A Letter From The Editors

In the wake of a thrilling political climate, last year’s editors decided to change the focus of the journal so that it could better examine the nexus between literature and politics. This new direction culminated in events on Affect Theory and Occupy. As one of the only undergraduate literary journals in the country, our goal this year was to bring literature to the forefront and examine the ways in which literature itself can be revolutionary. Our events and papers provide frameworks for how to use literature to think about life, sometimes in the most hapless of circumstances.

In the midst of tragedy, writing can often be therapeutic. Both Jason Bell’s paper on Romantic nausea and Matthew Johnson’s paper on Paul Celan demonstrate how language can be used to cure or express the wounds of both political tragedy and gender alienation. Interested in how literature could bring about change, we interviewed the founders of Usbek & Rica, a magazine that investigates and imagines both a utopian and dystopian future. Utopian or dystopian works from Plato’s Republic to Orwell’s 1984 have demonstrated that imagining the political, either normatively or in revolt, cannot pass without literature. Revolutions are literary before they ever are political.

We also wanted to bring the focus back to undergraduates interested in literature, and to provide a forum where they could express their own voices and learn from faculty. In a university where professors’ research is often drowned amidst scores of press releases and website updates, we decided to organize conferences to present the fascinating new scholarship of Columbia professors. Nicholas
Dames spoke about his groundbreaking research on the emergence and development of the chapter, while Edward Mendelson analyzed the evolutions of persons and categories from Homer to Virginia Woolf. Both lectures revealed how any study of literature is integral to learning how we think and live our lives.

We must confess one thing: we started the year wanting to prove wrong WikiCU’s description of *CJLC* as publishing “insanely pretentious essays.” As a result, through our reviews, essays, and events, we have tried to treat a broader variety of topics that we hope will interest people regardless of their background. To broaden our readership, we have also established an online presence!

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the Columbia Department of English and Comparative Literature for their continued support of the journal. We would also like to thank our faculty advisor Nicholas Dames who has been an incredible resource throughout the publishing process. This has been a most fascinating year, and the staff of *CJLC*, with its wide-ranging set of passions and personalities, has contributed to the journal immensely.

Thank you to all of you!

Hélène Barthélemy and Meredith Foster
Editors-In-Chief
Hélène Barthélemy (CC’ 13) is double majoring in MESAAS and in philosophy. She wrote her senior thesis on the emergence of a segregated legal and carceral system for Muslim Americans in the US today. If she ever gets over the tragedy of graduating (and of leaving CJLC), she hopes to continue working on this project!

Meredith Foster (CC’ 13) is a senior in Columbia College majoring in English literature. She is particularly interested in Victorian novels and hopes to read many more after she graduates. As an editor, she has enjoyed reading and editing all the fantastic papers by undergraduates, all of which have greatly improved her own writing and thinking.

Managing Editor
Nathan Proctor (GS ‘14) studies English literature but also loves everything about the movies, from classic Hollywood films to eight-hour Japanese epics.

Layout Editor
Amna Pervez (GS ‘15) is an English and philosophy double major with a particular interest in mythology and American literature. After graduation, she plans to attend law school. Amna would like to thank the staff and editors-in-chief of CJLC for their guidance this year. She hopes you all enjoy reading the contents of this year’s journal as much as she has enjoyed putting it together.

Senior Editors
Mounia Abousaid (CC’15) is majoring in comparative literature and philosophy. She’s, predictably, interested in aesthetics and literary theory—and has a truly unhealthy fascination with Arthur Rimbaud. She also likes macarons.

Camille Albouy (CC’13) is a major in comparative literature and society, graduating in way too little time, with way too few future plans. It will certainly involve publishing (on real, authentic, old-fashioned paper!). She thanks the entire team of CJLC for all of the events planned throughout the year, and another great edition of the journal.
Peter Conroy (CC’13) is majoring in English and concentrating in philosophy.

Ethan Edwards (CC’15) is majoring in philosophy. He is also involved in WKCR and the philosophy journal The Gadfly.

Alyssa Garcia (CC’13) is an art history major from Los Angeles, CA. She focuses predominantly on Roman art and architecture, and is particularly interested in the reception of art in public spaces and in the ‘language of images’ both ancient and modern. This is her second year with CJLC.

Alia Massoud (CC’13) is double majoring in philosophy and Middle Eastern studies. She recently completed her senior thesis for the MESAAS department on the Khazar conversion to Judaism. Alia also writes for Kallimat Magazine, a publication of Arab culture and thought that seeks to develop a visual identity for the Arab world.

**Associate Editors**

Ian Campa (CC’14) is majoring in biochemistry and concentrating in Russian literature. As such, some of his favorite books include The Master and Margarita and The Brothers Karamazov. He hopes to bring his science background into use in the world of literature and literary criticism, whatever that means.

Angelina Eimannsberger (’14) is double majoring in comparative literature and political science and is a visiting student at Columbia College for one year. Her time in New York has been wonderful so far but she will go back to Germany this summer to earn her Bachelor’s degree at the Freie Universitaet in Berlin. All things American are fascinating to her, and the English language is among the most beautiful and expressive things she knows.

Ortal Isaac (GS/JTS ’16) is in the GS/JTS Joint Program. She is a hopeful comparative literature and society major at Columbia as well as a Jewish literature major at the Jewish Theological School. She loves all things language, poetry, or CJLC-related.
Faculty Advisor
Professor Nicholas Dames is Chair of the English department at Columbia. His research is primarily focused on the novel, particularly the novel and reading practices of the 19th century. His most recent book is titled *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neurall Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*. He is a founding member of the Society for Novel Studies.

Photography:
Marianne Barthélemy (BC’13) is majoring in political science. She is interested in photography and film.
PART • ONE
RE V I E W S

To Infinity, and Beyond: The Biography of David Foster Wallace
by Peter Conroy

The spaces in between, for example
by Nathan Proctor

Searching for Knowledge to Combat Chaos in Richard Ford’s
Canada
by Angelina Eimannsberger

PART • TWO
IN T E R V I E W S

Inhabiting Voices—And Leaving Them: An Interview with Colm Tóibín
by Hélène Barthélemy and Meredith Foster

Conceiving the Future, Between Imagination and Reality: An Interview with Philothée Gaymard of Usbek & Rica
by Hélène Barthélemy

PART • THREE
F E A T U R E S

Language’s Family Portrait: A Reproduction and Subversion in
Jacques Derrida’s Dissemination
by Sally Weathers (Haverford College)

Romantic Nausea and Literary Production
by Jason Bell (Columbia University)
Wounded Language: Paul Celan and German Poetry After the Holocaust
by Matthew Johnson (New York University) 71

How Does Demons Think?: History, Myth, Negativity
by Peter Conroy (Columbia University) 82

A Streetcar Named Desire and the European Gothic Tradition
by Zoey Peresman (Vassar College) 107

The Theatricality of Form and Language in Racinian Tragedy
by Vivian Wenwen Meng (Homerton College, University of Cambridge) 121
During my freshman year I fell in with a group of friends who decided to organize a secret-Santa Christmas party. Someone got me David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. Marveling at its heft, at the prospect of adventures-in-abstraction signaled by the cover’s scattered-clouds graphic—not to mention the display of doting reviews heralding the author’s virtuosic skill, unfathomable intelligence, command of wit, humor, tone, genre—I leafed through the first pages with the kind of relish that accompanies such experiences of initiation. It seemed at the time like a kind of arrival, an arrival among peers equally intrigued by that sort of fiction Wallace has since come (perhaps too simply or unfairly) to represent: cerebral and brawny with a feint whiff of rebellion, at once technically ingenious and spiritually tortured. Receiving the gift felt like being given permission to belong, to participate in the attitudes and interests and tastes of a select coterie. I was eager and naïve, simply glad of the fact that I could profess having heard of it before ("his prose is wild!"). I was glad to belong, even if I was slightly ashamed of my desire for acceptance, my longing for intellectual validation.
What made this experience seem exceptional has a lot to do with the fact that, at least for people my age, Wallace’s work represents the culmination—if not the combustion—of that literary movement whose name incited such prideful enthusiasm in the merry first-year: Postmodernism. For some of us the term might still provoke a bit of giddy excitement, associated with the promise of certain books (maybe less like uncovered-gems than you’d like them to be) to animate and pull apart a social world grown too comfortable in its ways, too accustomed to the conventional forms and tropes supporting its ideological framework. For many latecomers, Wallace’s work was a way in, an exposure, leading the curious to a retrospective investigation of his contemporaries and predecessors—Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo. There is, to be sure, a certain irony in the fact that most young readers enticed by the prospect of disorienting postmodern fun are likely to discover first (if indeed not only) such writers as have been progressively canonized by the literary establishment, making whatever rebellion their work may once have performed now almost entirely hypothetical. Subsumed and neutralized by the culture it once targeted for critique, “postmodernism”—along with its enjoyment and consumption—thus locates itself at the center of a cultural contradiction: that an affinity for what was once a force of subversion (to be sure, an accurate description of such eminences as Gaddis, Delillo and, yes, Wallace in *Infinite Jest*) has come to be seen, by many of today’s literary elite, as either a betrayal of youthful naivety or a signification of one’s complicity with fashions and styles of the time.

Of course, praise for Wallace’s work, in my opinion entirely justified, has never been short of coming; and those prone to be dismissive of whatever ‘Wallace’ signifies often offer their critique in a way that
addresses not only his work in particular, but also all else that falls under the rubric of ‘postmodernism’ more broadly construed.

And the attitudes underpinning this re-appraisal are often evident in their quiet, everyday manifestations: not so conspicuously dismissive as, for instance, Dale Peck’s infamous berating of *Infinite Jest*, but nevertheless quick to stake its claim to a more mature, less puerile kind of art. On the first day of class for a seminar I took this past semester, the professor started a casual, ice-breaking conversation by asking us—perhaps anticipating the embarrassed grins it would provoke—to name our favorite writers. I included David Foster Wallace in my list. Immediately after class I went to the bookstore to make a few purchases, and found myself in line behind two classmates. D.T. Max’s *Every Love Story Is A Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* had just been released and was prominently displayed on a table next to the registers. One classmate said something about not having read Wallace and about being curious to know his work after having heard all the hype; the other remarked, surely aware of my lingering presence, “he’s good, but I would never call him a favorite.”

This little scenario—which is entirely true, by the way—reads like something out of Henry James: I was like an Isabel Archer overhearing the affected discriminations of a Mrs. Touchett, condemned to embarrassment for failing to disguise—or properly exhibit—my tastes. My failure was not simply to have *liked* Wallace; it was to have admitted it so candidly, without having calibrated my response according to social setting. Mine was still the naïve enjoyment of the first-year at the Christmas party, unaware of the fact that to mention “David Foster Wallace” in a list of his favorite writers was tanta-
mount to a failure of social positioning, betraying, as it were, one or maybe all of the following: an out-of-date affection ("you still like that guy?") , an inability to see past the aura ("he’s not that great, after all"), a dubious claim to enjoy one of the more ostensibly ‘difficult’ popular authors of our time ("don’t be so pretentious"), or perhaps worst of all, it would seem like another literary taste on par with the enjoyment of thrillers and sentimental movies ("clearly you haven’t read so-and-so’s critique…”).

The point is that for a very specific social class, comprised mostly of young readers of so-called serious fiction, these kinds of games reflect and are partially responsible for attitudes that come to determine the fate, or define the legacy, of literary movements. And if the little game I’ve just recounted has a meaning, it’s something like this: ‘postmodernism’ isn’t considered all that cool anymore, and if you don’t know this, your tastes could likely be situated somewhere on the continuum ranging from lame to pretentious to sentimental.

Since his death in 2008, many retrospective responses to Wallace’s life’s work have appeared, from friends and fellow writers, many of which explore the importance of his work at least partially by situating him within a narrative about the fate of “postmodernism” today. Some of the most sensitive and valuable have come from his longtime friend and literary rival, Jonathan Franzen. In a personal essay entitled “Farther Away,” published by The New Yorker in 2011, Franzen explores his own emotional responses to Wallace’s death alongside that form of writing perhaps most suitable for incorporating and meaningfully engaging with human solitude and ordinariness and individuality: the classical realist novel. Franzen recounts a trip he took to Masafuera, an island in the South Pacific
Ocean, during which he read Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and mourned the death of his friend. And in doing so, he offers a meditation whose questions about how we deal with personal grief turn out to be equally about what forms we use to give meaning to emotion. Franzen writes, for instance, “Defoe had staked out the territory of radical individualism, which has remained a fruitful subject for novelists as late as Beckett and Wallace, but it was Richardson who first granted full fictional access to the hearts and minds of individuals whose solitude has been overwhelmed by love for someone else.” At the heart of Franzen’s piece is this kind of ‘love,’ and his implicit wager is that the realist novel has and may well still provide the most adequate resources for comprehending individual hardship. Thus his piece depicts Wallace as deeply flawed, and worthy of love not despite it, but because of it. Franzen’s piece does what good realist fiction does: it demystifies its subject while somehow in the process making its subject not less but more laden with meaning; by undermining the popular myth of Wallace-the-tortured-genius or Wallace-the-saint and making him more like Wallace-the-person, Franzen seems to express the conviction that what makes a life most meaningful usually pertains to the ways in which it is imperfect and flawed, and fought-out in the theatre of the everyday.

What Franzen’s piece indirectly addresses are the challenges and the complexities of biographical writing more generally, in which form and authenticity are less incidental considerations than ethical responsibilities. There is no neutral way to tell a story, and there is no way to divorce how you write or narrate a life—the form in which it’s told—from its meaningfulness. Unless you’re someone who thinks life is reducible to a curriculum vitae, life itself may be almost impossible to conceptualize without recourse to some narra-
tive model. And the form of the model—what meanings it suggests, which details it suppresses and includes, which moments it picks for beginnings and ends—inevitably commits the biographer to a stance and an attitude towards its subject, and perhaps even to an implicit world-view predicated on whatever form of life the biography represents. That is to say that the form of a biography is almost always bound to a personal ontology—after all, the presupposition of all biography is that there is an individual self, a coherent person, a life there to be discovered in the first place—and so the biographer’s commitments are just as much to his subject as they are to the metaphysical conditions of his genre.

This is one of the reasons why biography is a lot trickier than many readers might assume. Of course there is always a set of facts to be recorded, an objective actuality to a life that immediately lends material to the biographical record; but the work of the biographer is to organize and frame this materials in such a way as (hopefully) to reveal something true about an historically and culturally situated subject, about his or her identity within context, which requires above all the interpretation of facts. This is perhaps an obvious thing to say. But it’s an important thing to say to the extent that it helps remind us that biography’s commitments are never neutral, and that its chosen mode of interpretation and its form of writing in any single instance constitute something like an implicit claim (as we might say fiction does) about what matters in life, signaled by the way in which its narrative creates meaning.

That Wallace as a thinker was acutely aware of the swarm of problems surrounding these issues, evident as much from his nonfiction as from his novels and stories, makes D.T. Max’s biography of him
all the more interesting. Max gestures towards the difficulties of his own biographical project in the book’s epigraph, taken from Wallace’s short story “Good Old Neon,” which suggests the difficulty of grasping with words the inscrutable inner life: “What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant.” This passage contains some of the ideas that recur throughout Wallace’s fiction: the limits of language, the possibility of knowledge about selves and others, the recursions of consciousness turned in on itself, the necessary exclusions of form and the imponderable vastness of the human interior. By putting this quote right at the beginning, Max seems to be making a concession to the limits—and the risks—of biographical writing, and at the same time, sidestepping a potential irony: to represent Wallace’s life with pretense to fidelity and objectivity—or at least with a belief in the possibility of an objective, total account—would be in many ways simply to ignore the philosophical, theoretical, and linguistic conundrums addressed by and in Wallace’s work. And this, it seems to me, belies the potential paradox of writing a biography of someone like Wallace. Taking him seriously as an intellectual and an artist nearly precludes the possibility of writing a coherent, stable narrative of his life; in other words, the implications of those techniques and ideas in his work that might be deemed ‘postmodern’—narrative fragmentation, the destabilization of signs and signifiers, meta-fictional self-consciousness, a deconstruction of the author as persona—have to be pushed to the side or, more provocatively, presented by the biographical narrative as ideas to be overcome, outgrown, transcended.

Or at least this is one of the implications of Max’s biography, particularly evident when he addresses Wallace’s literary output. For instance,
in tracing Wallace’s writing career up to the point of *Infinite Jest*, Max’s narrative depicts a precious young writer borrowing and reverse-engineering the styles of his antecessors (above all, Thomas Pynchon), experimenting with the implications for fiction of Derridian theory, often in a sort of puerile, show-offish kind of way; trying on voices and struggling to find his own, Max’s Wallace works to discover a literary persona at the same time as he cultivates his own individuality. Of *Infinite Jest*, then, Max writes:

The work contains all three of Wallace’s literary styles, beginning with the playful, comic voice of his Amherst years, passing through his infatuation with postmodernism at Arizona, and ending with the conversion to single-entendre principles of his days in Boston. It’s a nice schema, convenient in its neat manner of segmenting Wallace’s life and mapping it onto his fiction. What might be especially frustrating about this gloss, though, is the way in which it seems too casually to risk subscribing to the intentional fallacy and inferring on the basis of literary structure the very psychic structure of a progressing author. It offers a narrative of maturation and traces Wallace’s development with an often-implicit, dubiously normative valuation of the more ‘mature’ writing of his later years. And this comes to inform Max’s reading of the novel, which is as an almost prophetic attempt to anticipate a future within which postmodern irony—the source of so much social malaise—gives way to an ethos of authenticity and commitment, embodied by characters like Don Gately.
The allure of this interpretation is that it would seem to go well with Wallace’s ideas as expressed in some of his essays, like the famous “E Unibus Pluram” or his review of “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky.” In each, Wallace envisions a society in which popular culture has subsumed the very germs of rebellion that once might have offered a means of protest. Wallace suggests that because the dominant culture in America has rendered irony devoid of its literary efficacy, its capacity to stir and jolt media-saturated readers, and left but one alternative: a form of fundamentally moral writing that begins to synthesize and transcend the irony/authenticity dichotomy, a sincere fiction unafraid to risk appearing naïve, or shallowly earnest, or banal.

