lacks the facility to properly address a happening (on the scale in which atrocity was committed during the 20th century). This engenders social passivity which grows into a sort of willing amnesia; and the intellectual and social conditions that provoked unprecedented mass murder remain unchallenged.

To use a well-worn idiom, the Caravaggisti moment was a 'turn': but not a turn away, a turn back towards something fundamentally lost; an Orphic turn. It has been said that a Baroque church looks like a Renaissance church viewed through a waterfall. Another way of saying this is that a baroque begins in dreaming. The development of perspective in early renaissance painting grew from an impetus towards illusion and the wanting to reproduce the technics of the human gaze. The subsequent 'baroque period', on the other hand, enacted a subversion of this enterprise, becoming less focused on attempting to re-create 'the gaze' and more so on the artificiality inherent to such a practice. The baroque for which Caravaggio would become a primary agent was the product of a vast, and for centuries virtually unchallenged, hegemonic totality (the Roman Church) which had been forced, in what was meant to be its dotage, to turn back towards a half-remembered history and pull from that reasons to justify its political and cultural authority. Caravaggio's chiaroscuro ambivalently allegorizes the processes of political nostalgia and memory making.

It is impossible to consider the baroque outside of spatial terms. Indeed, part of the (form/mode/tendency)'s categorical elusiveness is that it is only ever properly enunciated through visual-spatial stimuli, and described through metaphors which appeal to one's sense of their body moving through a space, whether that space be an elaborate or ornate house (as Deleuze asks us to imagine it in *Les Pli*) or an entire cosmology (as Benjamin does). The person from whom we took

the term 'baroque' as an academic art-historical designation was the Swiss historian Heinrich Wölfflin who, for all intents and purposes, was the father of the methodological system we today refer to as the 'History of Art'. His analysis of the baroque as a stylistic change which occurred at the end of the 'High Renaissance', is focused mainly on architectural developments, though he stresses his theses can be applied to painting, also. Like most German academics of his time he adopted an Hegelian approach to historical analysis. For him, though he never says it outright, the 'spirit' (again, this term is applied as an Hegelian term) of the baroque is one of ecclesiastical grandiosity and displays of authority bordering on the vulgar (we might refer here to Postcolonial historicism, which observes that the 'early Baroque' period corresponded with increased colonial activity in South America by Catholic powers, with mass imports of gold arriving in Southern Europe from Mexico and Peru).

As for my own efforts, I have asked you to imagine a contemporary city. Infinitely variable, but uniform. The self-devouring, self-regurgitating cyborg city; the "postindustrial" urban cosmos; sleaze calling in its own annihilation and being replaced by sleaze-appeal; artist's squats knocked down and replaced with expensive apartments designed to recall artists squats; gay bars variously replaced with 'queer bars' (lesbian bars destroyed altogether) and/or "artisan" bakeries piled high with excessively priced pastries. As the urbanist Robert Park once wrote, the city is "man's most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself."³⁸ An earlier version of this essay went to great lengths to illustrate the baroque with an excruciatingly laboured metaphor: wherein a figure walks

³⁸ (Park, 1967)

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through a door which closes behind her, that she is inside something, a house, a walled city, whatever you like, as long as it is somehow contained. I think it was a callow attempt, on my part, at allegorizing Deleuze's conjectures on the nature of Leibniz's 'monads'. My objective had been to emphasise how an experience of 'the baroque' is perceived exclusively from a self-contained position and how the space one is experiencing is one designed to be simultaneously familiar and alien. The efforts were made to try and illustrate a sense of aporia. To become human is to become aware of oneself as: 1. a thing that can speak, or is spoken through, and: 2. a concept and constituent part of a wider conceptual system. It is a jarring linguistic experience. There is a poem by Bob Kaufman, named *Suicide*, which illuminates this tension perfectly:

Big Fanny & stromin vinne deal,
all that's left of the largest colony
of the new world, who coulda guessed it
no one in his right mind.

Poets don't sneak into zoos & talk with tigers anymore,
even though they read Blake and startle all by striped
devices, while those poems of God pout, lurking & sundried torn tree jungles
William Blake never saw a tiger & never fucked a lamb.
You get off at fifty ninth street, forever.

And The first man was an idealist, but he died,
he couldn't survive the first truth,
discovering that the whole
world, all of it, was all his, he sat down
& with a little piece of string, & a sharp stone
invented suicide.

Kaufman's poem presents the reader with an entire history of civilization. Subverting T.S. Eliot's pessimistic conclusion to *The Hollow Men*, Kaufman imagines a world which starts not with a bang, but a whimper. He contemplates the unbearable weight of coming into agency and having

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to negotiate the remnants of unfettered freedom. He construes an Afropessimistic view of history in which 'all that's left' of the Enlightenment project and its constructions of the sovereign individual, are concluded in 'Big Fanny & stromin vinne' dealing drugs and who could have predicted that? No one 'in his right mind'. The middle stanza serves as a swift but detailed typology of allegorical misapprehension. The reference to poets sneaking into zoos to 'talk with tigers' is a direct reference to Kaufman's sometime friend Michael McLure, who did one evening sneak into San Francisco Zoo to read poems to a group of tigers, in homage to Blake. Blake, as Kaufman observes, never saw a tiger for real and had only representations of the animal brought back from the colonies to work from (alongside the fruits of his visions, that is): 'poems of God' which pout in jungles, proud animals hiding in foliage. McLure's zoo break-in occurred in San Francisco, where there is no '59th street'. There is one in New York, however, where Kaufman lived after the sixties, in a state of dire precarity and mental illness. This melancholic stanza performs a broken temporality. An idealised past, both personal and historical, is evoked only to emphasise the cold and bitter present, where the poem's speaker gets off the proverbial bus, 'forever' and where no one speaks to tigers any more before the speaker is taken back to beginning of consciousness itself (in the third stanza), a development he shows us to be inherently tragic. Kaufman devises a *baroque ontology*: producing a controlled, highly artficed knowledge system (otherwise known as 'a poem') celebrating and emulating, though never reproducing, a lost heroic age which took with it so many mysteries; leaving behind a faded facsimile, like a reflection in dark water.

From a baroque-ontological perspective, it makes sense that consciousness will have originated with a suicide: Kaufman's creation myth is as compelling as any. Suicide is an act which collapses the conceptual world and the world in and of itself into a single metaconceptual heap. It is a dialectical procedure which at once transmutes a person into something inanimate and yet

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animates that person's presence (or lack thereof) in a way that nothing else can; there are few immaterial forces more powerful in the mind of the living than traces of the suicided. The act is, of course, as we all know, a howl of pain. Like the desperate yowling of a wounded animal, it is ultimately a plea to live.

When, on the opening night of his retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris, Francis Bacon was quietly informed that his ex-boyfriend, George Dyer, had died of a drug overdose, no one needed to tell him it was a suicide. Dyer's mental health had been in decline for years; he was totally alienated from Bacon and from the milieu they once shared, and he had nowhere else to go. He'd been threatening and attempting suicide, with varying degrees of seriousness, for months. Most of his last days were spent apoplectically drunk, wounded and alone. The last conversation they'd had was a row over a rent boy, 'with smelly feet', whom Dyer had brought back to their suite. Bacon and some friends found Dyer on the toilet the next day. On Bacon's instruction, they did not announce the death until after the private view was finished. With a characteristic stoicism, which he doesn't get enough credit for, Bacon engaged with everyone he was expected to engage with, was typically charming and caustic, and returned to London a few days later. It was only after Dyer's funeral that he finally broke down and allowed his own depression to set in.

At risk of reiterating the vainglorious art historical idioms of the 20th century, which flatten the human chronologies of an artists' life into a one-dimensional hero's journey, it was in response to Dyer's suicide that Bacon began work on his last 'great' project: a pair of triptychs, colloquially called 'the black triptychs', representing Dyer's final minutes. The baroque had always been at play in Bacon's practice. He spoke of the ways in which early baroque, or Caravaggisti, painting informed his work, with its high artifice and technical innovations, such as mannerism, forced perspective and chiaroscuro. But it is in the second of these triptychs, *Triptych, May-June 1973*,

where the thematic concerns of baroque thought, which orients itself above all else to the articulation of loss, become most evident.

In his review of Chris Marker's documentary *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* Jacques Rancière argues that the function of documentary filmmaking has little to do with an event as it happened. The documentary works not to preserve memory, but to produce it. *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* focuses on the avant-garde filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin, a Leninist exiled in France. The film focuses on Medvedkin's career as a Bolshevik revolutionary and artist, and the Soviet avant-garde he was part of; characterised by highly imaginative resourcefulness and narrative innovation. The film focuses also on Marker's friendship with Medvedkin and on the beginnings of the Perestroika, the conclusion of which Medvedkin would not live to see: he died during the final weeks of the Soviet project. While Medvedkin himself managed to survive the various 'revisions' of the Soviet era, much of his work did not. Marker's project, then, was not to reflect on, but rather devise, a history, and context, within which Medvedkin's work could be received. 'Memory must be created against the overabundance of information as well as against its absence. It has to be constructed as the liaison between the account of the events and traces of actions'³⁹ says Rancière. This argument draws us towards a compelling dialectical imposition. The idea that memory is 'created' is fascinating but, even more so, is the idea that this act of creation is premised on an act of opposition, as much *against* information and information's absence. Memory is an intervention against time's self-propagating wheel; the past is not restaged but curated.

What if memory itself were as accepted as artificial, capable of being ornamented in the same way time itself was ornamented in 1657, with the invention of the pendulum clock by

³⁹ (Rancière, 2004)

Christiaan Huygens (Spinoza's sometime collaborator and interlocutor)? In Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*, the replicants, bioengineered humanoids used for slave labour, are brought into life as fully grown, sexually mature 'adults'. To account for their lack of childhood and adolescence, and therefore the opportunity to grow a subconscious, their brains are pumped through with false memories engineered by 'memory designers'; highly sought after, skilled specialists whose vocation is to write authentically human recollections. The replicants are fully aware that their memories are false. Indeed, the film's central tension emerges from the protagonist's anxiety that a traumatic memory of his might be real.

The aestheticizing of one's 'trauma' is an occupation very much en vogue within postmodernity's visual and literary cultures. A juicy morsel of personal misery is valuable cultural capital. That's not to say those who draw from their sorrows are insincere and driven only by a brutal cynicism (though some certainly are). The young Narcissus observes his legacy, watching, from beyond the threshold, George die on the toilet in a luxury suite, somewhere in 1970s Paris. He considers the fungal quality of legacy, the barely discernible temporal hypha which probe at each other over the ages, impossible to mitigate or fully understand. Are they in communion? Or at war? These two means of relating are not mutually exclusive, here. He considers the limits of his own body, staring back at him, hoping to draw on enough frustration and self-loathing to forge something new. The baroque comes into itself at the limits of seeing: in the engineering of a threshold by which we better enjoy suffering.