There are, to be sure, traces of a certain kind of mythology underwriting this framework. And unsympathetic readers may be likely to detect an off-putting nostalgia or even a reactionary moralistic ideology at work. In any case, the kernels of ethical conservatism in Wallace’s work—an attitude that is more evident in contrast to the hostility it generates, such as Bret Easton Ellis’s twitter harangue which blasphemes “Saint David Foster Wallace” and his “new earnest irony-free fascism”—need not be the focus of a positive account of Wallace’s literary and intellectual contributions. Certainly Wallace’s sense of purpose in the later years, along with the ideal of sincerity he promoted around the same time, ought to be considered by biographers and critics and readers alike; and in light of his suicide, it seems undoubtedly important to make the effort to understand his life and work and their significance in terms of his own thought. Admirers of Wallace, like Zadie Smith for instance, have come out in support of Wallace’s literary mission by emphasizing precisely this: that Wallace’s fiction reveals something like a “way out,” as it were, of cynical detachment and a glimpse of some sort
of empathetic release from the solipsism of an alienating, atomistic form of life. But there’s a risk to this admiration, too. And it’s a risk that comes most fully into view when manifested as an understanding in Wallace’s biography: his life, it goes, follows a narrative of maturation, driven by his attempt to enact the morality his fiction endorses. The risk of accepting this view is that it may lead us to obscure or overlook the very complexity and ambiguity and ambivalence and moral uncertainty that preoccupied him as a thinker and a writer—and that was for so many of his fans the motivation to keep on reading.

This isn’t a risk Max succumbs to in any obvious way; but he does occasionally gives credence to it, as when he reads Infinite Jest as a sort of diagnostic and prophetic work ostensibly foretelling a mode of experience that will escape the entrapments of cynicism and ratify the sacred and the sincere. (This is an Infinite Jest of which Don Gately would be the Dostoevskyan hero.) I can’t help but read it differently. I see Wallace’s attitude in that work as not so much prophetic but rather as deeply sad and self-critical (it’s worth noting that, as Max points out, the original subtitle for the book was “a failed entertainment”). The book’s scope and confidence would indeed seem to announce a kind of triumph despite its sometimes-somber negativity; but more than implying the possibility of spiritual-cultural transcendence, it offers hope only in the attenuated sense of learning to cope with insurmountable contradiction. I don’t think Wallace admits such a strong teleological interpretation as Max suggests, for the novel’s disorienting circularity—entrapping the reader in a game whose fun begins to reproduce a sense of angst by recursively dwelling on unresolvable conflict—forms a world in which beginnings and endings are but the simple tropes of vacuous,
if superficially gratifying, fictions. One reason we might prefer an interpretation of the novel that would put Wallace on the other side of postmodernism, beyond the contradictions it deals with, is that it would seem to dissolve dilemmas of recursion and self-reflexivity, or at least it would give them a point. Thus there is a compelling simplicity to the familiar narrative dealing with Wallace’s relation to postmodernism: *Infinite Jest* marks the supernova phase of an exploding star. We might just as tenably read his work, however, as a compelling demonstration of the reasons why postmodern fiction might still offer a means of comprehending—or dealing with our inability to comprehend—a fragmented social reality of which there is no easy way out.

Because it implicitly engages a lot of these issues, Max’s biography offers many insights not just into Wallace’s career, but also into questions about what ‘postmodernism’ means and about what claims to relevance it might still be able to make. Too frequently the notion that ‘postmodernism’ is somehow passé or adolescent or trivial passes without contention. (I recently watched a Youtube video in which a philosopher, speaking at a symposium on the relevance of philosophy today, made flippant and condescending reference to all those ‘frou-frou’ French theorists—a pejorative that aptly illustrates a type of condescension that is as common as it is cloying.) Similarly, as in Max’s biography or in recent fictions like *The Marriage Plot*, narratives that deal with postmodernism in relation to individual lives make a sort of normative judgment about it according to more familiar models of personal development: postmodernism is basically adolescent. If you haven’t outgrown it yet, you will.⁵
As far as I can tell, the importance and significance of ‘postmodernism’ remains, or at least should remain, up for discussion. What is problematic is the kind of dismissive criticism that, however ironically, uses judgments about ‘postmodernism’ as a form of cultural capital: the ability to affect appropriate attitudes towards this or that category of art. This isn’t what Max does, but it’s certainly what the girl in line at the bookstore did. And her attitude was, in my experience, no exception to a more general rule, which treats ‘postmodernism’ as nothing more than another aesthetic category to be accepted, subsumed, and neutralized by far more familiar social codes for the profession of taste. Indeed, isn’t this the kind of condescension that these codes rely on precisely what postmodernism itself once targeted for dissolution? It seems to me that the irony of this situation calls for a reconsideration of what ‘postmodernism’ means and an evaluation of how our own attitudes towards it can function to reinforce the very cultural contradictions it once offered a way of understanding—or, to be sure, deconstructing.

NOTES
3. These of Ellis’s remarks were part of a stream of hostile comments made on twitter. See twitter.com/bretteastonellis, September 6 and 12, 2012.
5. In a recent issue of n+1, Nicholas Dames makes a similar point about what he calls “Theory” and its function in some contemporary realist novels: that the ideas that once critiqued capitalist society have in a lot of ways become the means by which individuals, or the characters of these novels, learn to cope with their position in it, rather than to change anything. Like Theory, “post-modernism” in Max’s biography often gets associated with a certain sort of immaturity, an inability to recognize reality as what it really is. (For Dames’s piece, see “Theory and The Novel” in n+1, no. 14.)
The Spaces in Between, for Example

Written by Nathan Proctor

Early one morning words were missing. Before that, words were not. Facts were, faces were. In a good story, Aristotle tells us, everything that happens is pushed by something else. Three old women were bending in the fields. What use is it to question us? they said. Well it shortly became clear that they knew everything there is to know about the snowy fields and the blue-green shoots and the plant called “audacity,” which poets mistake for violets. I began to copy out everything that was said. The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story. I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.

— Anne Carson, Plainwater

In an essay called anthropology, Anne Carson lingers ever so poetically on an everyday form most take for granted. “Water,” she says, “is something you cannot hold.” Even if you cup your hands, even if you squeeze your fingers tight, water will eventually slip out. That’s its nature.
Ever since I was introduced to Carson’s diverse body of work, I’ve found a similar resistance to my grasp. Poetry, translations, essays, criticism — they’re all there in some shape or form; yet every time I attempt to define or categorize or even talk about them, I’m inevitably met with a defiance much like water. Meaning — if we can call it that — is found in the cracks between, in the negative space, in the overlap, in the fading imprint her work leaves behind.

Hence the slippery phrase above, “Three old women were bending in the fields.”

Placed in between Aristotelian story telling and the author’s boredom, the three women oscillate in the reader’s mind between visibility and invisibility, between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility, and between form and content – that slippery yet undeniably rich place at the center of Carson’s oeuvre. By calling out poets for mistaking “audacity” for violets, Carson, while adopting what surely must be considered a poetic tone, separates her poetic voice from her critical voice.

Perhaps another way to look at her work is to consider it a slow process of erasure. “Husband and wife may erase a boundary,” she writes in one of her poems. “Creating a white page.”

Traditionally, to criticize a text is to make an argument or in some cases arguments that necessarily restrict the reader’s experience in order to guide him or her to a specific conclusion. Traditional criticism thus constructs guideposts for the reader. It’s important to note that traditional criticism does not claim to be an interpretation of the entire text. A text is too unwieldy, traditional criticism says.
ing must be attained by means of argumentative restriction. There are clear benefits to this process that lead the reader’s experience of a text through a series of marked guideposts. But what is lost in this process? What do we lose when we place a critical frame around a text? Can an argument or arguments be made while at the same time retaining that unwieldy structure of meaning inherent in literature and life? In a word, it could be said that Carson’s criticism brings into consciousness and into conflict the relationship between the reader of criticism and the generic conventions traditional criticism has set up, seeking not necessarily their destruction but their revelation by slowly erasing their boundaries.

*****

Carson received her Ph.D. in Classics from the University of Toronto in 1986, after having spent time at the University of St. Andrews studying Greek metrics and textual criticism. Her dissertation was published later that year with the title Eros the Bittersweet. Central to this work of criticism is the Greek poet Sappho, who, Carson notes in the opening sentence, was the first person to call eros “bittersweet.”

Drawing not only from the work of Sappho but also from Plato and Sophokles, Carson weaves together a manuscript that is at once scholarly and poetic thereby challenging and opening up the forms and expectations of both. For example, to explain the paradox hidden in the term “bittersweet” Carson geometrically unravels and then builds back up again a fragment from a Sophokles play. First, the fragment.
This disease is an evil bound upon the day.
Here’s a comparison—not bad, I think:
when ice gleams in the open air,
children grab.
Ice-crystal in the hands is
at first a pleasure quite novel.
But there comes a point—
you can’t put the melting mass down,
you can’t keep holding it.
Desire is like that.
Pulling the lover to act and not to act,
Again and again, pulling.

Hidden in the children’s pleasure is a temporal paradox. Holding the ice-crystal, the children’s hands begin to throb in pain thus creating a new desire: to put the ice down. But they can’t. The pleasure of their previous desire, to hold the ice, still palpably and persistently exists even though they realize that the longer they hold the ice the more their hand will throb. So they freeze, freeze in time. And here we have the paradox: the children wish and yet don’t wish to keep holding the ice, that is, they wish and yet don’t wish to be in two times at once—the moment they first held the ice and the moment they put the ice down. This brings Carson to geometry:

So, desire forms a ring around the small universe of its victims: the poet who strives to represent it, the children fascinated by its analog, the lover pinned in its compulsion.

At this point, Carson builds up layers of meaning—a topology of sorts—by placing the poet and reader in spatial relation to the poem’s hypothesis. After all, they too have desires. “But that universe does not form the outer circle of the poem,” she continues.
You keep climbing, for the staircase continues to spiral. The desire at the beginning of the poem is desire as transience… The desires at the end of the poem is desire as repetition… So time forms a ring around desire. Now, as you peer down through concentric circles of time, you see at the heart of the poem a piece of ice, melting. The startling likeness of ice drops into your perception with a shock like what the children must feel in their hands. The poem places you for shock, at an interface between two kinds of time, each of which spirals with its own logic upward through the structure of the poem, and through the psychology of desire. They seem to fit one within the other, yet there is a point where the perspectives become incompatible.

For Carson, reading is an education in desire. That’s why, through the erasing of boundaries, she draws the reader of her criticism, now dizzy, up a staircase not far removed in incompatibility and impossibility from an M.C. Escher drawing. Up to the handrail, the reader then looks down, frozen in time, down through the work, down through her self, and into a moment when the work and the self are one—when the work is the self, the self is the work, and a blank page is created.

*****

In some sense, criticism is a question of space—or, more specifically, of two spaces. Criticism is both a space in its own right and a creator of spaces that its readers populate and fill to capacity with their thoughts and ideas. But like photographs, these spaces have frames—that is, they have limitations. The theory is that these lim-
iterations are necessary. I watch a Western with a specific set of expectations placed on my vision like blinders, but as a result I can safely work through a specific set of social problems on the screen instead of real life. This process occurs even before I hit play. Merely reading the description puts me comfortably in the generic state of mind while at the same time sharpening my vision. But is this focus always necessary? Or might a vaster landscape reveal certain meanings and, dare I say, truths not only about the texts in question but also about our relationship to them?

Perhaps what Carson’s approach to criticism leaves intact is the multiplicity of meaning in literature. What ultimately seems at stake, then, is the genre of criticism itself. There seem to be instances when the pre-figured structure of the form is important—in the context of an academic class, for example. With expectations come certain conventions of reading that help one navigate the structured landscape of the form. But are there times when it’s more helpful to wander through the landscape without the fence posts? And if there are, how can we as students and future teachers cultivate such a wide-open pasture? Can academic argument still exist or are they mutually exclusive?

*****

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the poet H.D. positioned herself in between poetry and film criticism when, for example, writing in the July 1928 issue of the British film journal Close Up, she speaks of a central paradox that defines why she thinks Carl Theodor Dreyer’s silent film La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc caused her “more unrest, more spiritual foreboding, more intellectual racking, more emotion-
al torment than any movie [she had] yet seen.” The article is part mysticism, part criticism, part poetry, and part memory—with no lines drawn to demarcate the beginnings and ends of them. She instead leads the reader up a staircase.

Jeanne d’Arc takes us so incredibly far that having taken us so far, we are left wondering why didn’t this exquisite and superb piece of screen dramatisation take us further?

And so we freeze, split in two.

*****

Carson has similarly tried her hand at film criticism, albeit in a form more radical than anything by H.D.—so radical, in fact, that you might be hard pressed to call it criticism.

In Decreation, Carson writes a series of short works inspired by and in some way critiquing—that is, attempting to understand to make clear, to make visible—Michelangelo Antonioni’s notoriously difficult film L’avventura, especially the moments of sublimity that haunt it. Only one of these works is written in prose. In it, Carson asks the following question: what if the ancient Greek philosopher-critic Longinus was to dream from the viewpoint of Antonioni’s camera? While clearly not a direct work of criticism, what Carson reveals through her prose-like poem is a fresh and invigorating analysis of the sublime quality in Antonioni’s oeuvre. The critical move seems more than the mere application of analysis. Perhaps it’s more a process of critical mimesis. “Long bright dream of waking beside a man bleeding from his eyes,” she begins. “Clots of blood on his face and
through the bedclothes and him not inclined to take it seriously.” It’s the last part that strikes me as vintage Antonioni. Instead of writhing in agony trapped in a purely sensual moment, the bleeding man alienates himself from himself—acting aloof, almost jovial and remarkably calm to his horrid circumstance. This withdrawn indifference pervades most, if not all, of Antonioni’s work, making his films a horrifying yet beautiful critique of modern human existence that, in the hands of Carson, and after the bleeding man is finally convinced to see a doctor, turns back onto itself: “Sad now I turned my attention to the coffee pot with its missing parts and melted cord.”

Reading it and other works in Decreation, I can’t help but be placed in a critical relationship with Antonioni’s films—a juxtaposition you could say—that cracks open his work and sucks out its marrow in ways just as meaningful, if not more so, than any piece of traditional criticism I’ve read of his films thus far. So, as you approach the handrail one last time, a few stories off the ground, and peer down at the melting ice, and at the children frozen in time, and at your own hand clutching, holding, grasping, wanting to let go but unable to do so, I have a question I want you to ponder: what does the space in between look like, and how does it feel under your feet?
Searching for Knowledge to Combat Chaos: Richard Ford’s Novel *Canada*

Written by Angelina Eimannsberger


Richard Ford’s novel *Canada* is a captivating exploration of freedom and abandonment. It tells the story of a young boy Dell Parsons whose parents are imprisoned after having committed a bank robbery. A few days after their arrest, his sister Berner runs away without justification other than desperation about her parents’ failure to provide proper care. All Dell’s family members thus desert Dell as they are too occupied with their own struggles to commit to family life. In order to avoid being taken care of by American juvenile authorities, Dell moves to Canada where he is forced to grow up quickly and without a stable and supportive family. In *Canada*, normality and crime are juxtaposed, and the tension between both is examined through an intimate description of Dell’s stoic pursuit for autonomy.

The first part of *Canada* describes the life of the Parsons in the summer of 1960 in rich detail. Dell and his family live in Great Falls, Montana. On the surface all seems normal. The reader shares the perspective of Dell, which allows him or her to develop an intimate
understanding of Dell and his relationship to his family. Dell loves his family. He likes school. He is fascinated by bees, chess, and *The World Book*, which claims to list alphabetically everything that exists. This encyclopedia organizes his world and it feeds his limitless curiosity.

As a child, Dell believes that the future holds everything in store for him: adventure, knowledge, and integration into society. Dell’s childish hope contrasts with his emotionally distant sister, unemployed father who used to be a soldier, and dissatisfied mother who feels out of place in her own life. Dell’s parents are clearly unhappy with each other and with themselves. Before the robbery, which his parents commit out of financial and personal despair, Dell senses that they could make a greater effort at pursuing the “good life,” but remains a faithful and devoted son in spite of it.

Any facade of normality collapses for Dell after his parents are arrested, due to the shock of being betrayed by them and the knowledge that they willingly risked leaving him alone in the world. The mother commits suicide while detained and Dell is not in touch with his father after his release from prison. The breach between children and parents, caused by the parents’ utter incapacity to care for them, is irreparable. Dell’s state of being lost in the world is absolute as the comfort and security of childhood is no longer attainable. Growing up and being abandoned are congruent experiences for Dell.

Before her imprisonment, Dell’s mother arranges for her friend Mildred to take care of Dell to ensure that he escapes American juvenile authorities. As a result, in the second part of the novel, Dell moves to the Canadian prairie to live with Mildred’s brother Arthur Remlinger. Arthur, less than equipped to be Dell’s guardian, offers
a cold, miserable shack as Dell’s home instead of the hotel where he himself resides. The shack is located in the village of Partreau in which only two people live besides Dell. The profound emptiness of the prairie surrounds them. There is nothing but nature and some “empty, destitute houses.” About this life Dell thinks: “I was not exactly who I’d been before: a well-rounded boy on his way possibly to college, with a family behind him and a sister. I was now smaller in the world’s view and possibly invisible. ... My shack in Partreau was in fact what misfortune looked like. If I could’ve cried on those nights, I would’ve. But there was no one to cry to, and in any case I hated to cry and didn’t want to be a coward.” Dell must instead grow up fast, while desperately trying to organize a normal life for himself.

At the beginning of winter, Dell moves into Arthur’s hotel in Fort Royal. Dell perceives the change as an improvement because his life picks up speed: “The time that began for me in Fort Royal, in the Leonard Hotel, was in every way different from my lonely weeks in Partreau, and superior to them and felt — though it didn’t last long and ended in disaster--like a life I was actually living.” In this new situation, Dell develops a more intimate relationship with Arthur who at the same time remains a mystery to him. However, this slight sense of stability comes to a sudden end when Arthur repeats the act of abandonment of Dell’s parents. He kills two Americans and forces Dell to watch. Dell learns that Arthur is a political extremist and must again experience the profound shock of seeing a person he is close to turn into a criminal. Once again, his quest for a happy, normal life seems impossible. Yet, Arthur’s crime ultimately improves things for Dell because Florence, Arthur’s girlfriend, puts him on a bus to Winnipeg soon after the murders happen. In Winnipeg, Dell lives with Florence’s son and attends high school, both of which help him
return to the course of life he previously envisioned for himself.

The third part of *Canada* jumps to Dell’s days as a high school teacher close to retirement in Windsor, Ontario. He concludes that he has a good life despite all that has happened. Neither he nor his sister vesas children. This seems to be the sole manifestation of the profound unsettlement that their parents caused them both. Yet, Dell has found the normalcy he sought so desperately as a teenager. The last few chapters depict him as an old man whose voice has guided the reader through the story.

The narrative of *Canada* centers on a young boy for whom the intrusion of criminality, the loss of family, and the ensuing quest for normalcy are the most important factors. His life as a young boy is disrupted twice by crimes committed by the adults who were supposed to take care of him. The crossing of the border between the United States and Canada is particularly significant in the novel. Primarily, the trans-national trip signifies the loss of stability that Dell’s parents’ crime has caused. But while Canada is where Dell feels abandoned, it is ultimately the place where he can build a new life, and liberate himself from his past.

While the image of crossing the border and the title—“Canada”—invoke the significance of one’s chosen country, Ford suggests that the specific country where one resides actually does not cause or prevent unhappiness. Canada, although the country in which Dell ultimately finds peace, is no better than the United States. Crimes that bring life to the brink of disaster happen in both countries. Dell stays in Canada, rather than the United States, largely because bad personal and familial memories are attached
to the latter. Thus, while the desperation of Dell’s family might be particular to American society, the freedom of Dell’s life as an adult, for Ford, is doubtlessly an individual achievement that is not predetermined by national conditions. Interestingly, Dell lives the “American dream” in Canada. While living in Ontario, Dell uses the Detroit airport when he travels, which is symptomatic of his relation to places: he deals with them in the best way he can, but he does not bring an ideology to them. *Canada* thus makes a strong statement about personal freedom as Ford suggests that no country in the world, not even the United States of America, can set someone free if they do not embrace their individual freedom.

Instead, in *Canada*, Ford builds meaning not through changing nationality or one’s external conditionals, but through the personal acquisition of knowledge. The freedom from domination, from state authorities and from adults who commit crimes, are the central struggles of Dell’s youth. Yet as he matures, Dell commits himself to learning. Knowledge becomes his life’s central occupation. When Dell first comes to Canada, he finds fulfillment in pretending to have written *The World Book*. To collect and create knowledge gives him purpose. Similarly, as a high school teacher, Dell establishes a meaningful life for himself through knowledge. His students benefit from his life experience and he can overcome the confusion of his youth by using it as a basis of knowledge. Dell represents two core values for his students: the quest of knowledge and the search for a good life. His stoic pursuit of both—under a most adverse set of conditions—stays with the reader for a long time after s/he has finished reading *Canada*. 
I was interested in the chronology of Testament of Mary: you place Lazarus’ rising just before the Cana wedding. Was that a deliberate challenge to the Bible’s chronology?

No. I needed not to follow the chronology of anybody because all the chronologies are different. It is only really John who has the Wedding Feast or Lazarus. So since the others didn’t, I thought, well, there is no absolute rule in this. And also if you’re writing a novel, you just need this to come before that, because
I could get more in. You just need to follow your own instincts rather than following anything else. But I did take liberties.

**Why did you choose to take on the voice of not only a woman, but the biblical figure of Mary?**

I had been thinking a lot about the Greek characters, about Antigone, Electra, and Medea. I found those presences very powerful. In other words if there was a production anywhere on them, I would go to it. I realized that sort of voice in a way makes its way into our time in the guise of Sylvia Plath, Louise Glück. It’s not as though it is lost. Well if you did it with Mary, it would be the only voice… well I couldn’t really use a meek humble voice; it would have got me nowhere. The idea that she was traumatized and that it was afterwards [after Jesus’ crucifixion]. That was something I could work with. But it had to be a voice I could work with.

**We hear about Daniel Day Lewis practicing his Lincoln voice. How do you do your Henry James voice as opposed to your Mary, for instance?**

I think it’s slightly like that—that you really inhabit something for a while so you couldn’t keep two going at the same time. It takes you awhile to finish up. I’ve probably finished up with Mary now because the play is opening this week. This morning we sent off the final draft of the play’s text to the press. There really won’t be any changes to that. So that was a big moment this morning at about 8 o’clock.

**Was it scary?**

It wasn’t scary as much as an enormous relief. Yes, you inhabit it. You attempt to live it. Not really in your daily life, but you could
go back to it at any moment and fit a sentence into it without any difficulty. I noticed, for example, when we were in rehearsal and somebody, for example, the director would say “look, could a line come in here?” and she’d give me an example. And I’d say “hold on you need to give it to me” because she wouldn’t have the rhythm and I did. I was the only person who had the rhythm.

**Is it hard to give the voice over to an actor?**
Yes, not hard as much as you have to be absolutely determined about it. You are doing this and therefore it is up to Fiona Shaw how she wants to interpret the line. You can never tell her. It would never do for an actor or an actress to be told this is how you should say this line. You should only say it if they ask you. If they need to know something about the line, then you tell them. You would never interfere. You must allow their role as an artist to emerge without trying to snuff it.

**So you have to give up something?**
Yes, you certainly have to give up control, but you also have to give up a sort of power. In other words, yes, you wrote it and, yes, you have that interpretation in mind, but you must allow her full freedom.

**Along with your own insightful literary criticism, one of the best parts of New Ways to Kill Your Mothers is the wealth of funny letters exchanged between writers such as Yeats, James, Mann with their parents—was this the motivation for the book or a surprise as you embarked on the topic?**
No, each thing happened on its own. I had to give a lecture at the Yeats Summer School. They had a huge amount of Yeats correspondence and so I could have done anything. I went to look through them. I had
to give this lecture so I better work out some subject. I discovered
that Yeats began to write to his father about his own writing and I
discovered that no one else had covered this… It isn’t in anyone
else’s book. So I simply began tracing this in every letter and every
reply. Some of the pieces that were in that book were written for
different occasions and then put together in a book. It wasn’t as
though I had an idea for a book and then wrote those pieces. It
was that I had the pieces and then I put them together in a book.

So what about that topic continued to interest you?
Then when I came to do that lecture on Amherst on artists
and mothers, I wrote a long piece that I used at the beginning
of the book. But actually these pieces were there for
some years without me knowing how I would re-treat it.

Does your experience at Columbia influence your writing?
Yeah. Oh yeah, absolutely. That close reading and attempting to
make commentary on a text sharpens you and gives you an insight
into things. It makes you alert. Instead of spending two hours this
afternoon wandering around the streets I will be in the class with
this book and we will be really seriously looking at it. Everything
you say has got to be somewhat intelligent or relevant or serious
and that’s really good for me.

Do different places influence your writing?
A few places like Barcelona, but not many.

Not New York?
No but New York will come. New York is coming in slowly. New
York is beginning to appear, but it takes years.
Conceiving the Future, Between Imagination and Reality: An Interview with Philothée Gaymard of Usbek & Rica

Conducted and translated by Hélène Barthélemy

In the US, the future is most often invoked to denounce the drifting of the present. Critical scholarship reminds us that we live in a colonial, violent, and Orwellian era of inequality and injustice. In Paris, a magazine called Usbek & Rica (http://usbek-et-rica.fr/) was started by a young graduate, Jérôme Ruskin. It aimed to start cogitation on the future, enthusiastically enticing its readers to take control of it. Melding fiction and fact, it produces a wide array of scenarios for tomorrow. U&R imagines how trends such as augmented reality, the return of localism, or paper scarcity will or can influence our lives. All the while, it provocatively studies the feasibility of key social solutions, such as the closing of prisons and universal basic income. Three others have now joined Jérôme, making U&R a vibrant and dynamic intellectual production. The Columbia Journal of Literary spoke with one of these editors, Philothée Gaymard.
How did the idea for *Usbek & Rica* come about?
Jerome wanted to make a magazine to democratize knowledge when he was at EHESS [Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, a graduate school in the social sciences], to allow knowledge to leave the classroom, where it was contained only between professors and students. At the beginning the magazine was cultural but then the theme of the future came about unexpectedly.

For a futurist magazine, it’s interesting that you decided to choose print over digital?
Jerome has a very strong attachment to graphics and to beautiful things in general. We believe in the value of permanent objects that you can read and reread according to your desire. He wanted to produce a magazine that you could place in your library and preserve, and refer to whenever is needed. His aim was to produce an aesthetic object. The magazine is a quarterly, which also allows us to spend more time designing it.

Is *U&R* successful?
It’s working quite well. We used to sell a 200 page magazine-book but decided last year to switch to a forty-page magazine format, which is proving very successful. It was also cheaper and allowed many more people to have access to *U&R*. We organize monthly events and they are now always packed with people. The number of sales is also stabilizing. On the side, we work with a variety of firms for which we write magazines that help them think about how to innovate. This helps us fund the quarterly *U&R*. We are also currently producing a series of books: *the World Explained to the Old!* After a series on Facebook, Lady Gaga, violence, and solitude, I am writing a book on vintage.
Do you think *U&R* has a unified vision of the future?
No, the future is vague and always open and this is what we hope to emulate. We always look at different paths for what tomorrow could look like. I think we go beyond traditional cleavages: for instance, we don’t have a clear political line. There is no one way of reading *U&R*. Of course our method is in some ways consistent. There is a trend in what we publish: we are mostly optimistic. We don’t necessarily write about the impending future but about the desirable future. We are enthusiastically seeking solutions.

So do you think you achieved the democratization of knowledge that you strive for?
It’s hard to establish. We have the impression that the topics we treat are constantly on the rise, but that might be because we have a tendency to see them everywhere: the rise of a social, democratic, local movements, the liberation of the individual, the return of morality. Perhaps our vision is a bit biased. But these topics are extremely rich and spark discussions. People want to read enthusiastic propositions about the future, and this is what *U&R* offers them.

Since *CJLC* is a literary magazine, I was wondering how you imagined the literature of the future. Some say, the literature of the future will only be science-fiction. Do you agree?
I’m not sure but I imagine it more as a change in form than a change in content. I really don’t think that literature will become exclusively science-fiction. With the development of e-books, images, sounds, and hyperlinks can be inserted within a text, creating a multimedia literature. This is used for scholarly texts to insert graphs and data in a book without crowding the page. But I think it could bring about a very creative change in literature and poetry for instance, by changing their form radically: inserting images, sounds, videos and integrating them in the text could challenge its very linearity.
Language’s Family Portrait: 
A Reproduction and Subversion in 
Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination*

Written by Sally Weathers, Haverford College

1. Introduction

Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination* mounts a deconstructive assault inside Plato’s *Phaedrus*, unraveling and reconstituting Plato’s dialogue out of its own unloosened threads. In one of its major analytical moves, *Dissemination* rehearses and reinterprets the metaphorical figures of the ‘mother’ and ‘father’ of language that appear in the *Phaedrus*. The Derridian reiteration of these parental figures in the *Phaedrus* presents linguistic generation as a reproductive process carried out by heterosexual actors. However, as its title suggests, Derrida’s text primarily focuses upon the role that paternal bodies play in conceiving language and seems not to award the mother’s procreative contributions equal attention or prestige. Derrida admits of Plato’s works, “[They are] all about fathers and sons…about glorious legitimate sons, about inheritance, sperm, sterility. Nothing is said of the mother, but this will not be held against us [i.e. against both Derrida and Plato].”
Interestingly, *Dissemination’s* (and the *Phaedrus’s*) unequal treatment of the mother and father appears to clash uncomfortably with the Derridian text’s parallel reiteration of the Platonic ‘pharmacy.’ The *Phaedrus*’s repeated reference to both remedial and harmful narcotics symbolizes an environment of precarious and evolving differences between so-called ‘opposites,’ a site of unavoidable side effects and of conditional statuses. In short, the very concept of the pharmacy suggests that no mother could be held entirely distinct from a father, nor could any father assume a status perpetually superior to that of the mother. Instead, the Derridian pharmakon, or ‘drug,’ reveals language’s mother and father, often used by Derrida to approximately represent language’s signifiers and signifieds respectively, as fundamentally constitutive of one another rather than as polarized opposites. Thus, a review of the Derridian pharmakon raises puzzling questions as to why *Dissemination* would betray what appears to be the underdeveloped shell of a vertically ranked binary within the conceptual context of the Platonic pharmacy.

‘Underdeveloped’ may be precisely the notion that proffers a viable explanation. *Dissemination* proposes that, in the process of uttering any spoken or written linguistic unit (any word), possible meanings are violently pulled off and weaned away from the signifier in order to create a given linguistic message; the message in question comes into view when the specific, contextualized moment of a given utterance consolidates and limits the range of signifieds that may aptly adhere to the words uttered. However, these moments of linguistic lucidity are never fully developed insofar as they are inseparable from the lingering residue of the infinitely differing possibilities of interpretation lodged in the pharmakon. Offered and received in contextualized moments, the deconstructive process of *Dissemina-
tion, a linguistic work, cannot escape the adherence of a trace, in this case the mother, even given its awareness of the pharmakon. The mother is a residue that is impossible to extricate from the father and is always ready, in a hospitable context at a fortuitous moment, to almost fully actualize herself and to subordinate the father (in an impermanent and non-absolute fashion) to the supplementary role that she previously occupied. In short, the conceptual tension motivating this study does not undermine or otherwise inhibit Derrida’s work. Instead, Dissemination demonstrates that even the most ‘deconstructive’ of linguistic projects cannot escape the potential for subversion that lies dormant within the Platonic-Derridian pharmakon. In fact, such a potential for subversion characterizes articulations of semantic meaning.

2. The Derridian Reproduction of Plato’s Portrait: Recognizing a Tension

Dissemination’s recapitulation of the Phaedrus’s ‘father’ symbol insinuates that the paternal figure’s endowment to his linguistic child also constitutes it. Indeed, the endowment primarily confers upon language the gift of identity, and through identity the father passes to the son the gift of being realized in a state of substantiality. Dissemination aligns “the good (father, sun, capital),” with the “hidden illuminating blinding source of logos.”6 Although the Greek logos, as the Phaedrus utilizes the term, is associated strictly with reasoned thoughts and spoken words in opposition to written texts, Dissemination’s deconstruction of ‘writing’ concludes that the parental relationships that exist between language and its origins are fundamentally similar with regard to every type or mode of language.7 Thus, when Dissemination references the ‘source of logos,’ this term encompasses the spring of all language.8 Indeed, the terms ‘sun’ and
‘capital’ position the ‘father’ as fundamentally life-giving with respect to language. The ‘sun’ is an energizing, generative actor in the creation of the child; it offers the warmth, light, and energy that constitute essential ingredients to the lives of most organic beings. Lacking a symbolic sun, language would experience no growth and might even starve to death. Without the sun’s ‘illuminating’ effects, all would be obscured and ambiguous, including linguistic meaning. Therefore, the father is an animated, pro-active figure feeding the child essential nutrients, or the meaning that constitutes language, and thus largely creating language.

The term ‘capital’ clarifies the father’s significance. This economic vocabulary connotes language’s means of production, a term that is often associated, in Friedrich Engels’ materialist theory, with live-stock, or with the creators of consumer products that not only provide the nutrients and amenities necessary to human existence, but also promise a profit. Profit may be compared linguistically to the value of words, their meaning or significance. Capital also encompasses technologies and industrial production systems, i.e. the mechanisms that imprint upon, shape, and structure raw materials. As such, the father actively defines the very essence of a given thing in as far as, prior to being molded into a certain form or structure, the thing in question does not have an identity that could be illuminated or obscured. Thus, the father elucidates linguistic meaning to a strong enough degree that it is possible to say he vigorously gives his child its signified(s), its necessary ingredients, and thereby brings language into an actualized state, into substantiality.