Theorists of the baroque, both in its contemporary and historical contexts, will often start with a nominally anodyne evocation: the threshold, the view into a scene, the 'way in' which simultaneously acts as the barrier which shuts you 'out'. Deleuze argues that this threshold represents the vantage points, and limitation, of a particular episteme. 'We', those of us existing

now, have crossed over a threshold and are able to look back from a particular vantage point, but this also limits us and our ability to fully comprehend what we're looking at. It's like seeing a dead body for the first time: the first few stupefying seconds, before the brain is able to fully comprehend what it is even looking at. There is a 'coherence' there, that the viewer is not made privy to, and thus the very act of 'viewing' is thrown into disarray. Deleuze asks us, borrowing a concept from Leibniz, to imagine a solitary monad lost in the 'baroque house': a palatial system of history and signification and infinite self-referral. When Jarman visually quotes *Narcissus* in *Edward II*, he is relying on pre-existing knowledge of a particular image. The reference is not reliant, however, on the audience thinking to themselves: 'Ah! This shot is a direct re-staging of a painting by Caravaggio, dated uncertainly between 1597 and 1599! The contemporary understanding of the Narcissus myth is based on an anachronistic metaphor, and there is, in fact, a lot of "queer potentiality" which we could just as easily read into the narrative!' No. All Jarman needs from his audience is a pre-programmed understanding of an image of a young, beautiful man gazing at his own reflection. Jarman is making use of a Deleuzian fold. The 'fold' or act of 'folding' describes the construction of subjectivity; to fold into one's own thought the structure of another's (thought) or indeed the 'thought' that comes to define an entire epoch. The 'fold' occurs frequently in Deleuze's philosophy but is most obvious in his writings in *Le pli* and his monograph on Foucault (*Foucault*, 1996). For Deleuze, 'folding' allows for the construction of a 'non-human' subjectivity or, moreover, the folding of various subjectivities into each other thus creating a kind of aesthetically autonomous subject which has been uprooted from, and survived, its source. The baroque is primarily referential: it relies on a pre-existing familiarity with its subject. It is for this

reason that it is not a ‘movement’, or trend, but, as Deleuze puts it ‘an operative function...a trait [*tendance*]’. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things’.⁴⁰

Jean-Luc Nancy, writing about a painting by Caravaggio, positions the human gaze itself as a threshold; a synchronous invitation and barrier, through which thought crosses to meet external signification.⁴¹ The person ‘looking’ is at once invited into the scene (portrayed in the painting), but nevertheless is alienated from it. Like Deleuze, Nancy’s conception of the perception is based on an act of distancing and delimitation; but he also observes how these alienating principles work to intensify intimacy. Christine Buci-Glucksmann imagines our contemporary epoch as one where the threshold is pluralised, where we are forever at odds with our images, held behind a multitudinous baroque interface; wandering a city built by and for the movement of capital, foreign to everyone, ‘a labyrinthine proliferation of squares, crossroads, thoroughfares, and side streets, a kind of multi body of the past and memory’.⁴²

The urge towards suicide is not an urge to depart. It is the urge to enunciate one’s already deeply felt sense of estrangement. ‘I don’t think they even heard me’. said Yukio Mishima as he climbed back into the Commandant’s office, having delivered a call to arms to the assembled soldiers, who had laughed at him. He then suicided in a botched seppuku. As some, including friends, have argued, Mishima’s failed coup d’état was designed to be a failed coup d’état. It was only ever a pretext for a particularly baroque suicide. It was the pursuit of an image. In Mishima’s case the image was of a Romantic pre-Meiji Restoration Japan. That image was of an idealised past which was only ever real in disappearance. Indeed, the baroque image is one which pre-exists its loss, it is the ‘Beloved,/lost to begin with,’ we could come to understand the baroque

⁴⁰ (Deleuze, 2006)

⁴¹ (Nancy, 1997)

⁴² (Buci-Glucksmann, 1994)

imagination as an endlessly regurgitative apparatus which is fed on an economy of disappearing mythologies, which it can only then comprehend in terms of their estrangement (from itself). Because of this, what I'm discussing here can be understood *not* as a tendency to depart, but to capture the feeling a departure leaves behind. The departure from 'nature' is always prefigured in the attempted cloning of the natural in our visual, aural or literary traditions. Further to departure, to the entering, there is a veil placed over the things lost. The veil denotes the dead as transfigured into objects for mourning. In *The Muses* Jean-Luc Nancy constructs an ekphrastic analysis of Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* (Louvre, Paris). It might be anachronistic to refer to the 'lyrical' quality of Caravaggio's paintings. They have next to nothing to do with contemporary theoretical concerns with the lyric. What Caravaggio gives us in *Death of the Virgin*, however, is death at the *end*. He negates the religious notions of death, death of the body only, and presents us instead with a corpse which we gaze upon from the threshold, in our awkward perversity. Nancy understands the ultimate threshold as the human gaze itself and Deleuze concurs to a point, in accordance with his understanding of the baroque as something ultimately so folded in on itself that it is removed from the 'natural' constraints of subjective human readings. The difference is a matter of numbers; Nancy's threshold is the monolithic gaze, where, for Deleuze, this doorway is tessellated many times over. '[We] take thresholds to be so many minimal units of consciousness, tiny perceptions are in each instance smaller than the virtual minimum and, in this sense are infinitely small'.

However, there is, perhaps, a conceptual concurrence. When we consider the notion of 'presence'. Jean-Luc Nancy explores the temporal-spatial relations of 'looking' and notions of 'presence' that a viewer can derive from a painting. As Bersani and Dutoit, and other queer theorists of Caravaggio, have suggested, his key thematic impulse tends to be one of invitation. Nancy, in his verbal reproduction of *Death of the Virgin*, tries to unpick the intimate tensions that

the painting establishes with those who gaze upon it. In his efforts to capture the painting's 'life force' his re-production itself becomes a sort of attempted seduction. After all, what else should a theory be? He writes: 'we can't exactly say that we have penetrated there, but neither can we say we are outside...we are there without leaving the threshold, on the threshold, just as our eye conforms to the plane of the canvas and weaves itself into its fabric'.⁴³ His use of the word 'penetrated', here, is particularly provocative and gets to the centre of painting's fundamental tension, something he continues to pry at throughout, 'Someone has just pulled back the covering in which she had been wrapped. The body and the face are swollen, the hair is undone, the bodice unlaced'.

As Nancy remarks, the story surrounding this painting is characteristic of the Caravaggio mythos; being one of grim realism, impudent defiance and mighty technical eloquence. The model in the painting was his comrade, a sex worker who drowned in the Tiber, whose body he witnessed being fished out from the foetid waters. Nancy folds the audience into the fabric of the painting itself, into the enormous crimson veil that hangs over the dead 'virgin'. He elucidates the model, folding into her body the various mythologies that surround Caravaggio; making her into something more than a muse, but a collaborator, an accomplice. Her final act as an accomplice was to be pulled from the river, bloated and so profoundly dead that it inspired Caravaggio to iterate a defiantly hopeless version of the Virgin's 'ascension'. Notice the ceiling. Typical representations of the Virgin's ascendance do not feature a closed wooden ceiling, rather they feature cherubs and clouds, the heavens opening and a very clearly alive Mary either in ascendance or about to. This is to say Nancy's drawing out of an atheistic element to Caravaggio's painting is not anachronistic. It was observed at the time, too, by the Fathers at Santa Maria della Scala, for

⁴³ Ibid p.57

whom the painting had been commissioned, when they refused to accept it on the ground that it was blasphemous; a ‘vulgar death’.⁴⁴ She was too dead, there is no hint of an assumption here. ‘Life is changed, not ended’ it says in the *Missale Romanum*, to put it less poetically: death is a transition, not a conclusion. Even this basic tenet of Catholic theology seems negated, here, let alone the Virgin Mother’s undying ascent into the heavens (an episode not in the Bible, and held as an axiom only by the Roman Catholic Church; Orthodox and Protestant Christians do not believe this). ‘And what if that was the subject of this painting? That there was never death “itself”?’ asks Nancy. How might we assess the fundamental nature of representing a corpse and the very notion of death “itself” as an impossibility?

The true definition of a thing neither involves nor expresses anything beyond the nature of the thing defined...No definition implies or expresses a certain number of individuals. In as much as it expresses nothing beyond the nature of the thing defined. For instance, the definition of a triangle expresses nothing beyond the actual nature of a triangle. It does not imply any fixed number of triangles.⁴⁵

There can be no ‘death itself’ insofar as there can be no real ‘lived’ state of non-being or of being inanimate: the corpse means nothing to the person it was in seconds before becoming a corpse, because that person no longer exists. It is everything to those who loved that person.

A lot of purple prose could be poured from a young, earnest writer trying to get at some misjudged sense of empathy. I could write here: ‘I do not know why Francis Bacon became fixated with the scene he represents in the *Black Triptychs*’. To do so would be callow at best and, at worst, pusillanimous. Because of course I know why he became fixated on this scene. The most powerful

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ (Spinoza, 2005)

visual force imaginable is the ‘upsetting image’. Precisely because upsetting images are the only ones that never truly leave us; which lodge themselves somewhere too deep to get at and so become obsession.

Who wouldn’t become obsessed with such a scene? Were you in his position would it not haunt every second of your remaining time? Would a single hour pass without the image pushing itself into your thoughts? My earlier use of the word ‘stoic’ to describe Bacon’s character was not arbitrary: he was immensely stoic in his refusal to face away from the great catastrophe of his life. It was his pure, unsentimental *focus*. It is in this focus that we can recognise a baroque-occultic dimension to his artistic tactics. The second iteration of the triptych, from 1973 (roughly two years after Dyer’s death), is far more direct than the first. The violence of the act being depicted and the violence of the recollection, and attendant grief, is accentuated. The scene is coldly contracted around the body at its centre. There is the shitting, and the vomiting and these bodily irruptions are punctuated by the figure staring blankly ahead, lost in terminal contemplation. Bacon used old photographs of Dyer so as to better recall his likeness, and the profile in the middle painting is from a well known photograph Bacon had taken of Dyer during happier times. Obviously, Bacon was not present at the death itself and so its forensic reconstruction is purely imaginative; the image which haunted him so profoundly (as it would anyone) was fictitious, generated by his own mind. The adored can only truly transfer themselves into total adoration through their disappearance.

II. The Dead Poet's Society

Subutex. Give me the prescription
and I will be you. I'll pretend to be you
and if I cannot, well, I'll tell you about your walls
the interpretation of the cracks, divination etc
you probably don't wanna know. give me the paper
it's fine I'll never remember a thing.
you'll say things tomorrow I'll have said them last week.
just right. I know explosives. magic I know and dialectics.
just write the prescription ok.
I have conversations with the dead.

Sean Bonney, *Our Death* (Commune Editions; Oakland, California), 2019.