In comparison, Dissemination’s mother is marked by her formless proximity to absence, and by her passivity. In Dissemination, the
mother is aligned with the “matrix, womb, or receptacle that is never and nowhere offered up in the form of presence, or in the presence of form since both of these already presuppose an inscription [by the father] within the mother.” Given that the ‘presence’ refers to almost nothing when the nature or identity of the thing in question has not even been established—i.e. when ‘thinghood’ is not secured—the mother, too, is almost nothing. Nonetheless, language has a mother, or an element of its construction that the father does not supply, and thus Derrida and Plato’s texts speak of her with regard to her child: she is “The ‘Place,’ the ‘locus,’ ‘that in which things appear,’ ‘that upon which,’ they manifest themselves,” or in other words the “‘impression-bearer,’” the “‘formless base,’” “the completely inodorous substance on which the perfume-maker can fix the scent.” In these examples she is likened to a medium, but she is not precisely this, for she is not precisely anything in the fullest sense of being. Her role serves as an acknowledgement that the father’s sperm must inscribe something, but exactly what is inscribed or cut off and distinguished from ‘other’ things is not apparent prior to the inscription. And so she remains nearly absent except insofar as she may be grasped through an understanding of her potential to perform a certain task, i.e. the expectation that she will be “receiving” something with form and meaning. 

Several elements of Dissemination’s description of the parents orient these two figures in a relationship of inequality. As has been seen, the father performs the inscription, the potential for which serves as the condition for the possibility of the mother herself. Lacking either the father or the mother, language could not come into being; but without the father, the mother dissolves into total absence and nothingness, thereby establishing the father as the more fundamental of
language’s parents, the one that is more prior. In one of the text’s most blatant acknowledgements of this disparity, the word “good” is iterated beside the terms “father, sun, capital” in parentheses, thereby positing with what sorts of signifieds \(^1\) ‘good’ may signify,\(^1\) and positioning the father figure within that list.\(^15\) Indeed, it is difficult to imagine an interpretation of the Platonic parents in which a father associated with ‘capital’ and thus with the production of profit and value did not grant a critical weight of importance to the paternal figure. Thus, the Derridian-Platonic prioritization of the father over the mother is apparent throughout *Dissemination*’s exploration of the two characters.

It is the Derridian reiteration of the *pharmakon*—which occurs simultaneously with the description of the mother and father in *Dissemination*—that seemingly creates a friction between the hierarchy outlined above and the deconstructive approach\(^1\) illustrated throughout much of the rest of the text. *Dissemination* identifies the notion of the *pharmakon* in several seemingly disparate moments throughout the dialogue that constitutes the *Phaedrus*. In recounting a legend to the character of Phaedrus, the Platonic text’s version of Socrates recalls the claim that writing offers a “cure” or *pharmakon* to memory loss and to the errors that frequently arise from it.\(^17\) However, earlier in the *Phaedrus* Socrates relates another story in which the legendary princess of Athens is killed “while playing with the Pharmacia, when a northern gust carried her over the neighboring rocks.”\(^1\) Thus, the *pharmakon* reiterated throughout the Platonic text contains the potential for vastly differing effects and outcomes. It is the source of healing remedies but it is equally the source of terrible harm, and even of death. The *pharmakon* achieves its remarkable potential for giving rise to seemingly disparate phenomena through the full force of non-pres-
ence. Indeed, the *pharmakon* constitutes nothing whatsoever except insofar as different possible elements of its composition have the potential to be actualized more fully than others in various contextualized moments. As such, every seemingly firm characterization or deceptively solid and unchanging identity may be traced back to an origin in which opposites are not essentially opposed to one another, but rather derive from precisely the same place or formless arena. In this arena, the characteristics of the binary’s elements are not separable from one another’s, and, insofar as this is the case, these characteristics do not even exist yet. Thus, elements that appear to be fundamentally opposed and distinct from one another are revealed to be only superficially differentiated within the *pharmakon*. The projection of a hierarchy onto this already tenuous series of distinctions, therefore, represents an *additionally artificial* achievement of human efforts to divide, organize, and thereby pull certain possibilities out of the basically formless and unsubstantiated reaches of the *pharmakon*.

It is worth pausing a moment to briefly sketch the powerful implications of the Derridian *pharmakon* for the Platonic mother/father relationship. It appears odd that language’s origins would ever be divided in two by a text that propagates the view that the ultimate origin or source of identities consists of a sort of low ground where all distinctions collect and mix completely together to the point that everything (now, however, an ‘everything’ that has lost all the thing-hoods of which it was composed) is completely indistinguishable from everything else. By preserving the Platonic text’s hierarchy, *Dissemination* appears to contain an impasse between the notion of *pharmakon* and the concept of a familial-linguistic hierarchy. The remainder of this study will be devoted to re-interpreting Derrida in
such a way as to move beyond this seeming impasse. Indeed, this re-interpretation will a) subvert the hierarchy in question, b) thereby demonstrate the precariousness of the mother/father power dynamic, and c), as a direct consequence of b), expose the hierarchy’s basic affinity with the pharmakon.

3. A New Reproduction and An Inversion
To a certain degree, the very act of altering the pharmakon by pulling out certain elements from its formless reserves also implies retention of it. In other words, nothing, least of all the pharmakon, can actually ‘be altered’ without an attendant reiteration of itself. Thus, when an author or a speaker dives into the pharmakon’s formless pool and retrieves a non-naturally differentiated element from its depths, the spoken words or written texts that result from the endeavor cannot fail to retain a trace of the pharmakon’s infinite number of other possibilities. The Platonic drug inevitably threatens ‘side effects,’ an arsenal of infinite differing possible consequences, which materialize to varying (always incomplete) degrees simultaneously with the primary phenomenon. These alternative possibilities wait for a context that will violently force their more salient features to the fore. They haunt the sidelines in the meantime, however, because their features are intrinsically constitutive of those of the primary one, and vice versa. Therefore, even the linguistic expression’s ‘primary’ meaning in a given context is not actualized fully because inseparable constituents or necessary “supplements” to its full force are contained within the infinitely many other elements that are de-emphasized in the act of producing a linguistic expression with a clear, central message.19 As a result, every utterance harbors the shells of other deferred and suspended meanings that cannot be severed completely from the nearly fully crystallized meaning that the current
utterance, the utterance as it appears in this context at this moment, temporarily conveys.

The notion of the indispensable supplement presents an understanding of the mother not as a categorically subordinated figure, but as a character that importantly constitutes the father. She has only been sidelined from what is apparently ‘his’ spotlight on a temporary and contingent basis. A second reiteration of the mother and father illustrates the similarity and reversibility of their roles. In describing the mother and father metaphorically, in terms of a symbolic family portrait in which they both appear, Dissemination includes a passage that reads:

And if one looks hard enough as in those pictures in which a second picture faintly can be made out, one might be able to discern her unstable form, drawn upside-down in the foliage, at the back of the garden. As excerpts quoted earlier also suggest, the mother is a near non-presence in this image. She stands to the side, obscured by a tree, and even upside-down. Although it can be assumed that the father occupies the foreground, he remains absent from this passage. She is portrayed in relation to the father, although he is never named, and it is in the negative space created around her depiction that we understand the father to be central to the image, and, by that, the central subject. He is the ‘first picture,’ and defined by all of the characteristics of prominence that she, according to the text, is not. It is in this seemingly most polarizing and hierarchical of descriptions that we can first tease out the threads of a mother defines the father, that makes his position within the text possible.

The necessity of the mother to the family portrait, indeed the father’s dependence upon her, is evident, like the mother, in the background and the details framing Derrida’s text. Dissemination describes the
“source of logos,” or the origin of language, as “blinding,” as a phenomenon that cannot be encountered without a refractive mediation, without the protection of some shade.\(^{21}\) It is of some significance then that the mother in the family portrait hovers in the shade of a tree where she is protected from the sun, from the overwhelming face of language’s origins. In this image, however, the father is not the sun. The sun, according to *Dissemination*, is “hidden” even as it illuminates. The father, like the mother, is simply an image in the garden. Unlike her, however, he is standing upright whereas she is depicted on her head. Unlike her, he represents a strong substantial presence in the scene. She blends with the foliage — it is difficult to discern where the mother ends and the tree begins.

To develop these observations further, it is helpful to align them with the passive, near absent mother and substantial, life-giving father outlined earlier. As noted, the mother’s status as “that in which things appear” and the “formless base,” suggests she is actualized by the activity and form-giving inscriptions of others, namely of the father.\(^{22}\) Lacking their formative influence, she constitutes nothing more than a materiality that contains the potential for instantiation in various forms; she is only mildly distinguishable from full non-presence in as far as the potential for the inscriptive gesture, for the dissemination of sperm into her, opens up the theoretical possibility that she may one day actualize as a “womb.”\(^{23}\) However, *Dissemination*’s family portrait describes a mother that, even in her insubstantiality and near absence from the entire scene, describes and outlines the shape of the father, a father that is invisible except in relation to her. His formlessness without her reverses the hierarchy that superficially assaults the reader upon a first reading of the text. As such, this subtle moment of power and initiative demonstrated by the mother
betrays the more essential manner in which the mother and father’s relationship displays a mutually constitutive dependence rather than an absolute reliance of one upon the other that would subordinate the former (the mother) to the latter (the father).

To fully demonstrate this reversibility that betrays the mother and father’s inherent (yet incomplete) sameness, it is possible to reiterate the images of ‘sun’ and ‘capital’ versus ‘receptacle’ and ‘matrix’ in such a way as to invert the relative importance associated with each pairing and thereby obscure distinctions between the four terms. The sun, indeed, infuses language with its energy, feeding and illuminating the signifieds associated with different words. However, the sun, like sperm, accomplishes nothing when it shines upon a seedless, infertile ground, when it cannot find an appropriate receptacle or when there is no place, no matrix, upon which it may shower its bounties. A motherless signified, therefore, never achieves substantiality. Its presence, in the absence of an appropriate container, amounts to partial absence. Furthermore, the mother, in as far as she is analogous to a medium and she performs, among other roles, the function of a medium for the filial inscription, determines the texture, the color, the malleability of the linguistic child. In other words, she determines the child’s characteristics that the father, in his insatiable effort to emphasize certain aspects of the utterance and thereby clarify its meaning, cannot afford to pay a great deal of attention to. She decides the color of perfume, the texture of an image, the shape that a liquid takes as gravity presses it downward. She is strongly analogous to gravity in that she constitutes an unavoidable force exerted by the pressures of a fundamentally formless reality to return back to formlessness, and in so doing participates in and determines (somewhat paradoxically), certain sensible features of
language. She constitutes the force of the *pharmakon*, which repeatedly compels distinctions to dissolve back into the indefinite state out of which the violent efforts of the life-giving, mortal father has propelled them; but in her pressure she also touches and changes the reality so compelled. The mother is immortal in that her force, if not her form or her substantiality (neither of which she ever truly has), relentlessly exerts itself upon the movements and temporary achievements of living beings, of linguistic children.

In the light of these interpretations, language’s family portrait finally begins to dissolve and retreat back into the *pharmakon* from which it was derived. It is now possible to meaningfully interpret why the mother stands next to a tree and dissolves easily into the natural background, into the timeless immutable forces of nature, that contextualize the picture. She herself forms the context of the picture, i.e. of the “first picture” or of the “father.”² And the hazy outline of her appearance that we can barely distinguish from the tree evidences the fact that she has been forced by an utterer or the reader/viewer of sorts to situate her role in language’s origins, and thus she, like the binary of which she herself forms the residue, is forced to more fully actualize and emphasize some elements of herself than others. In this case those elements being carved out and artificially melded together are those pertaining to motherhood. The father too has a residue that defines and indicates the source of his identity. The mother as his residue, in an important sense, *is* all of those things that comprise the father: the coloring that outlines him in the portrait, the signifier that denotes his signifieds, and yet all of these distinctions represent merely contingent and temporary ones insofar as the two elements of each pairing are basically indivisible from one another.
The mother, associated with the obscuring effect of the foliage and the background into which she could almost melt, suggests precisely the sort of refractive medium that the ‘blinding’ power of language’s source would require in order to become intelligible. Furthermore, as an upside-down figure she resembles the reversed image on a slide that, when shot through with rays of light, portrays the same image flipped up and down or left to right, on a screen, a canvas, or the center of a display. Thus, the mother here could be understood as constituting the image of the linguistic child itself, and the source of the projection of the father. Her subtle role underscores her quiet but no less powerful position within the mother/father relationship when she happens to be cast in the state of residue.

In the Platonic text, the unavoidable slippage of one element into another appears only subtly and infrequently at arbitrary intervals of the text. By contrast, Dissemination locates the phenomenon in metaphorical terms repeatedly throughout its reiteration of Plato, creating an impression in which it seems distinctions are always almost threatening to slide into one another. Insofar as language constitutes an altered iteration of the pharmakon, and always has the formlessness of the pharmakon lurking at its edges, the forces that propel binaries to collapse are no less constitutive of the Phaedrus than of Dissemination. It is simply that in the first, the pharmakon bides its time as a residue, as a foundational but largely imperceptible trace; in the second, in the altered iteration accomplished in the Derridian text, the pharmakon, no less fundamentally but only more visibly than before, rotates into position as the object of discourse, as the most salient feature in the portrait Dissemination paints.
Consequently, this study has sought a further shift: the rotation of the linguistic mother into the center of discourse. Having undertaken this rotation, we can see that the seeming clash of the concept of the *pharmakon* with the mother/father relationship did, indeed, constitute a play of forces *against* one another other, but it also consists of a series of mutually constituting notions that feed off of one another. Language and the efforts that the *Phaedrus* casts as ‘paternal’ seek to stabilize meaning and attach certain signifieds to certain signifiers. As a result, relentless propulsion toward recognizing the mutual dependence of categories such as signified versus signifier, one word versus the next, etc. follows upon attempted reiterations, and inevitable transformations. Importantly, these forces do not assail one another from entirely different vantage points. On the contrary, both spring from the same spot, from the same place, from the same matrix, and it is precisely their tension that defines the two — i.e. it is in a contradiction *Dissemination* discovers, impedes, and then regenerates meaning, in much the same way that this study has obstructed and then regenerated a theme discovered in Derrida’s text.

**NOTES**

1. For a comprehensive definition of ‘deconstruction,’ to the extent that such a definition is possible, please refer to Derrida’s “Letter to a Japanese Friend” (1983). Also, consider this essay as an exercise in deconstruction; as such, it will be seen that deconstruction depends heavily upon the notion of the *pharmakon* that this essay explores.


3. For a full discussion of the terms ‘signifier’ and ‘signified,’ see Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1972).
4. This essay’s use of the term ‘context’ does not seek to imply that a signifier’s context is ever precisely determinable. See Derrida’s *Limited, Inc.* for more information on contexts.

5. An interpretation or set of signifieds that adhered “aptly” to a text would adhere in a way that was congruous with the text’s context and the signifiers used. See Derrida’s *Limited, Inc.* and “Honoris Causa” for more discussions of how to avoid misinterpretation.

6. Derrida, 82.

7. Ibid., 149.

8. For a complete description of how the *pharmakon* dissolves certain platonic divisions between writing, speaking, etc. see *Dissemination* “Plato’s Pharmacy.”

9. ‘Essence’ is not used here to denote immutable identities or times states of affairs, only as a synonym to the evolving *identities* that define beings.

10. Derrida, 159.

11. Ibid., 159.

12. Ibid., 161.

13. I do not mean to imply that the words ‘sun, ‘capital,’ and ‘father’ are signifieds in themselves, only that they, as signifiers, adhere strongly to certain signifieds that, as a result of the text’s juxtaposition of the four terms and use of parentheses, can come to be associated with the signifier ‘good.’

14. All claims about the associations of signifieds with signifiers will refer to this author’s interpretation and acknowledge the fact that the non-static nature of language combined with the infinitely many possible contexts in which language may be iterated render this interpretation one among many plausible ones. For thoughts on what constitutes ‘plausible’ see endnote iii.

15. Derrida, 82.
16. The phrase ‘deconstructive approach,’ does not claim that deconstruction is an approach, only that the Derridian approach to the Platonic text is a deconstructive one. For information on why it is problematic to identify deconstruction as something see Derrida’s “Letter to a Japanese Friend.”

17. Plato, 87.


20. Ibid., 143.

21. Ibid., 82.

22. Ibid., 159.

23. Ibid., 159.

24. This ‘sun’ should not be confused with the ‘blinding’ source discussed in other sections of the text. They are used in association with each other, clearly, but should not be taken as iterated within Dissemination identically.

25. Derrida, 143.
Romantic Nausea and Literary Production

Written by Jason Bell, Columbia University

After the marriage of her brother William to Mary Hutchinson, Dorothy Wordsworth collapsed on her bed, paralyzed, blind, and deaf. But as soon as the bride and groom returned to the house, she awakened from catatonia. In *The Grasmere Journal*, Dorothy records the following five days in one bloated diary entry. She does not touch upon the catatonic episode again, nor does the incident inflect the following text explicitly. Instead, Dorothy inscribes psychic trauma on her journal with persistent and intrusive notations of nausea. On an extended journey from Grasmere to the wedding in Gallow Hill, “Mary was very sick, & every time we stopped to open a gate, she felt the motion in her whole body, indeed I [Dorothy] was sick too.” From Calais to Dover, Dorothy “was sick all the way.” Returning to Grasmere in a post chaise, Dorothy “became very sick.” Resting at an inn, Mary and William enjoy a hearty dinner, but Dorothy “was not quite well.” Dorothy’s nausea—purportedly a symptom of motion-sickness or spoiled victuals, more pointedly a consequence of psychic trauma from William’s wedding—culminates at Hawes, where Mary makes Dorothy “some Broth for all which supper we were only charged. I could not sit up long. I vomited, & took the Broth & then slept sweetly.” As a form of catharsis, vomiting purges poisons from Dorothy’s body and spirit. Dorothy simultaneously expels the contents of her stomach and the traumatic content of her
psychic imbroglio with William. Furthermore, as though vomiting was an insufficient expression, Dorothy registered her nausea in her journal.