The city takes on a discernibly feculent mode midsummer and the poet is a thing that can only conceive of itself as dead. It is the smell of rotting garbage which rises with the heat and permeates every bedroom, it is the pallid, punishingly sheer hue adopted by the sky, the pavement and everything taking on a sweaty, hung-over ambiance. It is a light brown film clinging to absolutely every expression of matter and thought. One gives up on even attempting to remain clean. This feels something like 'tragedy' but is too abstracted for that term to be properly applied. For tragedy draws on the follies and vanities of men who have known the Gods, and one cannot feel further away from that terror and beauty here in this unerring miasma which negates all happenings, hubristic or otherwise. Given it's impossible to escape an all-pervading sense of

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rotting meat, one almost inevitably jumps to morbid cogitation; but what makes this particular morbidity so unbearable is its unendingness; there is no death here, in the sense that ‘death’ implies a finitude or conclusion and therefore mercy. If the heat, and its stink, resemble any kind of sickness, it’s of the chronic variety; an endlessly punishing cycle of moderate to intense discomfort and a mind unable to focus on anything else; pulled back to its misery over and over like a dog on a chain; a tongue darting for a sore borne from an immediately accessible part of the mouth; a sepsis deep in your gut, which is killing you forever, but never actually kills you. And in this excruciating and inescapable corporeality an intense desire: ‘You need Jesus in your life, you disgusting, degenerate sissy!’

These were words directed at me by a preacher one August afternoon circa 2017, after he’d watched me kissing another man from across one of those steely, newly built piazzas with fountains built into the ground which half-heartedly squirt some brown water every half an hour. I remember becoming slowly more cognizant of the preacher, not certain at first that we were the couple being addressed. He grew more distressed with every syllable and his insults were becoming increasingly experimental. Shortly before we left the range of his shouts, he was attempting some reiteration of the ‘Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’ cliché, but had become so apoplectic that his voice had taken on an almost pleading quality: ‘Eve or Steve! Adam? The anus is for shitting! Paedophiles!’

I still wonder today whether it was the site he chose for his proselytizing which drove him into such a rage. I cannot remember the name of the man I was kissing that day, but I remember the preacher, his white-hot misery and shrieks. I dare say we held some common ground. That word, ‘degenerate’, comes from the Latin ‘degeneratus’ meaning ‘no longer of its kind’. He had mistaken my companion and me, the two homosexuals, with a very real and profound lack, a

gaping, raw hole across the historicopolitical landscape. The miserable piazza was so lacking in character, was so redolent of the urban fugue which characterises the contemporary ‘post-industrial’ cityscape. It could have been anywhere: London, Salford, Taipei, Brooklyn, Downtown LA. Such sites sing in harmony these days, joined together in a long totalizing chant. The preacher told us we needed Jesus in our lives, and he was right, but so did he. You could call this community.

In 1657 the German Catholic priest and ‘heavenly messenger’ Angelus Silesius became infamous for increasingly heretical theses argued across a sequence of Alexandrine couplets published as *Heilige Seelenlust* (literally, ‘The Soul’s Holy Desires’). Remarkably, he was never formally penalised and ended his days under the care of the Jesuits, still a priest. A contemporary of Spinoza, and dying the same year as him, Silesius’ conception of God is similarly informed by an increasingly unavoidable cognizance of God’s absence. Anticipating the major trends of German Idealism, which in turn would go on to inform much of Modernist intellectual life, he writes: ‘Love like a magnet is, it draws me into God/ and what is greater still, it pulls God into death’.⁴⁶ This is a truly baroque account of apotheosis: the chiaroscuro of love and death: the Godhead, like most things once living, is heavier as a corpse.

The occultish science of summoning is revived as a direct response to the dearth of God(s) and all which attends them. New avatars for devotion are called forth. Nietzsche’s pithy declaration from *The Gay Science*, that ‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him’ usually finds itself quoted in isolation, estranged from the greater context of his argument, where he goes on to say:

⁴⁶ (Angelus Silesius and Shradly, 1986)

How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

Nietzsche was an atheist of a far more sophisticated kind than those who would proudly bear the denotation a century later (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris et al). He is not arguing that God has disappeared but that the idea of God has been immensely complicated. It is impossible for an increasingly literate, educated and introspective citizenry to believe in a God the same way people did during the middle ages. The static authority of a cosmic patriarch, which so easily exerted itself over the medieval imagination, simply does not hold after the Enlightenment; to continue to have faith in such an authority requires serious effort. The need to speculate, cogitate and contemplate the nature of God, previously the vocation of an educated minority, cloistered away in monasteries (and later universities), becomes a necessary activity for every believer in order to justify to themselves the nature of their belief.

Who could have guessed that the death of God would bring us closer to God than ever before? It is obvious, in hindsight, that theistic thinking is not so easily escaped; not least due to the fact of it's being sown into the base anatomy of our linguistic universe. There's been some speculation that the compulsion towards ritual emerges from a corner of the mind which pre-exists, but anticipates, the capacity for language.⁴⁷ The catastrophe and hyper-violence of the 20th century served as an invitation into deeper collective, and individual, cogitation into the nature of things

⁴⁷ (Tennie and van Schaik, 2020)

such as the 'self' and of 'God', and the tendency to interrelate or synthesize these constructions. 'God' the monolithic authority has been supplanted by a cloud of discombobulated signification and manically, endlessly, shifting countenance.

The movie in your head with its endless, feral mediations of the 'real' tends to induce a paroxysm of lyric. Generally speaking, academic analyses of poetry commanded us to refer to a 'speaker' when referring to that greater presence from which prosody emanates. We can put forward our theories as to who, or what, speaks; try to pick apart that indissociable cloud of the poet, as well as the other poets from whom the poet has lifted ideas, ideas likely lifted many times over, the political or social idioms and clichés the poet hopes to impart, the disseminated auras of visual or sonic cultures, memorable panning shots, a catchy melody, a brilliant song lyric etc.; these things that have form for lodging themselves within poetry. I believe there's a more interesting question here, and one that might lead us down an even more seductively teleological path: who's asking?

'Who is asking this question – a witness, a judge, a god, a scholar?'⁴⁸ The contemporary critic often reveals their self-doubt through the feebly performative authority with which they address a reader. The pursuit of criticism is today one of half-hearted inquisition, with students trained to adopt the profile of a pompous, insecure schoolmaster, or, at best, a priest. But what of the inexperienced, poorly advised warlock, overcome by the suddenly unruly delineation(s) they've summoned? The problem of summoning is that the summoned tend towards more agency than the summoner might have expected; what makes a ghost a poltergeist, more than its creepy autonomy?

⁴⁸ (Rose, 1994)

Now, where that gay bar was, or where I remember it to have been, is a popular café and roastery. It is similarly antiseptic in decoration, with sheer white walls, but more sheer and far whiter than before, unnullified by cheap disco lighting or sodium vapours creeping through cheaply tinted windows. The unit's planning is more or less uninterrupted, there is a new bar in in the same place as the previous bar, but this one is loaded with stale pastries, dripped in melted sugar, and what was the dance floor is now peppered with dark brown bench tables. There are large silver machines and an unrelenting smell of burning coffee and no corner of the space remains unprobed by LED lighting. The unabashed, enthusiastic brightness of the whole enterprise seems devised to exacerbate a hangover. There's still a pride flag, palm sized, perched atop a lollipop stick and cello-taped to the side of the tip jar, with a phrase written on it in tipp-Ex; 'money is the root of all evil, cleanse yourself here!'

In 2014 Jeremy Paxman was made a judge of the Forward Prizes; infamously declaring that 'poetry' (as in, the entire form) had 'connived at its own irrelevance'. Paxman betrayed an anxiety which has gnawed at the Anglo-Saxon mind for centuries. It is the same anxiety that drives so-called 'analytic' philosophers, with their 'thought experiments' and hatred of language and its plasticity; with their fake utility and 'common sense' and futile attempts at negating the inescapable reality of mystery and systems that exist beyond human comprehension. (It's what Deleuze described as 'poverty disguised as glory'.⁴⁹) While Paxman is correct in identifying (the comparatively wan and meagre cultural industry generally referred to as) the 'poetry community' as embarrassingly parochial, he waddled into a characteristically journalistic conflation between this parochialism and the 'inaccessibility' of poetry in itself. In point of fact, Paxman's censoriousness echoed the long, and increasingly despairing, wail of self-appointed poetry czars.

⁴⁹ [www.youtube.com. \(n.d\).. L'Abécédaire de GILLES DELEUZE: W comme Wittgenstein. \[online\] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEYRzyTsvas&ab_channel=SUB-TIL](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEYRzyTsvas&ab_channel=SUB-TIL) [Accessed 14 Jun. 2023].

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It seems no matter how many school children are dragooned into reading Simon Armitage that poetry remains alienating, incapable of generating any real public excitement, and market value. If there is any ‘radical’ potential to poetry it is in the lyrics’ exclusivity. It is the means by which a poem confounds, eludes and troubles its reader that it connives aesthetic force.

However, postmodernity has yielded its own answer to the lyrics’ recalcitrant anti-marketability. Near the destroyed gay bar is a newly freed up plot, the foundations of its foundations (a wide, deep man-made hole) hide behind an ekphraseis:



The weekend warriors ominously prophesised here would never arrive. The promised paradise, a hotel, ‘Bloc: Grand Central’, was never delivered. The city council diligently

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demolished the monolithic office block over whose ruination a twenty-four-story vinyl obelisk was to be erected. But there was a planning discrepancy between the application to build and the revised plan after the application was approved, i.e., the plot of land was too large for the fashionably narrow skyscraper. Then the pandemic arrived, and the parent company could no longer afford to go ahead. Now palimpsest with graffiti this prose poem has been transfigured into an elegiac work of ekphrasis haunted by its own giddy promises of the image of a slick, stainless, tik-tok friendly city.

A definitive aesthetic experience of our epoch is disappointment. Everything is an advert, advertising itself, a washed-out photocopy of an already violently sentimentalised image. Any tangible 'product' is wholly deficient; artistically; intellectually; spiritually etc. The brand new (rent only) apartments have overflowing drains, or the lights don't work, or the ceiling falls down on top of you while you're watching Netflix. The Marvel-Disney movie is consciously designed to be vacuous and disappointing, stringing you glumly along with its post-credit scenes and every song you listen to on Spotify uses the same four chords and poetry is everywhere: in adverts for banks, for supermarkets, for life insurance. It's all-over social media: the zenith of 'insta poetry' being just one example of the myriad ways in which anti-lyrical poetics have been instrumentalised by the system which enslaves us, variously named as 'postmodernity' or 'capitalist realism'. A recent neologism to have entered the hysterical vernacular of 'online' is 'thought terminating'. It is most commonly deployed as an attack against those who are perceived to be guilty of anti-intellectualism, usually in service of some hated ideological position (whether this position is on the nominal 'left' or 'right' isn't relevant to my argument). While the over-use of the term has deprived it of any real critical impetus, I do find it to be a useful formulation for understanding the problem of postmodern poetics. Writing is depleted of phenomenological intention, as the act of

literary production is engineered in service of an author's *profile*.⁵⁰ The work that gets produced is rooted not in the author's direct corporeal experiences and instead becomes an accessory to a kind of avatar, built after the writer's desired profile. Authorial agency is subordinated to a sequence of arbitrary and superficial identity categories and any literary or artistic production, poem or novel or artwork, is just another curiosity slipped into a portfolio and substantiated by the author's elected identity categories. In short: you wish the author was dead, the author is on Twitter.