However private and silent, writing offers a complete catharsis impossible to realize solely from physical purges. Against misogynistic narratives of literary production common to both High Modernism and the Romanticism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Dorothy’s writing responds to a disease that cannot be spoken of: her insufferable relegation to the status of William’s scribe, an occupation that prevented her from achieving the status of ‘author.’ Dorothy’s journal, in particular her periodic nausea and vomiting, offers an alternative story about how Romantic poetry was composed and to what end. Romantic nausea follows from an inability to process and enunciate lived experiences. Yet it precipitates the urge to write.

Ultimately, nausea finds a cure in the poetry of Robert Burns and John Keats. Unlike Coleridge or William Wordsworth, Burns and Keats exemplify a more sensitive attunement to the kinds of psychic and sensual cramps that plague Dorothy. For them, Romantic nausea is an alternative to the blunt nostalgia and sentimentality of tried-and-true Romanticism. Nausea becomes a way to read the Romantic canon that assumes ambivalence to the sensual world, a simultaneous desire for sensory pleasure and disgust with the alien nature of pleasurable things.

Both the medical and aesthetic meanings of catharsis share a gendered genealogy. Aristotle uses catharsis in *de Generatione Animalium* and the *Historia Animalium* to describe menstruation. Aristotelian catharsis implies “the medical context of healing and curing through expulsion and evacuation of harmful elements,” but also
indicates purification, “cleansing the spirit and sublimating the emotions in order to prepare for or to achieve a state of exaltation.” Subsequent centuries of aesthetic philosophy coded catharsis as a feminine purification ritual. Models of literary production that defined the act of writing as cathartic situated the male writer as both imitating the female yet at a secure distance from her. Catharsis becomes more than an event in the creative process: the representation of catharsis as expulsive, as menstrual, turns menstruation into a metaphor for writing.

In her essay, “A Sexual Model of Catharsis,” Velvet Yates argues that Aristotle reads menstrual discharge as analogous to semen and devoid of healing powers. Yet Modernist misreadings bring the ejaculatory and ritual connotations of catharsis into concert. At stake in the genealogy of catharsis is first, its anatomical substance or composition, and second, its diverse medical and creative properties. Modernist poets, who opposed what I refer to in this essay as Romantic nausea, celebrated a pseudo-classical conjunction of menstrual fluid, semen, and literary production. Wayne Koestenbaum notes the Modernists’ belief “that a woman’s urine, excrement or blood are substances connected to her literary products.” For example, Ezra Pound equates “creativity and semen, and describes semen as a shaping force vast and omnipotent as Coleridge’s ‘esemplastic power.’” Predictably, Pound hedges his position and equates literary production with feminine catharsis. However, he distances creative genius from the female body’s supposed pollution. What then is the Romantic nausea that Pound and Eliot stand against?

If Greek and Modernist catharses adopt a biological correspondent to menstruation and ejaculation, Romantic catharsis simulates vomiting. The complex of nausea-vomiting structures Romantic literary production as catharsis and is fundamentally different from the
Modernist system. Catharsis, writing, and female reproductivity are no longer ironized as part of the female body and agency, but distant from them. *The Grasmere Journal* is remarkable because it returns the disguised origins of catharsis back to the female body. Dorothy’s status as William’s scribe and potential lover emerges in her journal, which serves as a testament to her literary productivity. Therefore, Dorothy’s nausea, a disease that cures, both induces writing and suggests an ontology of Romantic literary production. The nature of that ontology will be the elusive subject of this essay. Although “Romanticism” implies period and place, this essay conceives of its secondary reference, an orientation to the world characteristic of multiple periods, places, and authors. Romantic nausea is a condition of that perspective, a pathology that describes an experience of life and potentiates a set of possible literary responses.

Late 18th and early 19th century medical discourses framed nausea as a symptom of cure for various hidden diseases. The first mention of nausea is in Samuel Solomon’s *A Guide to Health*. It appears in a section on “Suppression of the Menses,” which addresses the cessation or blockage of menstruation. Solomon describes how “the first appearance on the menses in girls who never had them before is seldom so instantaneous as to surprise them unawares. It is generally preceded by. . . a nausea.” As a function of proximal cause, nausea is intimately associated with women’s health, but in effect, nausea indexes the need to evacuate some excretion from the body. Nausea signifies the approach either of menstruation or of vomiting: two cathartic alternatives. Nausea’s indexical quality correlates to Solomon’s claim that nausea is “rather a symptom of other diseases, than a disease of itself.” Yet, because nausea points to a more serious underlying ailment, it stimulates appropriate treatments. Solomon advises vomiting as a cure for nausea and its underwriting disease, “for nature in general seems so intent upon expelling another dis-
ease, as to neglect his.” Among those diseases, Solomon prescribes vomiting as a cure for barrenness, nymphomania, and menopause.

The vocabulary of nausea and vomiting is decidedly gendered. Introduced so early in *A Guide to Health*, menstruation inflects the other diseases caught up in cycles of nausea and vomiting. In Henry Seguin Jackson’s medical philosophy *A Treatise on Sympathy*, a brief commentary on the ”strong sympathy between the uterus and stomach,” Jackson couples nausea to women’s bodies. He equivocates female reproduction and digestion. However peripherally, Jackson’s equivocation explains the bizarre resolution of menstruation into vomiting, not menses, in the terms of catharsis. The expression of menstrual flow as vomiting forms the central ideology of Romantic nausea. Jackson preserves the language of nausea as a “disease that cures.” He thus characterizes vomiting “as an index of a general debility, and often the means of relief to the system.” As opposed to emetics, chemicals or botanicals prescribed to induce vomiting, nausea is auto-diagnostic and auto-remedial: it detects a disease and produces the cure. Jackson’s theory of sympathy includes a strong reciprocity between the five senses, consciousness, and physiology. The relationship between lived experience, the psyche, and the bodily condition informs the progression of nausea, which is inextricable from the patient’s situation in a sensory and social world. Thus, the diagnostic and reparative functions of nausea actively register and respond to a material universe. Nausea documents the flux of the world through the body. For the body as sensorium, nausea is an antenna picking up sickening sensory vibrations. Perhaps there is an obvious, if preliminary, analogy between a nausea that induces vomiting and a nausea that induces writing. Dorothy’s journaling represents a kind of vomiting that follows from her nausea. Writing releases the blockages of the world in the body. What precisely Dorothy’s nausea registers or indexes remains an open question. How-
ever the curative or cathartic property of writing—its pharmacological principle—remains indubitable.

In this line, Derrida is interested in the philology of writing as pharmakon, “the drug: the medicine and/or poison.” It is no accident that in Derrida’s analysis, Thoth, the god of writing “is thus also a god of medicine. Of ‘medicine’: both a science and an occult drug. Of the remedy and the poison.”¹² As imagined it thus far, nausea bears a striking resemblance to pharmakon. Nausea is a poisonous sensation that indicates the presence of another poison, and then remedies both itself and its underwriting pathology in the emetic moment. The “disease that cures” comes so close to “the poison that cures” that we cannot help but see the enthymeme: nausea and writing are bound up in the same body.

In fact, Romantic medicine and the Romantic literary movement did not exist in isolation; an axis of mutual influence links physicians of the period and their poet-patients. For example, proto-psychologist, translator of Kant, parodist of Romantic verse, and physician Thomas Beddoes exerted a powerful influence over his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge.¹³ Thorough exegeses of their relationship populate Romantic studies, at least partially as a consequence of New Historicist criticism, which precipitated a revival of interest in Romantic medical-philosophical texts. The seventh part of Beddoes’ Hygēia, “Essay on the Preservation of the Physical Power of Enjoyment with Remarks on Food and Digestion,” suggests the intimacy of gastronomic and medical nausea. Nausea interrupts the normal lifecycle of food in the digestion track: its taste in the mouth, sensation in the stomach, and passage through the bowels. Once the body detects a pollutant, food’s linear downward progression reverses. Regurgitation brings back to the surface, to the outside, to the world, what has been taken to the body’s interior depths and partially in-
corporated into the organism. The ontology of digested food is what Beddoes articulates as alchemy: “elements, after undergoing new combinations, shall be given out in the form of air; some in a liquid state; and the remainder shall be unlike any thing the body contained at first.”¹⁴ Nausea is an inevitable reaction to the absorption of foreign objects into the body. Indeed, vomiting is itself a nauseous, self-perpetuating process because it births from the body that which is not of the body. Nausea is a monstrous pregnancy. Vomiting, an alien birth. In this essay’s logic, nausea displaces menses and the uterus into the stomach, where a slime of peculiar ontology matures and boils forth.

In Paul Youngquist’s article “Romantic Dietetics! Or, Eating Your Way To A New You,” digestion is a one-way street: its directionality is down and its end is out. Therefore, when Beddoes treats Coleridge’s poor digestive system, the complaint is constipation, not vomiting.¹⁵ In Coleridge’s notebooks, he compares constipation to the labor of a birthing woman.¹⁶ According to the allegory, blockages in the digestive track symbolize blockages in the organs of poetic production; this analysis aligns literary productivity with the “down and out” morphology of anal excretion, menstruation, and childbirth. Insofar as nausea and vomiting invert that schematic, “throwing up” creates an entirely alternative narrative of literary production. Coleridge’s constipation transforms into an upward, regurgitative menstruation or childbirth.

Vomit thwarts the biopolitical control of excrement, women, and medical bodies—“waste management,” “Romance,” and the medical-domestic complex—that emerged at the end of the 18th century. The textual content of vomit cannot be supervised in privies; if it converts inside to outside, private to public, it does not, as Dominique Laporte asserts of her titular subject in History of Shit, “be-
come a political object through its constitution as the dialectical other of the ‘public.’” The publication of vomit is categorically unauthorized and uncontrollable. Youngquist identifies downwards digestion and Romantic dietetics—the medicalization and moralization of diet—as a foundational theory of Romantic literary production; he cites, for example, Wordsworth’s easy digestion of the world in “Tintern Abbey”; but vomiting is an equally legitimate, however radical, alternative.

Romantic nausea embodies a counter-narrative to the male-coded institutions of Romantic genius. Youngquist acknowledges Dorothy Wordsworth’s place as a repository of Wordsworth’s literary waste. He remarks, “there is a chauvinism of digestion that poetry like Wordsworth’s reinforces.” Following Youngquist’s final thought, that “a new politics of digestion might occasion news subjectivities, insurgent in a way that troubled Wollstonecraft for being witty, womanist, abject, and carnivalesque,” I would like to suggest vomiting as that “new politics.” Yet my analysis resists the consignment of certain politics and aesthetics to variations on a feminist theme. Instead, a “vomit comet” structure of literary production is inclusive of metaphysical orientation, not exclusive of gender. Thus it becomes possible for a number of poets of any number of genders to produce text as vomit. The fact that I have identified this practice as surrounding a female writer and as against a coterie of chauvinists is perhaps the beginning of a Romantic counter-narrative, one that organizes poets by affective states. Subsequent observations, such as a grouping of chauvinists against non-chauvinists, suggest that chauvinism or feminism derives from more fundamental responses to the sensual world than bare ideology.

Robert Burns, for all his poetic and Scottish celebrity, joins Dorothy and, as we will discover, Keats, in a group of like-minded Roman-
tics. In her recent article “Embodied Communities: Commemorating Robert Burns, 1859,” Ann Rigney traces the inscription of Robert Burns as a Scottish hero in the public imagination. The 1859 commemorations of Burns drew upon a myth of a “ploughman poet” who rose to poetic prowess. A tension between urban and urbane settings of commemoration and the (seriously mislead) mythology of Burns inflects his strange coordinate in the canon. There is something different about Burns. Burns is canonical because he is peripheral. Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats, Burns’s humor is Rabelaisian. He writes in a Scottish dialect that in its distortion borders on the grotesque. Set in conversation with his Romantic kinsmen, Burns revises the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, “a linguistic and embodied social practice that ‘degrades’ culturally rarefied discourses by transferring these texts, which speak in the language of the ‘high, spiritual, and abstract,’ to their material grounding in the ‘bodily lower stratum.’” The categorization of Burns as a Romantic activates the possibility of the carnivalesque and Burns’s verse relocates the lower strata into vomit.

“Address To A Haggis” is Robert Burns’s most vomitus poem. It mythologized the haggis as Scottish, delicious, and nauseating. The poem conflates disgust and desire in one body, the “Great chieftain o’ the pudding-race!” While Burns anthropomorphizes the haggis, he qualifies its ontology as unknown; just as pudding embodies an opposition between solid and liquid, the sweeping metamorphosis of pudding into a “race,” clearly Scottish, is hedged in satire and patently absurd. The ontological slipperiness of the haggis produces blockages in the normal processes of aesthetic digestion. Vomiting is the only tenable aesthetic response to haggis; regurgitation organizes the versified surface of “Address To A Haggis,” codes the reader’s affective orientation to the poem, and models Burns’s production of the poem.
The third stanza of “Address To A Haggis” offers the most sublime conflation of disgust and desire in the Romantic tradition. A knife slices the haggis open, “trenching your [the Haggis’s] gushing entrails bright, / Like ony ditch; / And then, O what a glorious sight, / Warm-reekin’, rich!” As a culinary artifact, the Haggis reproduces the organ outside of the animal: the sheep stomach, stuffed with other organ meats, resembles a living being, estranged from ordinary biology, thrust into the world, and worse, onto the dinner table. Slime, the pharmakon, writing, the haggis, all consolidate antithetical phenomena into singularities. The haggis, however, concatenates a third term onto the medicine/poison dialectic: food. Therein, the medicine/poison/food chain mediates discourses on Romantic taste. To describe exposed entrails as “warm-reekin’, rich” imbues an image of illness, excrement, and death with pleasure and desire. The quivering pudding provokes a coprophagic shiver; the ideation of entrails as edible conjoins the anus and the mouth.

Freud chases the origin of the disgust-desire complex to the evolutionary separation of upper sensory facilities from lower strata, either the mouth from the anus or the nose from menstruation. As man began to walk upright, a menstruation taboo developed. Likewise, anal eroticism “succumbs in the first instance to the ‘organic repression’ that paved the way to civilization.” In its bloody excess, the haggis exemplifies a writing that moves up the digestive track, against the vectors of civilization. Normally understood as a reaction of repulsion, vomiting expresses a repressed desire for anality (homosexuality) and the “pollution” of the female body. The concomitance of pleasure and pain, in both moments of consumption and expulsion, informs the indeterminacy of vomiting as a metric of taste. If the dish tastes delicious on the way down, “Address To A Haggis” asks, “how does it taste coming back up?” The catharsis
of vomiting—the rearrangement of lower stratum into the mouth—imagines a speech that achieves this supplementarity: an ambiguity that dreams a constant flux between the strictly policed borders of self and material world. Whether it expels menstrual discharge, shit, or the contents of the stomach, vomiting perverts a metaphysics of taste that privileges the mouth, speech (logocentrism), and the authority of the individual imagination over writing.

Despite the horror of Burns’s haggis, John Keats earns the dubious honor of most nauseated Romantic. Following our above analysis, he consummates the inversion of excrement into vomiting, speech into writing, and imagination into receptivity. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse, Keats introduces the chameleon poet, a distinct entity “from the Wordsworthian, or egotistical Sublime),” which “has no self—It is everything and nothing—It has no character . . . it lives in gusto. . . .he has no Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body.”29 For the famous “in gusto” passage, Keats draws on William Hazlitt’s “On Gusto” and *Hamlet*, in which the chameleon tastes the air.30 The chameleon’s metamorphic camouflage enchants Keats; a diet of air corresponds to the assumption of many disguises. Critics have understood the chameleon poet as embodying Keats’s “negative capability,” “that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”31 In Keats’s copy of *Paradise Lost*, he left an annotated trace of the chameleon poet’s negative capability: Keats believes Milton “sees Beauty on the wing, pounces upon it and gorges it to the producing his essential verse . . .”32 Like the Derridean Os, “everything in this closed cycle of consumption circulates through the mouth as the place of both taste and expression, a more tasteful mode of emission than occurs at the other end of the digestive tract (in other words, excretion).”33 Gigante posits that the Miltonic, or perhaps Keatsian poet, absorbs and receives the world, consumes
beauty, makes a judgment of taste, and then spits up, with greatest
decorum (into a napkin held delicately to the mouth), a literary ex-
pression of that beauty. Yet, this position presumes that everything
sits well with the poet—that he experiences no nausea. As we will
see, Keats was not the chameleon poet who swallowed air like wine
and breathed back its bouquet. Keats’s nausea demanded a more vi-
olent poesis, a vomiting, that performs excretion through the mouth.

A selection from *Hyperion*, can be read as Keats’s most salient com-
mentary on Romantic nausea. When Hyperion smells incense, “In-
stead of sweets, his ample palate took / Savour of poisonous brass
and metal sick . . .” Like the chameleon, Hyperion tastes the air,
but instead of beauty and pleasure, he consumes a noxious, chemi-
cal stew. Aesthetic receptivity is blocked or stalled, and Hyperion’s
ugly encounter with the world suspends his organ of taste, speech,
and literary production in a state of repugnance. The metaphor of
decorous poetic excretion through the mouth disintegrates under the
pressure of nausea. As incense assaults Hyperion’s aesthetic con-
sciousness, airiness and immateriality paradoxically avow his mate-
rality. Hyperion’s response to the incense is a sickness of being-in-
the-world. It is, in fact, the negative condition of negative capability.
Infinite capacity for aesthetic reception threatens to dissolve the poet
into ontological diffusion and the tasting of air endangers the ontol-
ogical stability of the subject. The absorption of material existence
and the ratification of the poet’s existential self inflict a sudden, ver-
tiginous nausea: the dread of dissolution adheres to recognition of
the material self. It jams the neat speaking of the world’s beauty
back out into poetry.

Therein, Keats’s abandonment of the Wordsworthian will to pow-
er—the poetic ego—cannot be a simple entrance into negative ca-
pability, “generosity towards existence, that ‘releasement’ or better,
that letting be, which lets being be.” The “releasement” of negative capability, or the resolution of obstruction, nausea into vomit, poetry, obliges a complicated and even hostile orientation of the poetic subject to the world. Gigante leverages grammatology against the poem, interpreting the incense as “a kind of pharmakon that causes [Hyperion] to die into life reduced to existence.” This reading marks nausea as the end-state of negative capability, but Gigante has actually advanced a half-formed negative capability as a whole; for the chameleon poet not only dies into existence, but also announces that death in a vomiting forth of poetry.

Given the cathartic quality of vomiting, it is only natural to ask how Keats and the chameleon poet’s nausea might have been a “disease that cured.” Gigante indulges in a little biographical criticism when she compares the “fever of thyself” in The Fall of Hyperion to Keats’s consumptive presentation of fever, weakness, and nausea. Indeed, Romantic medicine, like Solomon’s, Jackson’s, and Beddoes’s, associated fever and nausea. Unfortunately, Keats never enjoyed the healing catharsis of vomiting; his only release from nausea was a death into death. Or, at the very least, Keats never enjoyed the medical purgation of the emetic.

Thus far, this paper has merely insinuated that the poetic process constitutes a cure for Romantic (and existential) nausea; at this point, it seems worthwhile to make that claim explicit. If Keats’s consumptive nausea—a hunger without taste—could not be medically satisfied, his poetry vomits against the nauseated condition of unsatisfied negative capability. A 20th century literary-philosophical tradition, reaching from Sartre to Beckett, imagines psychological or spiritual nausea as a concomitantly physical phenomenon; medically circumscribed nausea slips around psychosomatosis. Just as Beddoes musters a physical cure (vomiting) against a psychological
state (hypochondria), the Romantic’s poetic nausea is fluid, inseparable from either a poetic organ or a physical body. Keats’s refusal of Wordsworthian excretion, alias the halved negative capability, nauseates the physical-spiritual-psychic poet in the world.

Thus we return to Dorothy Wordsworth with a stronger sense of her nausea as a “disease that cures.” In contrast to the primary subjects of this analysis, however, Dorothy has not been included in a canon of Romantic poets; she has been marginalized as a writer, and her reincorporation into the imaginary of Romantic literature has fixated on her journal, a text that destabilizes the boundaries of literature and not-literature but that acquiesces to a masculinized model of literary production. After all, Dorothy’s journals nominally speak to her brother; she is his Thoth, a magician and scribe who copies over his poetic excretions. Even if *The Grasmere Journal* exerts a destabilizing force on the Romantic canon, the document and the act of its inclusion reaffirm a masculine-dominant literary field. At the risk of crudity, the Wordsworthian masculine poet writes with his penis and semen; the Burnsian, Keatsian poet writes with his vomit; but what does Dorothy write with?

In her essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” Linda Nochlin lists the assumptions of her title question, including “the inability of human beings with wombs rather than penises to create anything significant.” The insane logic of that assumption is the investment of creative potential in the male fluid, not the female, the elevation of semen at the expense of menstrual discharge. In Burns’s and Keats’s work—the writing of vomit—cathartic energy channels menses through the male mouth. The slippage of vomit into menstrual fluid codes the Burnsian and Keatsian traditions as closer to a feminist aesthetics, especially in comparison to the Wordsworthian.
Discrete from the poetry of Burns or Keats, though, *The Grasmere Journal* more fully contains the possibilities of pharmacology. Because Dorothy’s writing coexist with William’s in some relationship of ventriloquism, and because Dorothy’s entanglement with William’s supposed poetic genius is concentrated into her domestic, feminized work, her cooking and transcriptions, *The Grasmere Journal* flickers between medicine and poison. While it is a document expressive and performative of Dorothy’s submission to William, it assembles a resistive counter-narrative. When Dorothy vomits, she momentarily breaks the fever of nausea, of being-in-the-world that is structured, for the female Thoth, as subordination to the material, masculine real. The Grasmere Journal more completely destabilizes the Romantic canon, insofar as it achieves a covert and subversive *poesia*.

NOTES

2. Wordsworth, 131.
6. Koestenbaum, 121.
8. Solomon, 64.
9. Ibid., 64.
11. Jackson, 163.
15. Youngquist, 243.
18. Youngquist, 250.
19. Ibid., 251.
20. Ibid., 254.
21. The “vomit comet” is a nickname for a reduced gravity aircraft used to simulate the experience of space travel. To produce the effect, the plane arcs like a rollercoaster at a crazy angle through the upper atmosphere. Apparently, the ordeal is quite nauseating. It is worth noting that the phrase “metaphysical orientation” in this sentence refers to a state-of-being in relation to the world. Therefore, a certain definition of existence, or existentialism, is one metaphysical orientation. Absurdism is a slightly different one.


In Derrida’s deconstruction of Kant’s third critique, aesthetic subjectivity coalesces about the Os, an absolute, Hegelian mouth of indiscriminate consumption. Gigante analyzes the processes of aesthetic taste as obeying a “restricted cycle of consumption,” wherein everything passes through the mouth: the socially acceptable end of the digestive tract and gateway to aesthetic subjectivity. A classic example of the consuming orality that characterizes the post-Kantian subject of taste is the Wordsworthian mind that feeds upon infinity in the final book of *The Prelude* (9).
27. Freud, 78-9.
30. Gigante, 3.
31. Keats, 57.
33. Gigante, “Endgame,” 3. Gigante posits that the Miltonic, or perhaps, Keatsian poet absorbs and receives the world, consumes beauty, makes a judgment of taste, and then spits up, with greatest decorum (into a napkin held delicately to the mouth), a literary expression of that beauty. Yet, this position presumes that everything sits well with the poet—that he experiences no nausea. As we will see, Keats was not the chameleon poet who swallowed air like wine and breathed back its bouquet.
To one who stood before the door, one evening:
to him I opened my word —: toward
the clod (Kielkropf) I saw him trot, toward
the half-baked
brother (halb-schürigen Bruder) born in a
doughboy’s (Kriegsknechts) dung-caked boot,
him with his god-
like loins (Gemächt) all
bloody, the
chittering manikin (schilpenden Menschlein).

Rabbi, I gnashed, Rabbi Loew:

For this one —
circumcise his word (beschneide das Wort),
for this one
scribe the living
Nothing on his soul,
for this one
spread your two
cripplefingers (Krüppelfinger) in the hale-
making (heil-bringenden) blessing.
For this one.

25  ...............  

Slam the evening door shut, Rabbi.

..............  

Fling the morning door open, Ra- — ¹

“The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today.”


“Nonetheless, he did everything he could in order, I will not say to appropriate the German language, since what I suggest is precisely that one never appropriates a language, but rather to carry on a hand-to-hand, bodily struggle with it… It seems to me he touches the German language both by respecting the idiomatic spirit of that language and in the sense that he displaces it, in the sense that he leaves upon it a sort of scar, a mark, a wound.”

Paul Celan’s ‘wounded language,’ as identified by Derrida, embodies the brokenness of the German language in the wake of the Holocaust. Adorno’s negative dictum, on the impossibility and barbarism of poetry after Auschwitz, has become, in many ways, the paradigmatic statement on postwar German poetics—and has greatly impacted the critical interpretation of the work of Celan and others. Of perhaps more interest for a reading of Celan’s own work, however, is Celan’s critical private response: “No poem after Auschwitz (Adorno): What is assumed here about the way a poem is imagined? The arrogance of one who has the audacity to hypothetically and speculatively contemplate or report on Auschwitz from the perspective of a nightingale or song-thrush.”

Derrida’s ‘wounded language’ seems to describe Celan’s poetic alternative to Adorno’s Romantic assumptions.

Celan, born in 1920, in Czernowitz, Bukowina (then Romania), was raised in a community of German-speaking Jews, outside of Germany and Austria. His parents were deported during the Holocaust while Celan spent the night in a friend’s hideout; both were later killed in concentration camps. Celan himself was detained for much of the war in forced labor camps. He later lived in exile in Paris, where he taught at the École Normale Supérieure, and where he committed suicide in 1970. In addition to German and French, he was fluent in Romanian and Russian, and had a strong knowledge of Hebrew and English. Despite his multilingualism, he continued to write in German—what he came to call a “deathbringing speech” — both his mother tongue and the language of his mother’s murderers. Characteristic of much of his oeuvre, Celan’s 1961 poem “Einem, der vor der Tür stand” (“To one who stood before the door”) is an attempt to deal with his Judaism in relation to the German language and tradition after the Holocaust.
Celan’s historical position heavily impacted his writing. As Adorno indicated, the very possibility of poetry is at stake in the work of Celan. The testimony of survivors of the National Socialist regime demonstrated that any prior historical or literary (indeed any descriptive) frame of reference was destroyed in the camps: there were no words to describe what had happened. Celan’s poetic task was burdened by this experience: it became prone to failure or to the infliction of further abuse. National Socialists permanently transformed the German language, purging it of foreign words, distorting its philosophical heritage, and giving new, politicized meanings to common words of the vernacular. Celan self-consciously inherited this wounded language, exposing it and seeking a reality beyond it in “Einem, der vor der Tür stand.” His work also revisited an older problem, one that predated the Holocaust and concerned the representation of trauma, of wounds themselves.\(^5\) Celan forces the reader to consider the question of whether a wounded reality can be represented using a language that is itself already wounded and perceived to be inadequate for its task. Additionally, Celan’s poem gestures toward the future, toward the possibility of a new, perhaps more ethical, reality.

The original title of his poem was “Que sont mes amis devenus?” (roughly, “What have my friends become?”).\(^6\) By citing a thirteenth century poem of the same title by the writer Rutebeuf, the original title explicitly cites the French literary tradition. Celan, however, decides not to invoke this tradition, and instead chooses a title homonymous with the first line of the poem: “Einem, der vor der Tür stand.” Importantly, Celan has no aversion to the use of non-German titles (e.g., “Envoi” and “Radix, Matrix” from the same collection, \textit{Die Niemandsrose}). Thus, the move away from the French-language indicates the poem’s determined relation to German-language precursors.
The most important of these German-language precursors seems to be Franz Kafka, whose influence can be traced throughout Celan’s poetry and life. Celan admired Kafka’s letters to his lover and translator Milena Jesenská, who was eventually killed in a concentration camp in Ravensbrück in 1944. In addition to Kafka’s writings, biographical parallels between the two influenced Celan. Kafka, like Celan, was born into a German-speaking Jewish community in Eastern Europe. Yet an important biographical difference persists between them—the difference between pre- and post-Holocaust experience. Kafka died in 1924, well before the rise of the National Socialists. Celan, of course, lived through the war. Although Kafka came close to experiencing the catastrophe, he did not. Yet, the affinity between the two writers nonetheless persists. Harold Bloom writes, “If you can imagine Kafka as a Holocaust survivor, then you would approach nearer to Celan, whose poetry, like Kafka’s prose, purifies the German language of many elements that makes Jews uneasy.”

Writing in German after the Holocaust, Celan attempts to continue Kafka’s German-Jewish tradition, so nearly destroyed. The importance of the pre-war German-Jewish tradition exemplified by Kafka is further established by Celan’s pervasive allusions to Kafka’s parable “Vor dem Gesetz” (“Before the Law”) in “Einem, der vor der Tür stand.” The title of Kafka’s parable is also homonymous with the first line of the text: “Vor dem Gesetz steht ein Türhüter” (“Before the law stands a doorkeeper”). John Felstiner, citing Dietmar Goltschnigg, remarks that Celan first read “Vor dem Gesetz” when he was a teenager before the war, and that he translated it into Romanian just after the war in 1946. In Kafka’s parable, a guardian stands in front of a door when an anonymous man appears. In Kafka, this man (“ein Mann vom Lande”/ “a man from the country”) is a nameless figure entreating entrance to “the Law.” In Celan, this man (“ich”/ “I”), also nameless (perhaps the poet himself), has
no specified origin and the door blocks entrance to something enigmatic. Two thresholds thus situate these texts. This is not to say that Kafka’s text should be grafted onto Celan’s. Indeed, Celan makes important revisions and departures away from Kafka (informed by his belated historical position); centrally, Kafka provides a line of continuity for Celan to the German-Jewish past, a line that Celan seems to be working to restore, and extend forward.

Celan’s poem begins by presenting a blurred scene. Categories, such as character, place and speech, disorient rather than stabilize. The first lines throw the reader into a position of uncertainty: “To one who stood before the door, one/ evening: / to him I opened my word—:” Both identity and space are decontextualized: the identities of the speaker and of the “one who stood before the door” are unknown, while the nature of the space—the realms to and from which this door leads—is not defined. Compounding the ambiguity of these lines is the strange, broken syntax highlighted by the use of diacritical marks (two colons, a comma, and a dash in the first three lines alone). These marks are used liberally throughout the poem, as are extended ellipses and split compound words. Their overall effect is a halting and broken verse, bereft of traditional, harmonious lyricism (the kind Adorno seems to have had in mind when writing his dictum). These marks focus attention on the actual workings of the language, a language once familiar and accepted as the unquestioned mode of communication that has now become alien to the Jewish speaker of German. A similar effect is figured in the third line, when the speaker ‘opens his word’ (“tat ich mein Wort auf”). The action mimics the brokenness of the poem’s own language, as Celan breaks open “God-like,” “half-baked” and “Ra-[bi].” In this way, Celan seems to be exposing the wounds of the past on the German language.
While Celan presents the German language as wounded, he also expresses hope in its future, by leaving his own mark, paradoxically, his own wound on the language, as Derrida describes. The blurred scene of the poem’s first strophe, characterized by strange syntax and diction, achieves greater clarity beginning with the injunction by the speaker. This coming into focus is achieved through a shift in tense and direct speech. The speaker pleads: “for this one circumcise his word.” The speaker of the poem demands a wounding of the language equal to the rite that inaugurates the entrance of the Jewish male into his community. As indicated by the colon, this demand is directed to Rabbi Loew, perhaps a mohel, a person trained in the covenant of circumcision (Rabbi Loew, according to Jewish tradition, also comes from Prague—the city of Kafka). This plea marks a turning point in the poem: the wounded language remains, but the attempt to ‘cure’ it, to bring it back into the Jewish tradition, is thematized.

The dative “diesem” (“for this one”) is repeated four times, attached to a plea to bless and protect. The hope of entrance into the Jewish covenant persists, but this possibility is precarious. Before the fourth instance of the dative, the speaker enjoins, “spread your two/ cripplefingers in the hale-/ making blessing.” In German, hale-making is “heil-bringenden.” Celan bifurcates the word, forcing it to spill over into the next line. The split is made to underscore “heil,” a word wounded through its forced pervasive use as a salute and greeting, “Heil Hitler!” The “cripplefingers” also remind us of the injuries that have been done to the Jewish community and tradition, here embodied by the Rabbi. The spread fingers, however, still present a transgression of the Nazis since the saluting movement of the arm that goes along with ‘Heil Hitler’ forced the fingers to be one next to the other. In Celan’s poem, “heil” (which, ironically, means salvation) seems to be in a process of transformation: it express-
es an authentic wish for a more ethical future. Yet, it will always be charged with the meaning inscribed in it by the Nazis, who had turned it into a signifier of their salvation, a negation of the salvation for the Jews of Europe.

These gestures can be extended to account for Celan’s own struggle with (and insistence on) the German language. Consider again Derrida’s description of Celan’s relation to language: “It seems to me he touches the German language, both by respecting the idiomatic spirit of that language and in the sense that he displaces it, in the sense that he leaves upon it a sort of scar, a mark, a wound.” Derrida here inverts the wounding of language by the Third Reich to account for Celan’s own effect on the German language. The wound-image becomes doubly charged and paradoxical, as it is in “Einem, der vor der Tür stand”: reflective of the catastrophe of the Holocaust, but also reflective of the act of poetic creation as a Jewish act, figured as an entrance into the covenant. Celan cannot write this poem without breaking words and interrupting syntax; he breaks open the closed system of meaning of the German language mandated by National Socialism. Celan himself wounds the language, as Derrida remarks. Derrida’s critique of the possibility of appropriation of language should be read as a positive critique in the context of Celan’s work, for it implies that the attempt by the National Socialist regime to appropriate the German language was, in the end, impossible. Certainly they left their mark, deeply wounding and perverting the language, but the work of poetic creation has the potential to counteract this brutalization, to inflict its own defensive wounds. This is not necessarily a successful endeavor, however.

The ambiguity of “Einem, der vor der Tür stand”—both hopeful and despairing—is stressed in the ending, bracketed by extended ellipses. “Slam the evening door shut, Rabbi…Fling the morning door
open, Ra- —.” The poem is literally cut-off, ending with a wounded word. The slamming of the door introduces additional violence. Despite the speaker’s pleading, no reply or answer is ever given. Similarly, in Kafka’s “Vor dem Gesetz,” the man from the country pleads entrance to the Law for years, till his eyesight worsens and all becomes dark, in a figurative endless evening. The evening door is closed in Kafka (“Ich gehe jetzt und schließe ihn”). Does Celan’s speaker entreat a repetition of this closing, while gesturing toward future possibilities? Perhaps there is a deferred hope of a salvation to come (think of the radiance that lies behind the gate to the Law)?