'Belief had died with the rise of the contemporary, the instant. Belief being one of those hangovers from some other era, a mere shading of history. But then again, they were fags for belief. They were poets, after all...I hate when people title their poems after paintings. Ekphrasis is so dead, man. Bleak and needy shit.'⁵¹ So writes Brandon Taylor, and so exclaims one of his protagonists from 'The Late Americans', a novel set on a prestigious Creative Writing programme in the American Midwest. The character who remarks on the death of ekphrasis is a convincingly rendered solipsistic young man with a proclivity for callow provocations. On this point, however, I think Taylor has gifted his character a genuine insight, even if it is stumbled upon during an arrogant tirade. 'Belief' I take to mean 'integrity', 'faith' and 'conviction' all at once, and the premise that 'belief' has become so antiquated to the point of impossibility, like an ancient crown which crumbles to dust the minute you try to clutch at it, functions more or less as the novel's presiding thesis, which makes the spiteful, invidious and faithless world of Grad School (or post-grad school) culture into a metaphor for contemporary America itself.

⁵⁰ (Moeller and D'Ambrosio, 2021)

⁵¹ (Taylor, 2023)

And, so, to my central provocation: all contemporary poetry is ekphrasis, after the profile of ourselves we wish to advance and, also, all contemporary poetry is also epistolary; a letter to that profile, which crumples into an endless hole into which we throw our language. Allen Ginsberg and Sean Bonney met the same phantasm, at two very different historical junctures, and both after the consumption of DMT. It was described by Bonney as an ‘enormous, formless black shape’. Ginsberg, having treated with it in the halcyon bedlam of the sixties, believed it to be God. It made a point of explaining to Bonney, appearing to him in the brutally antiseptic environs of Austerity Britain, that it was not God.⁵²

Sean Bonney is remembered as a political poet, but there was an intensely mystical strain to his work which is critically neglected. He was, like Pasolini (who appears as a protagonist in Bonney’s work), an avowed Marxist-Materialist with occultish proclivities; sometimes spirits mask themselves, slyly, with the vocabulary of dialectical-materialism, sometimes they are openly cavorted with. His final collection, ‘Our Death’, was marked by a return to the epistolary style he had adopted in its predecessor, ‘Letters Against the Firmament’. But the ‘letters’ were this time frequently interrupted and intervened upon by percussive, despairing, lyric works, which appear halfway down a blank page like moments of excruciating lucidity punctuating a drug-blackout.

The ‘confessional’ has always been in at play Bonney’s work but it was always re-orientated, repurposed, salvaged and made into a communistic-magikal ‘epistemo-critical’⁵³ polemic. Sean Bonney’s work was not ‘autopoetic’ or ‘autotheoretical’ (and definitely not ‘autofictional’) in so far as those terms delineate irrevocably bourgeois aesthetics. Instead, the confession, in Sean’s work, is *mobilised* as a means of polemical critique; Sean Bonney’s

⁵² (Grunthaner, 2019)

⁵³ A phrase used by Frederic Jameson to refer to Walter Benjamin’s first book, ‘Origin of the German Trauerspiel’. (Jameson, 2022)

intervention was premised on a cognisance of the means by which capital mobilises one's own experience of humanity; that your 'lived experience', with all its attending delights and despairs, is no less a part of the body politic than the systems you attempt to resist.

Thomas De Quincey referred to Charles Baudelaire as a 'street philosopher pondering his way endlessly through the vortex of the great city'.⁵⁴ Though the term 'street philosopher' may today induce a toe-curl, it works itself out in a thrillingly dialectical way, describing a certain species of thinker to emerge from Modernism and its wreckage. The 'street philosopher' does not seek out truths, or deliberate between empiricist or rationalist methods, but rather ponders the experiences of knowledge itself. The street philosopher becomes an intellectual allegory for the unpredictable, and unplannable, chaosmos of the city itself. Indeed as, at one time, the human was an indistinguishable aspect of nature, so too is the street philosopher a baroque reflection of this: an aspect of the heaving, self-engrossed, dementedly interconnected, oppressively anonymous, artifice of the urban world: 'So I moved to a new country, a new city. The effect is not dissimilar to tearing your name off your face, to finally stumbling onto the secrets of archaic techniques of invisibility. Or at least that's what I tell myself when I've been awake for several days'.⁵⁵

In so far as a poetry collection can carry a thesis, Sean Bonney's 'Our Death', works out its mania through an ekphrastic passage after the concluding shot from Pasolini's film, 'Teorema'.

In *Letter against the language*:

Because sometimes in Pasolini's work, in the late work, it seems as if utopia itself is the necropole, a ring of slums, a circle around the city, a "force from the past", tearing up the present, a fever-desert, coming from the future, an inexpressible

⁵⁴ (Benjamin, 2002)

⁵⁵ (Bonney, 2019)

distance, inconsolable. And that screaming factory owner, in the last scene of *Teorema*, was he screaming because he was entering the “kingdom of the living”, or because he was leaving it. I don’t know. It isn’t even a scream, not really. More a dead thing, a powder-rasp. And as I was thinking this I suddenly realised I was no longer walking, because there was nothing to walk on, or through, or anything. Vague impressions of a ring of houses or bones. Vague sense I could enter into any of them. That no one would stop me...about how in the last interview Pasolini gave, just hours before he died, he did not admit to belief in magic and how that magic was not simply to be found knowing how to pronounce the so-called unpronounceable names but, more to the point, from knowing how to translate those names into sheer anger, which means the knowledge of how to inhabit the word “no,” its landscape and its geography.⁵⁶

Bonney locates, via Pasolini, a new fundament; a brief, painful rekindling of revolutionary fervour. He successfully transmutes the image, a desperate, yet silent, scream, into the force of language. He circumnavigates the need to ‘simply’ describe the image in question, but successfully conjures up the same sly, occultish, tendencies that haunted the likes of Pasolini and his Marxist antecedents; such as Walter Benjamin. ‘Mystic Communism’ could be accurately described as a hole, as that same hole which Bonney describes so succinctly and which Pasolini captured so viscerally in the closing seconds of *Teorema*. As Derrida observed in *Spectres of Marx*, the materialist understanding of history and society is itself haunted by a fundamentally immaterial presence, ‘the spectre of communism’. A gaping vortex opens in the contemporary human subject out of which flies a litany of shadows, the ‘ghosts of lost futures,’ as Mark Fisher might have it.

⁵⁶ (Bonney, 2019)

Thirty or so years after the final, miserable, death of the Soviet empire, the failure to achieve real communism and the possibility of any more revolutions indefinitely forestalled by the almost incompressible immensity of the surveillance state, the most one can hope for are half-measures. Most of the time, the activist contingents occupy themselves by grovelling to the state for little more than minor rhetorical reforms; ‘crying out for a new master,’ as Lacan put it. Mystic communism starts by acknowledging this, the desperate ‘powder rasp’ of a cogitation which refuses to accept itself as living. We begin by accepting that notions of ‘revolution’ or ‘utopia’ have risen to such unreachable heights that they can only be understood as one might understand unrequited love: to be pursued with suicidal fury or accepted as a bittersweet hopelessness. In some ways, it has always been thus. Mayakovsky wrote his masterpiece *A cloud in trousers* while in love, and it was his passage through the poetic torture house that he came to his revolutionary zeal: ‘And I feel/I/is too small for me/Some other body is bursting out’.⁵⁷ There was, even in the Bolshevik-futurist, a glint of the Romantic, an understanding that it is in our most and intimate private moments, when we feel most profoundly alone (for better or for worse), that we touch upon the universal.

The idea of communism, which never truly came to fruition, continues to trouble not just the perennially defensive and paranoid imaginings of liberal-capitalist ruling classes but the collective, intensely depressive, mind of the ‘left’, or what’s left of the left. Fisher argued that ‘clinical’ depression should be understood not as a medical complaint, but redolent of a mind tormented by an unrelentingly hostile and unliveable society, referred to, by him and others, as ‘boring dystopia’. So too could we understand the contemporary intellectual left as under siege by depression in its most intense, psychotic, form, Cotard Syndrome, wherein the mind of the sufferer

⁵⁷ (Vladimir Mayakovsky and Carrick, 2015)

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comes to believe that it paradoxically exists within a state of non-existence. The condition is named after Jules Cotard, a 19th century Parisian neurologist who first encountered it in a patient, Mademoiselle X who was convinced she had no bodily organs, did not need to eat and would live forever. The condition is sometimes erroneously referred to as 'living-death syndrome' as its most famous manifestation is in patients who believe themselves to be 'dead'. This be expressed by a patient in different ways, of varying extremity. On the one hand there are people who go about their daily lives quietly under the impression that they are unthinking zombies, mindlessly drifting through a world to which they are totally numb; when they are not at work, or in public, they sit and stare at walls, sometimes for days a time, not eating or washing, contemplating their deadness. On the other: extreme acts of self-harm: people starving themselves to death (as Mademoiselle X did), immolating themselves, allowing themselves to be gnawed away by mice or parasites and/or deliberately contracting sepsis, and on it goes. The fundamental logic which underpins these behaviours nevertheless remains unchanged: it is a form of autopoiesis, a self-inventing logic within which a thing which has died may yet remain mobile, continuing to move about and be interacted with as if alive, but with total conviction in its resolute non-existence.

I apologise for the morbid turn, but we have little recourse. To be frank, I do not consider myself someone with powers of revival, and what's dead is dead, and the sad truth is, ideas can die too. Though more liable than the human to being called back, ideas never return the same way and tend to carry with them the unbearable weight of history and interpretation. Besides, I am not tarrying with a thing which I believe to be dead, but which believes itself to be dead. I believe it can only be met, therefore, by its opposite: the dead which believes it is alive: poetry.

What happens when the elegy begins to elegise nothing ever living, but the very impossibility of its own capacity to have ever lived? When Frank O'Hara died John Ashbery's

obituary for him opened thus: 'Frank O'Hara's poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined'.⁵⁸The 'program' that Ashbery was alluding to here was political kind. He remarks that O'Hara's poetry does not condemn the Vietnam war, for instance, nor does it proselytise on the joys or perils of excessive drinking or casual sex (two areas of particular expertise for the late O'Hara, who was struck down by a beach buggy on Fire Island while blind drunk).

It was an uncharacteristically literal observation from Ashbery, as the 'program' which 'joins' the disparate bodies of O'Hara's poems can only mean an ideological conviction which serves to contextualise the work within a wider social or political project. That the cultural symptoms of his time are not directly 'interrogated' in O'Hara's writing should not indict him as a poet with no 'program'. Furthermore, his poetry can be joined; albeit not in the (faux)classical sense. There is no rudimentary floor plan, no overarching melody, but a defiantly baroque cosmology; a joyously fake map of the stars viewed through an artificial waterfall. It is not clear what guided Ashbery into his provocation. Perhaps it was the need to emphasise O'Hara's importance against the pervading mode of American Letters at the time or perhaps, still reeling from the loss, it was the yearning to remember Frank's exuberant discursiveness which defined so much of his life and work. 'We shall have everything we want and there'll be no more dying/ on the pretty plains or in the supper clubs/ for our symbol we'll acknowledge vulgar materialistic laughter/ over an insatiable sexual appetite'. How's that for a program? The central declaration here, that there shall 'be no more dying', marks the poet as a continuation of an English lyric tradition generally referred to as 'metaphysical' poetry. Had the metaphysical poets been writing in a romance language, in the Catholic world, they would probably be remembered as baroque. Their poems were highly mannered word constructs of intense musicality and, like the art and

⁵⁸ (Longenbach, 2005)

architecture being produced on the continent at the same time, aimed for nothing short of the reproduction of transcendence; a project they aimed to realise through the pursuit of pure artifice. The baroque is itself a term only ever arrived at after conclusion, only ever applied to a moment after it has firmly concluded. The baroque, in this sense, only announces itself in death.

This may help us understand, then, why death or, to be more specific, the translating of death into artifice, has been a recurring fixation of baroque imaginings. If there is a single unitary thread which unites the various baroques since antiquity, it is perhaps in the representation of dead things and these dead things coming to stand in for the death of epochs themselves. As Luther's 'dismantling of the mediaeval universe'⁵⁹ provoked the second reformation and the total capitulation of the Catholic imagination to the potentialities of artifice, so too is every baroque articulated in the silence which follows an epochal death rattle, the 'last dying unearthly light in a world from which transcendence' is vanishing.⁶⁰ The development of chiaroscuro in baroque painting is no coincidence, nor realism: the suddenly too human features of the heroes and saints acting out their epics between dim interstices of gold light, as if to suggest every myth, martyrdom or divine intervention occurred at dusk and all we are left with now is the stillness of night.

Five years after Frank O'Hara died, a long prose poem by John Ashbery appeared in *The Paris Review*. 'The system is breaking down,' it announces. The 'system' in question is never given any other name, remaining an ambiguity. Though clearly referencing the various systemic breakdowns of modernity, it could be any number of collapsing historical, economic, phenomenological or linguistic regimes (circa 1972); any of a number of delapidating programs all joined under the carefully constructed void, like a sequence of friezes encircling the interior of a

⁵⁹ (Jameson, 2022)

⁶⁰ (Jameson, 2022)

cathedral's dome. What is clear is that the 'system' and its 'breaking down' are channelled through the conduit of an individual's experience, the poem's speaker, who manages his looming dread by artfully containing it in mannered, centipedal, sentences:

The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one's way to where the country is.⁶¹

The poem continues this way, itself a system of declarative sentences which avoid declaring anything and so never truly break down, creating an illusion of endlessness. 'Chaos' is a phenomenon peculiar to human cognition; it does not exist beyond the remit of the mind. Solar flares, or black holes or astral bodies which defy our understanding, are not indicative of chaos, but instead of the limits of scientific comprehension. As the autonomist philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi observes:

Chaos does not exist in nature, it is not an objective reality: it is the relation between the human mind and the speed of events that are relevant to our physical and psychological survival.⁶²

It is an interesting decision, on Berardi's part, to position the means by which the human mind relates to phenomena as a process which occurs outside of nature. But he's correct in identifying chaos as itself a human construction, yet another means by which programs may be joined together, even if through building a melody from incomprehension, constructing a harmony which, to lift

⁶¹ (Ashbery, 1972)

⁶² (Berardi, 2019)

from Denis Diderot's description of baroque music, 'is confused, loaded with modulations and dissonances, its intention and movement constrained'.⁶³

Ashbery resisted attempts to read his poetry in philosophical terms. 'I took a single philosophy class at Harvard, and was completely hopeless,' he said. Despite this claim, 'The System' clearly engages with philosophical discourse, at least in an affective sense. This might suggest Ashbery's claim not to have read philosophy since he was an undergraduate may have been facetious. Indeed, the poem can be read as expression of negative enlightenment; the failure of knowledge to truly elucidate anything beyond the depths of its own unknowing. Language itself then comes to stand in for the mysterious system and in doing so only furthers its troubling mysteriousness. There is throughout Ashbery's career, an obsession with the means by which language breaks down linguistic processes of delineation. For instance, in 'The System', the human speaker of the poem is slowly whittled away and by the second paragraph is no longer a person, per se, but 'whatever being there' which is 'listening, as though to the feeling of the wind before it starts, and it slides down this anticipation of itself, already full-fledged, a lightning existence that has come into our own'. Jeff Staiger proposes a reading of *The System* that orientates it as actively engaged in conversation with Hegelian historical hypotheses. He argues that the poem should not be taken as an endorsement of the now commonly maligned end of history hypothesis (as posited by Francis Fukuyama and others), but that it does place its speaker at the conclusion of a certain cultural narrative and suggests the ultimate incoherence of conceptions of progress and completion on which traditional historical narratives are premised. Indeed, Staiger understands Ashbery's poem as a 'sort of latter-day and truncated *Phenomenology of Spirit*'.⁶⁴ Unlike a work

⁶³ As quoted by Patrick Straumann, *L'Aleijadinha. Le lepreux constructeur de cathédrales* (Paris, Chandeigne, 2005)

⁶⁴ (Staiger, 1997)

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of philosophical enquiry, however, 'The System' has no thesis, no objective beyond the maintaining of its own secretive logic.

That great theorist of the postmodern condition, Frederic Jameson, briefly names Ashbery as an example of a postmodern poet in his earliest essay on the subject, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*. He clarifies, however, that the adjective, 'postmodern', can also be applied to Ashbery's populist contemporaries whose work was antithetical to his 'complex, ironic, academic' poetry. For Jameson, of course, the 'postmodern' is not a style, but a symptom. As he would say in a later, more famous, essay: 'postmodernism' is the 'cultural logic of late capitalism', it is the lost future, the sense that innovation that needed to happen has happened, as has every catastrophe: history is over.

Despite its prosaic form, 'The System' does not function like prose and operates in more a cinematic register. Just as a (good) film artfully deploys sonic, aural and visual affects in the engineering of atmosphere and orientating of mood, so too does Ashbery use the formal qualities of sentence structure as a means in and of itself; his narrative is not delivered directly by declarative statement, but by the form; the work's very structure serves as a thesis. Having said that, like a narrative film the poem affords itself moments of irruptive exposition and drags the reader further into the moral reality of its universe. Here, on the subject of truth, for instance:

the truth was obstinately itself, so much so that it always seemed about to harden
and shrink, to grow hard and dark and vanish into itself anxiously but stubbornly,
but this was just the other side of the coin of its intense conviction. It really knew
what it was.

The dialectical formulation here would impress the most unforgiving German Idealist. Truth, the language, the textual matter of the real, is only itself in so far as it shrinks away and retreats from

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those trying to understand it; it's 'intense conviction' is expressed through 'anxious' and 'stubborn' withdrawal. 'It knows what it is' through its vanishing, so how could 'we' possibly comprehend it, when the reality of it is expressed by an obdurate absence?

There's a famous extract from Fred Moten oft quoted out of context across social media infographics, more and more so since the murder of George Floyd in 2020. 'The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?' It's a moving sentiment, and a politically necessary one, which carefully negotiates the tendentious realities of American racial-capitalism and (the sometimes unwitting) diversionary tactic of identitarianism. Within its original context, the quote is taken from the final pages of *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, co-written with Stefano Harney. In its entirety, the argument is in fact a paraphrasing of the political project of Fred Hampton, of The Black Panthers, as Moten ascribes it:

Yeah, well, the ones who happily claim and embrace their own sense of themselves as privileged ain't my primary concern. I don't worry about them first. But, I would love it if they got to the point where they had the capacity to worry about themselves. Because then maybe we could talk. That's like that Fred Hampton shit: he'd be like, "white power to white people. Black power to black people." What I think he meant is, "look: the problematic of coalition is that coalition isn't something that emerges so that you can come help me, a manoeuvre that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that it's fucked up for

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us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?⁶⁵

The 'coalition', now, is translated. No longer a liberal abstraction, but an allusion to the very literal coalitions Hampton was in the process of forging with other proletarian groups as part of a wider revolutionary socialist project. It was for that he was murdered by the Cook County State's Attorney and the Chicago Police Department (at the behest of the FBI). However, the *killing* to which Moten alludes here, fifty or so years on, is not literal kind, i.e., armed police officers killing sleeping revolutionaries in their beds. The constative statement, *this shit is killing you, too*, rakes up for itself more and more urgency. And yet, *this shit* is always *killing you*, but it never *kills you*. It is very hard to represent in writing the means by which we are being collectively killed, the means by which our subjectivities are endlessly diminished and flattened and how even the very terms of our linguistic expression are turned back on us. As Bonney describes that same pessimist's epiphany: 'No one was expecting this. We talk about the news, about current events, as if we were insomniacs mouthing nonsense syllables/ The angles of the calendar are altered every morning and by evening it has all become normalized. Easier to take part in a cosmic collective suicide than to take the measure of the screams coming from the other side of the wall. There is no wall'. It is that final utterance of Bonney's that violently draws one's attention to the indivisible nature of atrocity. There is no wall. No border which differentiates and separates human subjectivities, beyond that conjured up by the hippocampus. But, please, do not take this to mean we are all in it together. We are not, we is not. There is a luxury to stupefaction.

⁶⁵ (Harney and Moten, 2013)

Within contemporary political-linguistic construction the pronoun ‘We’ has become the ultimate baroque edifice. It can only process itself within an elegiac register, it is only ever describing a dead thing. Just as the lines which separate us are entirely imaginary, so too is any communality beyond the irruptive force of our own collective despair; which, again, can never be truly represented in language, only gestured at, hopelessly. Bonney’s performative, epistolary, prose poetry echoes Ashbery’s constative essayistic, prose poetry in the sense that both modes express hauntedness. Echoing Adorno’s famous thesis that there can be no lyric poetry after Auschwitz, these poems are haunted by echoes of lyric utterance. But even this haunting itself is exceedingly controlled, curated, reached at through the means of pure artifice.

And so, like much of today’s cultural discourse, we are driven into deliberating with ghosts and echoes. The art of summoning can be treacherous; the ritual itself often teases out spectres that were never formally invited. The 2016 movie *A Dark Song* stages a fictionalised account of Crowley’s ritual to summon angels. In the film, the guardian angel functions more like the Djinn of Islamic mythology: granting a wish if captured. The protagonist, Sophia, is a bereaved mother who wishes to use the angel’s powers to revenge herself on the murderers of her infant son, a group of deluded teenage occultists. She recruits a bellicose and charmless magician named Joseph Solomon to lead the ritual. Solomon intends on asking the angel for ‘invisibility’ so that he can enjoy ‘some quiet’ before ‘hell’. The ritual goes wrong, due to Sophia’s initial dishonesty around her intentions, and the isolated farmhouse in which they’re staying is transported to a purgatorial dimension between the living and spiritual worlds, where they are ruthlessly tormented. Solomon eventually dies from a knife wound and Sophia is captured by the increasingly bold imps the two accidentally summoned. The imps are scared off, however, by a fiercely baroque angel; gigantic and beautiful and clad in gold armour. Standing before the angel she asks not for revenge, but for the

power to forgive. The angel smiles ambivalently and grants Sophia the release for which she yearns. She drives away and the film ends.