In his complexly allusive poem, Celan foregrounds Jewish precursors and symbols—Rabbi Loew and Kafka, the rite of circumcision, etc. These allusions are stained by the wounds inflicted by the Third Reich, but the future of German-Jewish literature is asserted by the symbolic plea that the closed door should not be the end of the poem—a plea echoed in Celan’s decision to write in German after the Holocaust. The last line of the poem is “Fling the morning door open, Ra- —,” thus explicitly reinforcing openness, figuratively and linguistically—yet the actual achievement of this openness is not written.

Celan’s relation to the German language remains fraught and pained, but traces of a future radiance remain. The poet Anne Carson writes of Celan, “Every time a poet writes a poem he is asking the question, Do words hold good? And the answer has to be yes: it is the contrafactual condition upon which a poet’s life depends.” In Celan’s case, he not only insists that words hold good; he also demands that himself and his readers wrestle this good back for the German language.
NOTES
3. He also translated numerous writers into German, including William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson and Charles Baudelaire. A more extensive biographical account is given in John Felstiner’s Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew and Pierre Joris’s introduction to Paul Celan: Selections.


How Does Demons Think?: History, Myth, Negativity

Written by Peter Conroy, Columbia University

“In the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears.”


Fyodor Dostoevsky’s attitude toward the Enlightenment and all that it signified was complicated and deeply ambivalent. As he figured it, the Enlightenment attempted to free man from superstition by way of rationality and Reason—but the ultimate product was a society divided on ideological grounds and riddled with hypocrisies. The failure of the supposedly Enlightened to realize the ideals they championed made the choice between Western and Russian culture an utmost historical exigency. Publicly he professed himself a committed ‘Slavophile,’ a devotee to the cause of his native country; but his conservatism and reactionary assertions of faith hardly stopped him from rigorously and skeptically questioning received opinions in his fictions. Indeed, he engaged with these European influences with a radical susceptibility to the impact and excitement of new ideas, responding in a way that would seem to reflect a mind torn by the often-contradictory demands of faith and rationality, nationalism and individualism, hope and truth.
The infusion of Russian culture with European ideologies is thus a recurring subject in his writing, posing a problem with no clear resolution. Atheism, materialism, positivism, nihilism, utilitarianism: these form a constellation of interconnected frameworks in Dostoevsky’s social-imaginary, figuring prominently, and often allegorically, in the dramatic conflicts of his ‘novels of ideas.’ These are novels of a searching philosophical inclination with narratives that deal as much with intellectual currents and abstract moral dilemmas as they do with the emotional and spiritual lives of individuals; they are novels that, sometimes rather disruptively, strain the limits of representation by trying to absorb and embody theories and ideas that would seem to be almost antithetical to the realist novel’s own ideological commitments, itself a product of Western culture.

One of the most challenging and opaque of these novels is *Demons*—the focus of this essay—which uses the form of the realist novel to stage a conflict between nihilistic anarchism canvassed as revolutionary democracy and the various beliefs and ideas of individuals within a politically and intellectually unstable community. I want to focus on this novel’s engagement with the prevailing ideologies of its historical moment as well as the modes and structures of thinking, feeling, and believing that Dostoevsky associates with them. I want to suggest that the sort of intervention staged by the novel in response to its political and intellectual context provokes questions about what we might refer to as the novel’s mode of cognition—that is, its manner of thinking about the rapidly changing world from which it emerges and to which it addresses itself.

So how does *Demons* think? How does Dostoevsky’s text enact a form of thinking capable of engaging and surmounting the narrow-
mindedness of its ideological adversaries without regressing to a form of dogmatism or idealism? Perhaps unlike some of Dostoevsky’s other major works, *Demons* performs a provocatively ‘negativistic’ mode of thinking, less emphatic in its pronouncements of belief, less resolute in its projection of an ameliorated future. By ‘negativistic’ I mean something similar to what Adorno uses the term to signify as characteristic of a form of thinking that relies on critical negations of concepts, frameworks, or paradigms in order to wrest truth from ideology, as it were, to clear a space for conceptual self-reflection, or to resist the violence imposed on consciousness by systematic totalities.¹ It may seem tenuous to invoke Adorno here. But, as I hope to demonstrate, his ideas help articulate what is radical about Dostoevsky’s text, what makes it profoundly attuned to contradictions between thought and experience, what prevents it from succumbing to one or any delimiting ideological camp—and what makes it still relevant today as an exemplification of how thinking can be ethically committed while also being historical and immanent.

By focusing on the question of literary thinking and cognition, this essay addresses a set of issues raised in Stathis Gourgouris’s *Does Literature Think?: Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era*, which asks not only about the ‘object’ of literary cognition (the *what*) but also about its epistemological mode or model (the *how*). Gourgouris explores the possibility of specifically literary forms of cognition that, perhaps unlike philosophical or scientific systems of thought, resist schemata and fixed categories. His book asks the question “whether [literature] has a capacity to theorize the conditions of the world from which it emerges and to which it addresses itself.”² Gourgouris distinguishes literary cognition from analytical processes by highlighting literature’s “explicitly
constitutive performativity”; he insists, moreover, that literature’s epistemological activity as such always functions within a particular social-historical horizon. Literature’s mode of theorizing is therefore contingent upon the norms of thought and behavior in relation to which it emerges; it remains inseparable from an immediate political context—its conditions of production—but nonetheless capable of performing a kind of transformative immanent critique. By functioning within and yet resisting the mastery of dominant structures of thought, literary cognition “challenges our usual definitions of knowledge in strict conceptual terms.” Gourgouris continues: “Instead, it demands that we account for the implicit, the nonpalpable, the ineffable, the perfectly contingent.”

Not least of the reasons why this form of analysis offers a provocative point of departure in interpreting Demons is Dostoevsky’s personal frustration, evident most of all in his argumentative nonfiction, with uncertainty and indeterminacy and what one could call the epistemological chaos of a post-religious world-view—a world-view that in Gourgouris’s phrase “posits knowledge as a self-consciously worldly enterprise without transcendental safeguard.” Often at odds with the orthodox opinions he professed to believed in, Dostoevsky’s work channels this frustration into the production of texts drenched in ambivalences, embroiled in contradictions, and perennially fixated on irrationality, psychopathology, and provocatively turbulent subjectivities.

This may be in part responsible for the long tradition of literary criticism, going back at least to Bakhtin, devoted to unpacking the transgressive elements of Dostoevsky’s work. In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, for instance, Bakhtin discusses the author’s “dialogic imagination” by demonstrating the ways in which his texts resist closure and stability of meaning by formal means that
dramatize tensions between his heroes’ consciousnesses, the terms of their self-understanding, and the reality they confront. Bakhtin shows how Dostoevsky’s texts operate according to a kind of anti-foundationalist model of cognition that reflects and reproduces the indeterminacy of knowledge, revolting against the reification of the human being as such: “a living human being cannot be turned into a voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process. In human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition.” This may be cause for admiration and excitement, or it may provoke a sense of angst—a manifestation of or a reaction against certain social pathologies resulting from the absence of legitimate authority figures. René Girard’s assertion that “metaphysical desire is eminently contagious,” while not directly about Demons, would surely make for a pithy diagnosis of the ailments plaguing its central characters.

Like many of Dostoevsky’s other novels, Demons remains highly, almost ecstatically receptive to the innervating power of revolutionary and destructive forces. But the valences of Dostoevsky’s attitude toward these new, powerful influences remains opaque. Excitement consorts with angst, curiosity with terror. The novel’s characters seek desperately to locate evidence of a transcendentally signified or a Divine source of meaning, from within a realm of uncontainable disarray and vertiginously intermingling discourses—call it the condition of ‘modernity.’ It is a ‘within’ search for grounds ‘outside’—that is, transcendent grounds for ideological certainty, knowledge, belief. The crucial impasse encountered in Demons is that between an immanent and a transcendental world-view. And for Dostoevsky, ever prone to thinking in terms of conditionals and hypothetical constructions
(“If God does not exist…”), the implications of either possibility—not just what their propositional content amounts to, but how they would seem to affect ethical life—inform his emotional/spiritual responses. To that extent, dramatic conflicts in *Demons*, actions performed against the backdrop of ideological strife, ultimately imply a theoretical response to the political, ethical, and spiritual question of the grounds for behavior and knowledge. In other words, *Demons* manifests the desire to overcome conceptual frameworks derived from secular rationality without feeling compelled to accept some form of nihilism; and the response, construed theoretically, amounts to a negativistic denial of absolutes and universals—of those articulated by its opponents, anyway—that implicitly suggests an idea of what human life could be by exposing what it isn’t. Which differs drastically from an ideological or moralistic denunciation, and constitutes a kind of utopianism—if it is indeed utopian at all—infinity more subtle and critical than those it responds to.

This arguably motivates what’s often too easily called Dostoevsky’s “existentialist” ethics. I take it that this would refer to the idea conveyed in certain of his works that meaning, value, and belief ultimately depend on matters of individual choice rather than received opinion, logical deduction, or contingently and historically given frameworks. Novels like *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* would seem, in their life-affirming conclusions, to substantiate this kind of interpretation; a faith founded on freedom vaccinates the threat of nihilism, clearing the way for a new life, a future resurrection. *Demons*, though, presents a curious exception among Dostoevsky’s works because it suggests a comparatively radical negativism (the dark side of its humor). Whatever vague suggestion it begins to make that human goodness or Christian love might be realized in the world is skeptically undermined by (in order of appearance): arson, murder, suicide, death-by-illness,
disconnection, abandonment, and ... more suicide.

What could be called the ‘mythographic’ imagination reflected in this succession of catastrophes suggests, I want to argue, something crucial about the form of thinking enacted by Demons. Since this form of thinking functions within a specific social-historical situation, it makes sense to address it only in consideration of its rather explicit reaction to an immediate political context. Originally planned as ‘novel-pamphlet’, Demons fictionalizes a mostly factual series of events and murders committed by an anarchist group whose planned terrorization of Russian society becomes, in Dostoevsky’s representation of it, tantamount to the extreme logical conclusion of an imported atheistic liberalism. Represented in the figure of Stepan Trofimovich, the ideas of an earlier generation of Westernized, hypocritically ‘Enlightened’ intelligentsia get radicalized in the ideas of, most prominently, Pyotr and his ‘revolutionary’ circle. The conflict between, on the one hand, figures like Stepan and Varvara and, on the other, Pyotr and Nikolai Stavrogin comes to constitute what Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky’s acclaimed biographer, calls the “historically symbolic relation between the generations.”9 Frank makes the case that Demons is Dostoevsky’s attempt to turn the factually given events of history into the trans-historical form of myth.

In this case, Dostoevsky’s use of myth as the fictional embodiment of ‘real’ occurrences would be imposing stability through the logic of form on an otherwise threateningly disruptive and anarchic disorder. But this kind of interpretation, perhaps reading Dostoevsky’s personal attitudes into the text itself, fails to account for the novel’s often-implicit critique of precisely such a compulsion to mythologize. Of Varvara Petrovna’s relation to Stepan, the narrator comments that she “undoubtedly and quite frequently hated him; but there was one thing he failed to notice in
her to the very end, that for her he finally became her son, her creation, even, one might say, her invention, became flesh of her flesh, and that she maintained and sustained him not at all out of ‘envy for his talents’ alone.”

The same compulsion recurs, albeit in a more cynical manifestation, in Pyotr whose plan to foment destructive fervor relies on a complex web of lies and deceptions; central to his plan is a mythological figure to be embodied by Stavrogin, about whom Pyotr declares, “I’ve been inventing you since abroad; inventing you as I looked at you.”

Just prior to this he articulates his intentions by saying excitedly to Stavrogin,

“We’ll proclaim destruction…why, why, again this little idea is so captivating! But we’ve got to limber up. We’ll get fires going…We’ll get legends going…Here every mangy ‘crew’ will be of use. I’ll find such zealots for you in the same ‘crews’ as would be ready for any kind of shooting and would even be grateful for the honor. Well, sire, so the trouble will start! Such a heaving will set in as the world has never seen…Russia will be darkened with mist, the earth will weep for the old gods…Well, sir, and then we’ll bring out…whom?”

“Whom?”

“Ivan the Tsarevich.”

“Who-o-om?”

“Ivan the Tsarevich—you, you!”

Stavrogin thought for a minute or so.

“An impostor?” he suddenly asked in profound surprise, looking at the frenzied man. “Eh! So this at last is your plan.”

This excerpt offers a compressed formal exemplification of the passages of thought and the mental processes provoked by internally mediated desire, which motivate and enable the endowment of illusory projections with robust metaphysical value. Girard in his analysis of ‘triangular desire’ in the works of Stendhal puts it like this:
The objective and subjective fallacies are one and the same; both originate in the image which we all have of our own desires. Subjectivism and objectivism, romanticism and realisms, individualisms and scientisms, idealisms and positivisms appear to be in opposition but are secretly in agreement to conceal the presence of the mediator [for example, the figure of Stavrogin-as-mythic-archetype]. All these dogmas are the aesthetic or philosophic translation of world views peculiar to internal mediation… They all defend the same illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted.\textsuperscript{12}

I doubt \textit{Demons} goes so far as to condemn the ‘illusion of autonomy’; indeed, Dostoevsky’s work in general remains committed to the ethical value of a particular form of individualism. But it certainly can be read as a critical deconstruction of various ‘isms’ and rationalities that function coercively as the products of malignant will. In the narrative, these ‘isms’ rely on appeals to myth for their security. Myth in these cases amounts to the performative construction of a structure of belief designed to swindle individuals into an acceptance of falsehoods and illusory goals. And by recognizing these myths as such, Dostoevsky offers an implicit deconstruction of ideological systems by demonstrating the process of their formation. The narrative, in other words, plays out the rhetorical and figurative foundation of ideological structures, revealing their basis in speech acts performed out of a desire to deceive and manipulate. It traces the formation of ideological structures fated to collapse.

A similar kind of critique occurs in Dostoevsky’s representation of other forms of political or social thought. One good example of this takes place during the conspirators’ meeting, at which the character Shigalyov proposes his solution to problems of modern society, related by a character referred to only as the ‘lame man’:
Mr. Shigalyov is somewhat of a fanatic in his love of mankind; but remember that in Fourier, in Cabet, and even in Proudhon himself, there are many quite despotic and fantastic pre-resolutions of the problem. Mr. Shigalyov perhaps resolves the matter even far more soberly than they do. I assure you that after reading his book, it is almost impossible to disagree with some things. He is perhaps least distant of all from realism, and his earthly paradise is almost the real one, the very one mankind sighs for the loss of, if indeed it ever existed.\(^{13}\)

The vision articulated in Shigalyov’s treatise, reproduced here by an anonymous character, is Dostoevsky’s satirical debunking of a characteristically crude positivistic utopianism. While Shigalyov’s nervous sincerity contrasts starkly with Pyotr’s sardonic fanaticism, Dostoevsky’s presentation of the different ideologies they represent (and attempt, with varying degrees of success, to enact) underscores a shared form of thought, evident in the tendency (naïve or sinister) to displace a moment of Divine presence, “earthly paradise,” or mythic resurrection onto a distant past or future.

In what sense, then, might Demons itself be understood as producing its own myth? Dostoevsky’s critique of such mythic formations as those presented by Shigalyov and Pyotr, not to mention Kirillov, make myth problematic to the extent that myth manifests the desire to crystallize a transcendentally sanctioned worldview. But this conception of myth or the mythographic imaginary, as Gourgouris argues, is not the only one available. Gourgouris’s notion of literary cognition suggests an alternative conception of mythic activity, seeing it as an embodiment of precisely those forms of thinking that resist the aspiration to fixity and certitude, even if it includes
appeals to otherworldly, transcendent figures. “As an instance of the creative imagination,” Gourgouris writes,

the literary act lies at the heart of what we may call society’s *mythographic* capacity: the ability of societies to generate and sustain an assemblage of images, thoughts, histories, etc., sprung from a specific historical imagination and always played out in an arena of social contention, whereby they may serve as instances of a community’s self-representation as well as fieldwork for potential self-alteration, should that historical exigency emerge.\(^\text{14}\)

Reading *Demons* as an instantiation of such a ‘mythographic capacity’ may help qualify Frank’s interpretation of the novel as ‘mythic’ by aligning myth not with uniformity of belief, law, or the authority of archetypes, but with plurality, self-interrogation, and cognitive resistance to mastery—that is, with forms of thinking that counteract the hypostatizing function of certain strands of Enlightenment thought, conventional philosophy, and, to be sure, religious fundamentalism. The thrust of Gourgouris’s argument is thus that *poiesis* (generally: making, forming or transforming, bringing-forth, constructing or sustaining a world) commits itself, inevitably and regardless of intention, to the fundamentally political test-trial of social-imaginary transformation. The potential problem with this, though, is that Gourgouris’s notion of the mythographic would seem to leave little room for the ability of literature (or dialectical thought, for that matter) to articulate in specific terms the particular positive values it seeks to defend or support.\(^\text{15}\)

I want to consider this as a problem for and in *Demons*—that is, as a problem already suggested by Dostoevsky’s acute awareness of
form (conceptual, literary, philosophical) and its limitations. One way to do this is to focus on the ending, which depicts a structurally significant sequence of deaths and suicides the narration of which reflects the novel’s underlying mode of thought in insightful, provocative ways.