The film avoids tedious genre trappings and quickly dispenses with any notion that the events it depicts may be occurring solely in the protagonist's imagination. Indeed, it subverts this notion and imbues its entire visual lexicon with a dreamlike quality; when the angel appears during the film's final act it appears convincingly, movingly, unreal; a beautifully co-ordinated amalgam of biblical, medieval, renaissance and baroque angels; at once magnificent and monstrous and reassuring. The angel, in all its immense goldenness, ruptures the film's overwhelmingly melancholic affects and re-orientates its visual grammar towards something approaching optimism. The angel's function here, is that of the baroque itself: an intervention into the melancholic endlessness of our current epoch through the material approximation of a transcendence whose true nature is long disappeared. While the film does all it can to suspend the notion that its representation of the supernatural is, within the logic of its fictional world, imaginary, this does not suspend the separate notion that the imagery is metaphorical. Angels and demons have to come from somewhere; and with the Godhead now annihilated from the modern mind, pushed further and further out towards the borderlands of the public imaginary, the imagination is the closest thing we've got to an origin story. Which brings us to an inevitable question: is the affirmative incorporeality of ghosts, or angels, something invented by us? Or are these greater presences self-invented and pre-existing our fundamental aloneness? Do they appear to us in pursuit of their own angry fix, by which I mean the satisfaction of being called once alive? Who, exactly, calls, and who, or what, exactly, is answering?

Near the Bay of Naples is the 'alchemist's chapel', Cappella Sansevero. Though built in the 16th century, it was re-designed and re-fitted in the 17th under the designs and labours of Prince

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Raimondo di Sangro, an alchemist, mason, architect, inventor, occultist and surprisingly, not a poet. Allegedly built over the site of a former temple to Isis, the church contains many strange and esoteric treasures, including human corpses; a pregnant woman, and adult man with their artery systems transmuted into metal, wax and silk. The pride of the collection, however, is a nominally less morbid attraction, not the product of an (allegedly) pagan aristocrat, but a sculptor, Giuseppe Sanmartino.

He lies just south of an extraordinarily opulent alter. Positioned more or less perfectly at the temple's centre, raised up by a modest futon. He is beardless and beautiful, a convention, if a rare one, since Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*. His body is covered by a light shroud, clearly sewn from some supernaturally soft material, it clings to him like a film of luscious, silvery mucus. As is characteristic of the baroque dead, his expression is disarmingly serene, he looks more to be feigning sleep. While the shroud bunches up around his face, the lips are unmistakably curled into a smile. Piled up at his feet, the usual affects: nails, crown of thorns etc. As with the Christ itself, it was the veil which proved a sensation. Visitors were unable to comprehend that these translucent pleats, this light silky, almost liquid fabric was hewn from marble. The rumour was that Raimondo di Sangro had placed a real funeral shroud over the completed sculpture and then worked his alchemical magicks. He denied this, refusing to take credit for Sanmartino's achievement and protested further that the artist has sculpted the *Veiled Christ* from a single block of marble; that the piece is totally seamless. Even today, the viewer cannot quite believe it and reaches out to pull away the veil. The material appears so soft that you don't find yourself anticipating the feeling of silk as much as slime, that to touch the thing would mean pulling back with you ribbons of pale ectoplasm. And to dip your fingers in again would be to get a good feel for the flesh underneath.

In a way, the corpse shroud is a standard hauntological signifier, in the sense that its presence is announced through lack, there is not really a shroud, nor body, but a lump of stone. However, it is a lack enunciated not by an immateriality, but by an excess of materiality, by a hardness; an eeriness enunciated through immensity, through heaviness. The shroud and the corpse it ostensibly covers are a single body. *The Book of Abramelin* warns the practitioner against naively assuming that the first thing to announce itself as your angel, your protector, is telling you the truth: Kings and Dukes of Hell are not bound by Heaven's law and are more adept at lying and cunning than any human. But perhaps that's what we wanted all along?

Marx and Engels described the complete and total *melting* of all that was once sacred and mysterious by the now dominant capitalist system, 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned,' which left the working classes with no recourse but to face the reality of their oppression. While the bourgeois revolutions in Europe had successfully transformed that small cluster of nation-states into more equitable societies, this equity was premised on brutal systems of exploitation. These systems of exploitation were premised on an illusion of free will and greater autonomy for the citizenry; this was the foundational lie of early capitalism. In the British context, the land enclosures, formally beginning with an act of parliament in 1773, converted common land into private property and forced the rural peasantry into cities, transfiguring them into the industrial working class; greatly reducing their quality of life and life expectancy. Ironically, it was this cold-blooded mechanistic murder of Albion from which rose Ye Olde England, alongside the East India Company, the workhouse, the lunatic asylum, the machine gun and so on. By the mid-19th century, the British Empire was the most powerful superstate the world had ever known with its ruling minority enriched by a brutal process of colonial extraction. Subsequently, the imaginings of those left on the British Isles themselves were animated by Arthurian legends, sad songs of disappeared

forests and long lost occultish secrets, re-excitement in the work of Chaucer and Shakespeare, in ‘Celtic’ cultures and the land of Faerie. To accompany these phantasmatic visions of a now lost ‘Other-Eden, demi-paradise’ came a distinctly Anglo-Saxon school of thought. To string together a few vulgar idioms which were seeded by this mode: this was an ‘empirical’, ‘common sense’, ‘no nonsense’, ‘plain speaking’ philosophical school. It was one formulated through early liberalism and protestant drives towards the location of truth or, in the absence of ‘empirical’ truth, the interpretation that comes closest to ‘it’. This kind of anti-intellectual intellectual system is now emblematic of a certain kind of anti “pretentious” philosophy and has been used as a form of dismissal since the time of Marx himself: indeed, it grew from the bourgeois hegemony’s need to challenge Marxism by denigrating it, in characteristically paternalist terms, as unserious, callow, ‘unscientific’ and beneath the consideration of serious people. A recent article by Keston Sutherland provides a hermeneutic for this anti-thought. Sutherland suggests that 20th and 21st century economics originated from the need to discredit Marx’s critique of political economy. You can trace the origins of ‘common sense’ reaction directly back to the 19th century right-wing reception of Marx:

The attack on Marx from the right, by economists committed to the development of a ‘science’ of consumption that would once and for all do away with the labour theory of value, took the form of an attack on Marx’s ‘literariness’ and was launched under the banner of ‘facts’. Marx was accused of being a literary writer who ignored facts. Marx’s contempt for facts was inseparable from, or simply the expression of, his attachment to dialectical concepts in particular and unnecessary philosophizing in general. This intransigent attachment, from which Marx never was able to shake free, together with his literariness, meant that

Marx's theory, especially *Capital*, had – in the words of Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk – “no future.”⁶⁶

Another way of saying ‘empirical’ is ‘hatred of song’. First and foremost, the onslaught against ‘radical’ theories has, during modernism and after, been formulated as a direct attack on poetics itself. The only truly empiricist critiques are critiques of language, even if their objectives are nominally orientated elsewhere. This is what Wittgenstein began to realize in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; itself a long and melancholic prose poem whose tragic lyric-song is formulated through the inability to acknowledge its own epistemological failure. The most easily recognized progeny of this mode is managerialist jargon; capital's linguistic manoeuvrings which work to snuff out any alternatives to itself. It's the kind of language we're all familiar with; ostensibly empirical, verbose (in the most banal way); encountered in the form a passive-aggressive email from someone whose exact role is never clear, but who earns twice your salary (if you're lucky enough to have one) and who has absolute power over you. It can be an accusatory letter from your bank. It can be an email from university management merrily announcing mass redundancies and funding cuts to everyone but the business school. It is a form of biopolitical magick dedicated entirely to regulation: the regulation of funds, of real-estate and of people (the most disposable aspect of any portfolio). In its most advanced form it is post-linguistic, it is teargas, ‘the anti-Rimbaud. The absolute regulation and administration of all the senses.’⁶⁷ This anti-poetics of dismissal synthesising with the despondent mythologies of lost land have resulted in a uniquely anglophone style of poetry: a disharmonious schizo-active style of self-eulogising. An inability to imagine the subject as enunciating anything but a corpse.

⁶⁶ (Sutherland, 2023)

⁶⁷ (Bonney, 2019)

The image of the preacher babbling his hours away about perversities and cultural degradation as if he wouldn't be completely lost without such things, giving him licence to get out of bed every morning to drag himself about the streets in a lascivious frenzy. The myth of the secretly homosexual homophobe is a particularly irritating, and patronising, one. These people are not homosexuals (even the ones who are). They are voyeurs, delighted by others' desires and sweat and shame. I should know, I pulled him from the earth myself. I was in need of a cliché.

Caravaggio's paintings were anachronistic in their own due to a certain kind of 'realism' that he adopted in his depiction of the human. Cupid has bad teeth and greasy hair, the ascendant Madonna just looked like a dead woman and Salome, on receiving The Baptist's severed head, just looks like a person being handed a severed head, her face subtly contorted as she tries to conceal her regret and disgust. He transposed these all too human subjects against unreal light and it is from this dialectical tension that he forged puncta. We see only ourselves in these scenes, our own yearning and ugliness and, crucially, our cruelty. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche elaborates on his famous claim that Christian morality merely disguises the human urges towards domination and sadistic pleasure in the suffering of one's enemies. Indeed he argues that 'cruelty' is the fundamental governing principle of civilisation. He writes: 'almost everything that we call "higher culture" is based upon the spiritualising and intensifying of cruelty...the "wild beast" has not been slain at all, it lives, it flourishes, it has only been transfigured. That which constitutes the painful delight of tragedy is cruelty...at the basis even of everything sublime, up to the highest and most delicate thrills of metaphysics, obtains its sweetness solely from the intermingled ingredient of cruelty'.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ (Nietzsche, 2003)

III. Summoning

Poem

Suppose that grey tree, so nude
and desperate,
 began to waltz
slowly in time to something we
are deaf to in the thickening snow.

Would it be merely trying to get
warm and true,
 as it seems one
does while dancing,
 or would this be
an invitation from the inanimate
world our bones,
 trying not to ache
with foreboding, seemed to warn us of
in early childhood?

Then, unenlightened by desire and
satisfied by very real dreams, we
were able briefly,
 as from a window,
to look bravely upon the baroque will
of objects,
 not knowing, in our clever
smile,
 who really felt the cold.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Frank O'Hara, *Poems Retrieved* (City Lights Publishers; Reprint edition May 7, 2013)
Originally published 1977.

There is nothing so human as pure artifice. Decades before Graham Harman, and the other Speculative Realists, worked out their ‘Object Orientated Ontology’⁷⁰, Frank O’Hara had already counselled his readers ‘unenlightened by desire’ to ‘look bravely upon the baroque will/ of objects’.⁷¹ The distinguishing quality of O’Hara’s oeuvre, and what distinguishes the post-war American lyric more generally, is a discernibly Schopenhauerian tendency. O’Hara’s general ode is to the unthinking, the unmovable, the mindless will from which all matter is formulated and of which the human is merely a phenomenal manifestation. Frank O’Hara probes the noumena, ‘the thing as it is in itself’, matter in its own terms, which confound the organic three-dimensional architecture of the human brain. Another way of putting this: O’Hara returns poetry to nature, by which I mean the entirely inconceivable.

In his observing ‘that grey tree, so nude/ and desperate’ which begins to ‘waltz/ slowly in time to something we/ are deaf to’ O’Hara describes the brain’s proclivity to narrativize through language every phenomenon it observes; not least the phenomena of its own unknowing. Just as the architects and composers of the baroque period sought to exercise their technical supremacy by accounting for nature’s idiosyncrasies through weird, bulbous forms and disharmonious melodies, so too does the poet’s ‘baroque will of objects’ work to spin the very idea of unknowableness into linguistic formulation. O’Hara’s use of the word ‘will’, does not gesture towards a mysterious and unknowable ‘system’ but towards human yearning for mysterious and unknowable systems. This is what makes it baroque: it is a wholly artificial construction conceived to delimit the processes of knowing itself. The occultic science of alchemy failed in every area but poetry.

⁷⁰ (Harman, 2016)

⁷¹ (O’hara, 2013)

Mystery is in itself an instrument, one that is especially useful as intervention. If we acknowledge, as I believe literally every single human being does, however zealously or covertly, a universal system or some *law* which mediates and dictates ‘reality’ down to the subatomic level, then we must make an attempt at assessing its structure. As the *Kena Upanishad* asks: ‘Who sends the mind to wander afar? Who first drives life to start on its journey? Who impels us to utter these words? Who is the Spirit behind the eye and the ear? It is the ear of the ear, the eye of the eye and the Word of words, the mind of the mind, and the life of life’.⁷² What is *the mind of the mind*?

The homosexual, by whom I mean the exile who never quite reached exile, arose by way of response to the phallogocentric visual cultures of the early European baroque. He initially crept not from language, but shadow. This epoch formulated itself through chiaroscuro: the technical, medicinal and aesthetic innovations of the renaissance had reached their zenith and yet unimageable volumes of brutality and violence persisted, most forcefully in the emerging systems of imperialism and colonial extraction, upon which much of this innovation was premised, at least materially. We cruise the economy of shadows, driven by ‘the inanimate world our bones’ to scrape through ruins; the flapping ultramarine tarp, the knotweed pushing up through paving slabs, heaps of blood stained gold and alienated nodes of thought and the brilliant, countless shafts of light which work solely to draw you into the impenetrably dark spaces between them. It is an epistemology of interstices. I can only make my case for living by summoning the dead, and the fags don’t fuck like they used to.

Is there any significant difference between a lack of meaning and a surplus of meaning? Kenneth Anger doesn’t own a television or a computer. He despises the very concept. In an interview with Nicholas Winding Refn, he becomes briefly enraged at the very notion of a

⁷² (Mascaró, 1965)

television. He describes the sensation of watching television as one of being *overwhelmed* by the ‘great proliferation of images – it’s like a plague – a rain of too much...stuff!’⁷³ A ‘plague of images’ is an apt description of not only broadcast media (an increasingly, if not entirely, outmoded technology) but even more accurately describes the techno-dystopias of the smartphone and social media: a great proliferation of images interfaced directly into human neurobiology, intent on engineering distress. I make this observation to emphasise that the means in which we *receive* art have fundamentally changed from the year 1954, when Anger’s film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* was first screened. At first, it may seem surprising that the artist behind a film as visually discursive, ecstatic and exuberant as *Pleasure Dome* would be hostile towards the tempest of contemporary media but beneath the nominally chaotic sequence of images that compose the film is a deep, primaeval sense of order.

The film begins with Samson DeBrier as a, or the, creator god (he plays a sort of trinity of Shiva, Osiris and The Great Beast) waking up, applying his jewels and his make-up and performing, before a great mirror, a summoning which brings forth The Scarlet Woman, played by Anger’s longtime friend and mentor Marjorie Cameron. The Scarlet Woman initiates a parade of divine indulgence, *inaugurating* a new pantheon of the ancient Gods; those of lust, destruction, yearning and beauty.

What does the movie in your head look like? Is it a muted, if poetic, affair or does it veer towards grandiosity? How does it announce itself? As a horror movie, perhaps, or maybe more neo-noir. Does rain hammer down onto the never quite real city of your mind? What kind of protagonist are you? I’m sure it’s the complicated kind. Or maybe you’re more of a side character,

⁷³ (2015). *Nicolas Winding Refn in conversation with Kenneth Anger Part 2*. [online] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yVYExZj8XI&t=3s&ab_channel=SpaceRocketNation [Accessed 22 Feb. 2023].

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an observer, a surrogate for the audience. Is the movie in your head a tragedy or a tragi-comedy? It couldn't possibly be pure comedy, could it? Does the *you* in the movie resemble you, or act as a point of departure from the you you're stuck with, here? Or are you simply a lens? Is that thing you estimate as yourself instrumentalized through a sequence of images? Does the movie in your head coincide with your tastes, or, to be more accurate, the tastes you advertise publicly, or is it more sentimental, dare I say, *corny*? Does the movie in your head make you grit your teeth and curl your toes or does it open some valve deep in your heart? Were I to ask you to describe the movie in your head, would that be exhilarating or unbearable, or some strange synthesis of these feelings? Would it be like getting naked in front of a one way mirror? Would it be a scream, or a yawn, or a sigh?

What is a summoning? I cling to this denotation and yet the full function of its operation remains mysterious to me. It's said that Alastair Crowley once tried summoning his guardian angel at Boleskine house, overlooking the shores of Loch Ness. The ritual this requires is one of Thelma's more taxing and dangerous magicks. It takes months and involves a strict regimen of fasting and excess and then fasting again; a highly controlled system of modulating the realms of corporeal experience. Before getting to the angel one must first summon, and nullify, the twelve Kings and Dukes of Hell (as they are described in *The Book of Abramelin*). Should the ritual be botched, or prematurely terminated, these sub-dimensional beings, or some aspect of them, remain behind to torment the erstwhile sorcerer and haunt the site of their failed summoning. Kenneth Anger represented this ritual in *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. But these anecdotes do little to answer my question. What, or who, am 'I' summoning 'here'? Why can I not simply say 'intervention' or 'critique' or 'encounter', or use some other interchangeable scholastic noun? I suppose it comes from a reticence to renege on my passivity and to affect the kind of authoritative

position that affords me the status to ‘intervene’ at all. I write as a poet, before anything else, possessed of little critical impetus beyond ‘my wounded beauty/ which at best is only a talent/ for poetry’.⁷⁴

Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome is a film best approached as one might approach the cult of an Old God. There is a cosmetic influence it wields over our visual and cultural epoch, but the full force of its religiosity, and purposes and drives of its ritualistic function feel to me deeply primaeval. The film was conceived after Kenneth Anger attended a Halloween party called ‘Come as Your Madness’ and ‘everyone who came to this party imagined themselves as some kind of god or goddess, which maybe shows where peoples' egos were in the bohemian world in Hollywood at that time’.⁷⁵ Anaïs Nin walks out of the gates of hell with a cage on her head. She is playing the erotic Goddess Astarte (a version of Venus from various Middle-Eastern and North African pantheons). She reminds me of an inverted Komusō⁷⁶: pure ego baroquely centred and shamelessly exalted. *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), viewed today demonstrates a startlingly familiar series of visual signifiers, with its baroque trappings, cavalcade of eccentrically costumed and beautiful people and audacious celebration of narcissism: it positively screams ‘queer’ to the contemporary viewer. Would I dare suggest such a delineation is misconceived? Because the film is, of course, clearly and demonstrably *queer*. Apart from being one of the most important avant-garde filmmakers and occultists of the 20th century, Kenneth Anger is a man with a fake tan, a gorgeously lilting, percussive enunciation (an ‘Old Hollywood’ way of speaking), an inky ‘Lucifer’ tattoo across his chest, dyed black hair, a drive to become besotted with, and then

⁷⁴ (O’Hara, 1976)

⁷⁵ (Pratt, 2007)

⁷⁶ Zen monks of belonging to the now defunct Fuke sect who were recognisable by the baskets they wore over their heads, an act of ritual de-personalisation.

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abandon, dangerous young men (a one time paramour was Manson acolyte Bobby Beausoleil) and a proclivity for designer leather and Moët. Kenneth Anger is, as they say in California, a *flamer*. He has spawned a legion of brilliant admirers and cheap imitators; Derek Jarman admired him greatly and cited him frequently through idiosyncratic imagery, camera work and occultish tendencies. I doubt Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* would have looked the same had there been no Kenneth Anger, Nicholas Winding Refn's later career is peppered with direct quotations and the young artist Jenkin Van Zyl's work is so shameless in its appropriation, and exsanguinating, of Anger's visual lexicon that I can only conclude Van Zyl must be proceeding from a position of at least partial ignorance.

We all know that Glorious Monster, the graven faggot with its foam-latex face and jewel encrusted fingers and shimmering rags, mincing out of the pits of hell. We might not all know who exactly summoned it. Queer(ish) visual cultures are so permeated by Anger's style, especially by the visual grammar of *pleasure dome*, that we might confidently name the subconscious drive beneath so much contemporary film art as 'Angerian'. This is not to suggest my belief in some kind of *queer geist* or similarly absurd construction. Rather, I'm arguing that in our own time, defined as it is by *cultural amnesia* and punishing onslaught of incendiary, but impotent, rhetoric and overpowering, but meaningless, imagery, it is vital to try and locate the source of a particular visual cultural lexicon. Moreover, in my summoning, I cannot forsake the offerings, as much as they may horrify me: that terrible chiaroscuro of failing neon on clammy skin, that pit at the source of all you are, that loss; the sacrifice that's already happened.

What beautiful parade of monsters do you afford yourself? The movie in *my* head begins with a bar called 'Gorgeous'. A regional gay club typical of its age: some vague and sorrowful approximation of long dead babylon spreads itself over the dancefloor via spasmodic pink lighting,

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there was linoleum floor with wood effect, a few meaningless flags and rotating disco lights; the inevitable stink of bodies, piss and cum and sweat and shit. There were about twenty to thirty gay men (it was a Wednesday) on the dance floor, all drunk and many tweaking. Everything was drowned out by an efficacious smoke machine and under the bodies, and their offerings, a strange smell of melting wires. In short, it was typical of a certain species of gaybar; usually found in medium-sized, industrial (or post-industrial) working class English towns; nondescript, uncommunal; an altogether uncomplicated site in which men search for sex with other men and maybe score some drugs on the harder end of the party spectrum. I had two postcards in my back pocket, stuffed against a crushed ten-pack of Marlboro Lights: a Jenny Holtzer: *IT TAKES A WHILE BEFORE YOU CAN STEP OVER INERT BODIES AND GO AHEAD WITH WHAT YOU WERE TRYING TO DO* and Francis Bacon's two figures in the grass.

I tell this story in part to evoke the grottness of my own bildungsroman, but also because it was my first dalliance with the definitive aspect of queer life today: a fundamental sense of absence and the intensely human need to pile into that absence as much meaning as possible. This is another way of saying: the fags don't fuck like they used to.

The fags *are* fucking, don't get me wrong. But the way in which we fuck now has been transfigured into a morbid simulcrum. The contemporary gaybar, or queer bar (an increasingly ubiquitous rebrand), formulates itself as pure performance, a kind of anhedonic bacchanalia. This is especially true in the brutally neoliberal environs of London, where I live. People get drunk and high and fuck but there's an eerie stillness to the whole enterprise; an inescapable sense of *something* dead, something mindless; but mindless not like something organic, but like a machine. The pleasure and creative energies generated by the bacchanalia of the ancients have been supplanted by a force of aestheticized, performative, self-pity. They exalt their feeblest qualities

as if it were some kind of politically radical project, rather than total capitulation to the tenets of capital's theology. The feeling and visual grotesquery of sickness are constituted into a lurid pleasure. An imagined and idealised sub-culture finds itself linguistically subordinated into a mode of vile ekphrasis. The enigma of postmodernity has become excruciatingly lodged in the enigma of cultural identity; and it is through this phenomenon that I re-stumble onto a term I can only call 'queer poetry'. Cultural identity acts as a series of signifiers rather than a series of experiences; in this way 'queer poetry' operates more like a form of ekphrasis for an indirect sense of collective self rather than a concrete gesture towards any actual self. A uniform language comes to 'stand in' for the ensemble of gaybars, sweat, great sex, unrequited crushes, their attendant violence, pointed yearning and humiliation, grief and grief's thrill and the thrill of an imagined queer life. Even the most devoted scene-queen knows the gaybar isn't what it was, but rather a ghoulish copy of itself; depressed office workers and neurotic artists alike dancing and fucking the way they think it should be. There are now several coteries worth of young writers and artists who desire for themselves a position in this cloistered historical imagining and utilise a very particular, and repetitive, set of aesthetic signifiers so as to better advocate their own positions within it. We see, for example, a revival of certain AIDS era activist aesthetics; ACT UP's famous 'Silence = Death' slogan alongside a loosely defined anarchist politics and vaguely punkish personal style (dyed hair, leather jackets, piercings, stick 'n' poke tattoos etc) which apparently doesn't preclude working with establishment publishing or broadcasting bodies. In short, queerness has been transfigured into a notion enslaved to the idea of itself, a nebulous, yet oppressive, verbal approximation.

The music used in the original version of *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* is Leoš Janáček's composition *Glagolitic Mass*; a Catholic mass sung in Old Church Slavonic, 'Glagolitic' being the oldest alphabet indigenous to Eastern Europe. The composition is structurally baroque

(in the straightforward art-historical sense of the word): using highly controlled sonic modulation and dissonance to create an illusion of the organic. All those emotions associated with lack of control; joy, rage, sorrow; are carefully reproduced. Janáček was a folklorist and pan-slavinist devoted to the celebration and reclamation of an ‘ancient’ Slavic identity. If we’re being uncharitable, it would be easy to see Janáček music as a form of nativist propaganda: intended to summon up in the hearts of its audience the forgotten, unsullied landscapes and songs and poetries of the region today referred to as Eastern Europe. I hardly need to explain that such landscapes and song and poetries were only ever native to the realms of the modern imagination.

As Leo Bersani observes, the ‘homosexual is a failed subject, one that needs identity to be cloned, or inaccurately replicated, outside of it’.⁷⁷ The faggot is made real by its outsideness; outside even of itself. The inability to conceive errs it on endlessly towards self-production.

Faggots are categorically recalcitrant, cloyingly dialectical and yet impossible to reduce to abstraction (try as the discourses might). Frank O’Hara did not say: ‘I was made in the image of an abstract category,’ he said: ‘you were made in the image of god/ I was not/ I was made in the image of a sissy truck-driver’. The faggot is, and always has been, a response. This response may be some form of sloppy mimesis, after an idealised, fictitious version of the faggot’s self, or it may be enacted as a form of opposition to an authority, imagined or otherwise. The faggot is a frankly under-discussed species of fugitive, a sissy in motion; an exile streaming along a damp highway. The faggot is solipsistic; aristocratic even, if only in the principality of its own mind; self-contained in the most excruciating sense; mobilised by the forces of needing to be alone and needing to be the centre of attention. Inevitably, in the lead up to its apotheosis every faggot has been a quiet boy: the brooding loner, but the kind who wears lipstick to school. Furthermore, this self-

⁷⁷ (Bersani, 2022) p.14

production can only ever occur within the confines of an alien terminology devised to ordain the faggot's villainy. The artificial, medical and punitive, taxonomies which differentiated, legally and medically, the homosexual from the heterosexual, have not dissolved but been reconstituted and still demarcate every possible path. Which is another way of saying: I can only make my case for living by summoning the dead. And the fags don't fuck like they used to.

I think of those two fingers in the grass, awkwardly folded over those stale marley-lights and my adolescent buttocks. They were brought into their fleshy unlife the same year *Pleasure Dome* was first screened, Francis Bacon first displayed the painting as part of a solo exhibition at the ICA in 1955, where Kenneth Anger's films enjoyed their European debut.

Allen Ginsberg once ingratiated himself with Bacon in Tangiers and tried to commission from Francis a portrait of him and his boyfriend fucking, done from life. Bacon's response to this characteristically Ginsbergian proposition was: 'Well, this is going to be awkward, Allen, how long can you hold it?'⁷⁸ Assuming he was being serious (and he probably was), Ginsberg was unaware that Bacon rarely, if ever, painted from life. Even when painting a portrait on commission he would work from his own photographs of the model, no one would ever pose for him longer than it takes to snap five or six photos (he more or less implemented an opposite system to that of his close friend Lucien Freud, who exclusively painted from life).

So, stop me if you've heard this one before: Francis Bacon loved photography, moving and still. He lifted his imagery from photographs and film cells, ripped up magazines, catalogues, pornography and medical textbooks. One of the most formative moments in his life was the close-up of a screaming and wounded nurse in *Battleship Potemkin*. Online, you can find interviews with

⁷⁸ The Allen Ginsberg Project. (2014). *Francis Bacon*. [online] Available at: <https://allenginsberg.org/2014/10/francis-bacon/> [Accessed 7 Mar. 2023].

him from the 80s, his (often drunken) pontifications on nihilism and butcher shops and orifices underscored by ominous synth music. There certainly is horror to Bacon's oeuvre and it would be self-conscious to try and explain that away as if the haunted and gory qualities of his work detracted from its "value." But before the horror, came the baroque, and Francis Bacon was the last great baroque painter. He resisted any attempt to characterise him as an intellectual, or his painting as some act of spiritual inquiry. He described himself as 'unimaginative' and stressed the importance of his craft over any wider philosophical concerns. He read voraciously and he read the things you'd expect him to read; Nietzsche, T.S. Eliot, the Greek tragedians and so forth, but these texts were only ever treated as just another heap of raw materials from which gestures, signs and moments could be lifted. Interviewed by David Sylvester in 1966 he describes finding a book in Paris documenting diseases of the mouth and full of hand coloured photographic plates. He describes these images as 'beautiful', the same adjective he uses to describe chunks of pig and lamb hanging in the 'great hall of meat' in the food court at Harrods. This conception of beauty rests not on the reality of pustulant, ulcerated orifices and dismembered animals but on the reproduction of these things in artifice. Francis Bacon's erotics are crucially inauthentic.

To use a contemporary idiom, the baroque began as a mode of 'soft power' implemented by the Roman Catholic Church after the 19th ecumenical council in Trent, which lasted eighteen years (1545-1563). To put it simply, the council decided the church needed to enforce a cultural uniform as part of its Counter Reformation. This corresponded with huge developments in late renaissance engineering, technology and architecture as well a huge excitement of interest in occultish practices such as alchemy and the summoning of angels. Walter Benjamin observed in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* that the baroque is entirely alienated from the lexicon of symbols (unchanging, eternal, bound up with that now totally alien concept of the 'natural') and is

composed entirely from allegory, the art of the fragment; a poetic vernacular that could only be built from the 'heap of broken images'. The famously abstruse prose of this early work by Benjamin works towards a relatively simple thesis as to the nature of the baroque: that for all of its triumphs of artifice, architectural innovations, visual and aural alchemies and excessive opulence, the baroque was a process of memorialising a lost nature. It is a realisation that human consciousness has fundamentally altered and that there is no path back towards a more innocent past.

Francis Bacon's project, in so far as one can identify any kind of singular aim in his work, was to render into perfect stillness the trace of things. Just about anyone can connive the visceral; can conjure up an anxiety in the heart of their audience with graphic depictions of sex or violence. What differentiates Bacon from this more schlocky tendency of modern and postmodern visual cultures his baroque mastery of silence. I cannot ignore the forces that have driven me here today. From that piss soaked gaybar in the post-industrial midlands to the here and now. We can name it as 'lived experience', if you like, or 'fate', if we're to employ a more ancient vernacular. There is, I believe, a separate thread. This thread binds together that ever growing amalgam of lives, histories, visual cultures, literature and philosophy that we now, increasingly tenuously, estimate as 'queerness'; but which we could also call 'weird', 'subterranean', 'acroamatic', 'sibylline'.

Kenneth Anger originally intended *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* to be projected across three screens but swiftly re-edited the film so it could be shown in conventional cinemas. Rather than lose the surplus footage he superimposed it over the final nineteen minutes of the final version. The result is a beautifully controlled discordance, three heavenly spheres haunting one another; distinct, but inalienable, worlds occurring simultaneously. This filmic palimpsest becomes a metaphor for the way in which visual cultures are received today. At risk of enacting a

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queer-Baudrillardian turn right at the end of this essay, I think it's important to ask ourselves: how have the circumstances of viewing this film, or looking at these paintings changed since the mid-twentieth century? How do these visual cultures assimilate into our understanding of the 'real'?

Today, our fantasies are instrumentalised more than ever as modes of cultural production. I asked you, earlier, to describe the movie in your head. I asked you this because I didn't want to ask: 'what is it that you want, exactly?', as that question could never yield as interesting an answer. In one of his most famous aphorisms, Oscar Wilde said: 'A man is least himself when he speaks in his own person, give him a mask and he'll tell you the truth'. But the mode of sincerity Wilde alludes to here is dying, if not long dead already. I could never begin to consider where the 'I' begins and the 'mask' ends. Out of the many speculations I have presented here, there is a final one I take to be essential: my only true conviction is the inescapable grottness of my own soul. This sense of deviance and self-disgust have over time, and by unknown forces, been transmuted into a communion with the dead. In a typically baroque way I have over complicated the rudimentary system of my own misery, artficed it, woven it into song. After all, I'm a faggot, and the faggot is its own mode of thought production, an endless source of horror and delight and that delight that horrifies you and that horror that delights you and the only thing that remains unbroken is the wail of the dead: so consistent and uninterrupted that you begin to hear something that approximates melody. Just the score to your living all along. After all, does any part of you escape the movie in your head?

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