The first major death, based on an actual political assassination, is Shatov’s. Pyotr’s ‘revolutionary’ group decides to betray and murder Shatov, whom they believe might turn on them. That Shatov’s pregnant wife returns in labor moments before the murder, and that the birth of his child provokes a small epiphany, imbues the murder with heightened pathos and with the sense that Shatov’s new life, as it were, has been tragically truncated. The narrator recounts what begins to look like a scene of redemption, saying “He talked…of how they were now going to start living ‘anew forever,’ of the existence of God, of everyone being good…In rapture they again took the baby out to look at him.” But, of course, everyone is not good. And it’s not long before Pyotr Stepanovich’s revolver incites recognition of that cold truth:

It is said that Shatov had time to turn his head towards him and was still able to make him out and recognize him. Three lanterns lighted the scene. Shatov suddenly cried out a brief and desperate cry; but he was not to cry out again: Pyotr Stepanovich accurately and firmly put the revolver right to his forehead, hard point-blank, and—pulled the trigger. The shot, I suppose, was not very loud; at least nothing was heard at Skvoreshniki… Full efficiency—though not, I think, cold-bloodedness—was preserved only by Pyotr Stepanovich.17
Dostoevsky’s prose (in Pevear and Volokhonsky’s translation) affects a process of slowly unfolding thought to mirror the dramatic action, guiding the reader’s response with pacing managed by punctuation, marking time and the violently disruptive gun-shot with a push-and-pull of swift, then smooth, then abrupt phrasing. And the narrator’s ineradicable presence—of which Dostoevsky reminds the reader with terse intrusions like “It is said that…,” “I suppose,” “I think”—heightens the ambiguity and obscurity of the event’s signification—an obscurity not lost on many of those present at the scene of the crime. Indeed members of the anarchist group, dawdling pathetically in dumbstruck bewilderment, stand flummoxed by the crude reality of an action whose meaning and impact now contradict the terms of their leader’s vacuous triumphalism. “You undoubtedly must feel that free pride which is attendant upon the fulfillment of a free duty,” Pyotr proclaims in response to Virginsky’s frantic, nearly incoherent outburst: “This is not it, this is not it! No, this is not it at all!” Virginsky’s troubled realization, which comes to be shared by others in the group, is that Pyotr’s manipulative agenda has effectively justified these actions by making appeals to a fictitious network of European revolutionaries—not to mention Pyotr’s attempt to divinize Nikolai—which, for his purposes, functions as a sort of outside, transcendent entity capable of authorizing the use of violence. It’s only within this frame of reference, the frame constructed by Pyotr, that the violent act attains the level of significance necessary for its justification; but Dostoevsky’s narrative highlights the utter contingency of the frame and so the dark dramatic irony of the conspirators’ actions, now rendered essentially devoid of meaning by the realization that, “This is not it!”—not, that is, what it should have meant for the Common Cause.

One might read this scene, then, as a sardonic mockery of violence perpetrated in service of an illusory idol. But as such a critique
it also seems to call into question the very nature of the sacred as conceived within an immanent world-view. Slavoj Žižek has recently written a pertinent essay on the place of violence and the sacred—and by extension, sacrificial violence—in Christianity. His essay, by attempting to invert popularly held ideas about the Christian sacred, usefully sheds light on what in *Demons* amounts to a feverish, impassioned attempt to determine *from within* what, if anything, legitimately counts as sacred.¹⁹ Žižek’s argument first enacts a sort of reversal by suggesting that, while many of those who “deplore the disintegration of transcendent limits present themselves as Christians, the longing for a new external transcendent limit, for a divine agent who imposes such a limit, is profoundly non-Christian. The Christian God is not a transcendental God of limitations, but a God of immanent love.”²⁰ Using Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* as one of his main examples, Žižek goes on to suggest that one of the major singularities of Christianity is, contrary to common perception, its rejection of the ‘sacred’ as something which might legitimately justify violence in the name of transcendent authority. But this then leads to the problem that, by not appealing to such an authority, one may simply be relinquishing the field of power to those who, often malevolently and violently, do or will. “Therein resides the ethical dilemma Christianity tries to resolve,” he remarks, “how to contain violence without sacrificial exception, without an external limit?”²¹ Žižek’s idea is that the Sacred functions as that in the name of which violent acts may be committed; but because it legitimizes certain acts of violence, the sacred also limits the cases in which violence may be justifiably used. (Of course, all ‘justifications’, in this sense, are relative to a particular religious system, ideology, spiritual framework, etc.). Having argued that Christianity’s unique historical achievement was to “demystify the Sacred,” Žižek suggests that in the absence of an external limit, Christianity perennially struggles to cope with the possibility of
violent eruptions committed in the service of new, extraneous limits, such as those established by ideologies emerging in its wake or under its rubric, be they of the nationalist, religious, or political variety.

I want to suggest that *Demons* can be read, at least in part, as an attempt to cope with this dilemma. In terms of the novel, the dilemma looks something like this: what role does the category of the ‘sacred’ play in social life? And, without a normative notion of the transcendent ‘sacred’—that which, according to Žižek, Christianity dispenses with, and which Dostoevsky in this case avoids asserting outright—what is to prevent abuses done in service of substitute idols, new versions of the ‘sacred’? These problems attain a heightened urgency in the novel precisely because Dostoevsky so warily maintains his narrator’s immanent position, and avoids appending his own judgments from outside the novel. Thus Dostoevsky juxtaposes Shatov’s belief, an instance of faith in “a God of immanent love”, with cruel acts of violence perpetrated supposedly in the service of an external limit, a false idol—but nevertheless resists, I want to suggest, making explicit claims for a ‘true’ one. To do so would be in effect to contradict the immanent world-view that is, for Dostoevsky, the only real alternative. But an immanent world-view is always less stable, less well-grounded, less assured of its foundations and its categories. And as such, it inevitably encounters the paradoxes and problems inherent to the task of self-justification. What’s at stake in *Demons* is thus the discovery of a form of thought capable of preserving ethical distinctions (e.g., good and evil) in a world of utter contingency, which requires an epistemological reconciliation of the disjunction of truth and meaning after the fact of the radical destabilization of significations.

Perhaps the best example of a character incapable of doing this is Kirillov, whose strange metaphysics—his self-creation as man-God—results in a “necessary” act of self-annihilation:
To recognize that there is no God, and not to recognize at the same time that you have become God, is an absurdity, otherwise you must necessarily kill yourself. Once you recognize it, you are king, and you will not kill yourself but will live in the chiepest glory. But one, the one who is first, must necessarily kill himself, otherwise who will begin and prove it? It is I who will necessarily kill myself in order to begin and prove it. I am still God against my will, and I am unhappy, because it is my duty to proclaim self-will.²²

The logic here is barely comprehensible, perhaps deliberately so. Rather than offering anything like a cogently logical formula, Kirillov’s argument appeals to the logic of the emotions, to the sense of despair that a Godless universe might provoke and which might lead to the compulsive effort, either triumphant or burdensome, to assert one’s God-like stature. Kirillov would seem to manifest and represent another form of the will to transcend, here taken to its most extreme, self-destructive conclusion. His death, in other words, exemplifies thought’s inability to cope with its own groundlessness.

The next major death in the narrative, Stepan Trofimovich’s, adds another layer of complexity to Dostoevsky’s engagement with the topic of (in Girard’s language) ‘metaphysical desire.’ The long section titled “The Last Peregrination of Stepan Trofimovich” follows this once “much esteemed” figure of the last generation as he moves through a provincial landscape and ultimately towards his death. Before he passes, though, Dostoevsky narrates a scene that flirts with the possibility of a moment of genuine transcendence, an escape from the pathologically perverted desire of characters like Kirillov and Pyotr, during his profession de foi. But this profession,
like so many others, walks the tightrope distinguishing instances of authentic self-realization from performative utterance. As the narrator remarks, “Either he had really come to believe, or the majestic ceremony of the performed sacrament had shaken him and aroused the artistic receptivity of his nature, but he uttered firmly and, they say, with great feeling, a few words which went directly against many of his former convictions.” To read this as a true revelation and a moment of self-recognition is to ignore the profound ambiguity of Dostoevsky’s either/or. By making such ambiguity central to the scene, Dostoevsky implies and forces his reader to deal with the frustrating impossibility of certain knowledge about selves and others.

Which sets up nicely the final, most powerful death in the novel: Nikolai’s suicide. His suicide unsettlingly concludes the novel’s denouement, which otherwise simply describes the provincial town’s return to normalcy. The build up renders the event all the more impactful because it is unanticipated. The narrator relates the content of a letter sent by Nikolai to Darya discussing the prospect of a future relationship in the tangled language and thoughts of a mind tortured by involutions: “I know I ought to kill myself, to sweep myself off the earth like a vile insect; but I’m afraid of suicide. Because I’m afraid of showing magnanimity. I know it will be one more deceit—the last deceit in an endless series of deceits. What’s the use of deceiving oneself just so as to play at magnanimity?” This letter in part offers a response to a community that thinks Nikolai has gone insane, that his erratic behavior—the slap, the kiss, the duel—proves he’s crazy. But after he is found hanging from a rope by Darya and Varvara, the narrator concludes the book with an insinuative negation: “Our medical men, after the autopsy, completely and emphatically ruled out insanity.”
The ending, then, denies psychological explanation and suspends resolution to the question of whether free self-determination and choice, perhaps in an ‘existentialist’ sense, can be find a place within this community’s conceptual framework, exemplified in the narrator’s commentary. By this account, dialogic and dialectical thinking seem to be strikingly similar. The narrative destabilizes the constellation of concepts and ideas (e.g. “man”, “freedom”, “rationality”) functioning within the social world it describes, challenging the reader to account for behavior by a logic, a rationality, or a structure of thought, that could escape the critique it levels. The novel demonstrates a series of revisions and deferrals of meaning and truth that both demand and negate explanations. As such, it brings to attention—even if it doesn’t ever totally account for—“what [the concept] fails to cover, what its abstractionist mechanism eliminates, what is not already a case of the concept.”

This quote of Adorno’s describes the starting point of a negative dialectic, which entails a process of interrogations and negations of ostensibly self-sufficient concepts. What Adorno and Dostoevsky both recognize is the way in which ideologies that purport to declare universal values can be responsible for more violence than justice. Adorno saw the negation of conceptual totalities and ideologies as a condition of the possibility of morality and thinking. Negation creates the space for morality and for qualitatively superior forms of individual experience; negative dialectics, which prescribe a method of constant critique and question, found the possibility of freedom and morality as such. What would usually distinguish Dostoevsky’s form of thinking from dialectical thinking is a tendency to grope for certainty and to try to rescue ‘truth’ from an ongoing process of revision and negation. Dostoevsky’s writing constitutes a reaction against Hegelian rationalist dialectics of the sort that would view History as a teleological progression moving towards an ultimate synthesis; and usually his engagement with dialectical thinking
searches for a refuge from negativity by looking to faith. But at the end of *Demons* Dostoevsky leaves out the leap of faith, the positive recognition of belief’s capacity to engender salvation, the moment of actual redemption. Instead, he implicitly underscores the idea that perspective manifests form; form reflects conceptual frame; and frame implies and ultimately gestures towards that which it inevitably excludes and cannot, without alteration, account for. And by doing so, his reaction against rationalist idealism anticipates certain aspects of Adorno’s negative dialectics, resisting any assertions of timeless truth and finding hope not in the bombast of absolutism but rather in the promise of a life uninhibited by the mastery of conceptual totalities.

Putting Dostoevsky in dialogue with Adorno might challenge or at least complicate a more intuitive comparison between him and someone like Kierkegaard, another astute post-Hegelian with an interest in the possibility of faith in absolute, ahistorical truths. Kierkegaard’s sort of theological-philosophical dialectic derives not from a materialist conception of History (as does Adorno’s) but from a recognition of the paradox that actual faith demands a relation of the single individual to the absolute (God himself) that transcends the universal (God’s manifestation in the world, in morality). The comprehension of such a relation, or of its possibility, defies rationality and dialectics and requires, if it is to be grasped at all, the passion of faith. An idea similar to this comes through at the very end of *Crime and Punishment*, when the narrator writes of Raskolnikov, “Instead of dialectics, there was life, and something completely different had to work itself out in his consciousness.” In this case, Dostoevsky presents faith as an escape from dialectics, a remedy to the vertigo of unmoored thinking, and a condition of redemption.
This is the direction Dostoevsky begins to go in *Demons* during the chapter “At Tikhon’s,” which editors initially cut out of the novel. This chapter recounts Nikolai’s trip to a monastery to visit Tikhon, an elderly monk, during which he relates the story of an affair he once had while living in Petersburg. Recollected in a brief document titled “From Stavrogin,” Nikolai’s story recounts an abusive affair he had with a young woman named Matryosha, whom he leads to commit suicide. In the story, he remembers his cruelty towards this woman with complicated and oscillating emotions. Tikhon’s response leaves the ultimate significance of Nikolai’s behavior still ambiguous: he criticizes Nikolai for not turning to God, but he also offers a fundamentally aesthetic critique against Nikolai’s manner of self-presentation. He takes issue with Nikolai’s “challenge” to the reader, his disingenuous self-posturing. That this critique should lead to an ethical or spiritual conclusion remains ambiguous throughout the scene. Nikolai’s encounter with Tikhon creates the conditions for what begins to seem like a process of confession and self-recognition, ostensibly creating the conditions for the reconciliation of agnostic despair and Christian hope; but the foundation of this reconciliation can’t be accounted for from within the narrative because in the narrative real inner motives never come into light, revelations of truth are forever relegated to an impending future that may never materialize, personal being lingers just beyond the sphere of comprehension. The terms of Christianity and the promise of redemption fail to incite the hope and belief of a character who denies their abilities to explain, to justify, to reveal himself to himself. Thus when Tikhon suggests that guilt finds relief only in the absolution of a forgiving Deity, Nikolai’s resistance is emphatic: “Christ, incidentally, will not forgive.”

Given these spiritually charged lines, it would be entirely plausible to read Nikolai’s suicide as a reflection of faithlessness drawn to
its extreme, self-destructive conclusion. But the complex dynamics of this scene make this sort of judgment difficult to support. Dostoevsky’s novel, here as elsewhere, relies on a form of narrative complexity that challenges the authority and validity of conceptual reductions. Thus a scene that initially looks like it’s going to offer a discursive justification of Christian faith becomes a scene about the conflict between the individual and the universal, between freedom and power—without actually endorsing universal values or standing on the side of power. Consider what Tikhon says to Nikolai after having told him to repent: “You will put to shame all your pride and your demon! You will win, you will attain freedom…”

It would be tempting to read this scene as an argument suggesting that the spiritual-religious freedom discussed by Tikhon is real freedom; as such, this spiritual freedom only serves to exaggerate by comparison the falsehood of other appeals to freedom, such as those made by Pyotr the “revolutionary,” and Kirillov, who sees his suicide as evidence of a “new fearsome freedom.” But the form of this assertion hardly lives up to the challenge of the novel, which continues to interrogate different dimensions of freedom, different modes of free human existence that the appeal to transcendence doesn’t or can’t explain. Not surprising for a piece written by someone inhabiting a society in which over twenty million people had just been liberated, the narrative reflects an attempt to negotiate two senses of ‘freedom’ (metaphysical and social) as they function within two potentially contradictory or problematically entwined discourses (religious and political). Spiritual freedom leaves unexamined the possibility of worldly freedom; but worldly freedom is blind without an understanding of its relation to the spiritual. Following a logic Dostoevsky would have supported, one could argue that the novel insinuates the need for a convergence of religious and social authority, of a unified set of normative ideals promoting the instantiation of Christian moral law; but the
novel’s ending nevertheless recognizes the difficulty, if not simply the impossibility, of realizing such authority in the world. And by committing itself to an immanent world-view the novel re-situates the question of spiritual freedom within a social world whose forms of life and behavior challenge the possibility of our ever knowing what spiritual freedom amounts to or why we should believe in it.

Thus the “At Tikhon’s” scene shows not so much the failure of faith to materialize in the world but the failure of religious and political authority to respond to or adequately comprehend life’s performative dimensions—let alone their own performatively constituted authority. When Nikolai presents his story to Tikhon, the monk criticizes him for posturing and for portraying himself in a deliberately negative light to ‘challenge’ his readers. Indeed, Tikhon’s entire case for the need to repent before God hinges largely on his belief in a dimension of thought and a domain of existence protected from performance, something like the provenance of true faith; but the radical gesture of Dostoevsky’s text is to completely obscure and the even eliminates the criteria or the transcendent perspective necessary to distinguish the performative from its dialectical other—call it ‘authentic’ faith. The need for such a category of experience—authentic, sincere, pure, ascetic, self-denunciating—underpins the Christian metaphysics of freedom and authority (or of freedom as transcendence into God’s love). But it is in favor of a much more ambiguous understanding of performance, knowledge, and faith—manifest in a narrative that challenges the reader’s grasp of motive and feeling—that Demons implicitly challenges the Christian ideal, the ideal of authentic faith, and perversely relishes the antagonistic other that such an ideal necessitates, generates, and thus cannot subsume.
NOTES

1. To read the novel, then, as a manifestation of the mythographic capacity in Gourgouris’s sense is to read it as an imaginative enactment of a mode of thought that challenges (like Nikolai’s letter) our ability to know or to accept grounds for spiritual conviction, legitimate authority, and ethical certitude. The novel calls into question the possibility of a sufficient conceptual formation derived from any single discursive framework; and as a manifestation of the mythographic imagination, it shows, in part through its own explicit performativity, the performative constitution of epistemic authority as such. Maybe even despite Dostoevsky’s intentions, the novel functions to de-naturalize certain historically given categories used to understand the essence of human being. (Tikhon calls Nikolai’s need to repent ‘natural’, but the text never admits so clear a motive.) We may experience guilt, but can we know its origins? We may talk about freedom, but can we ever know it other than negatively? We may search for truths about the self, about authenticity and faith, but can we ever account for those truths without accounting for the way in which the search itself is performed? We may offer a critique of the present, but can we know the nature of the future to which the critique ought to belong?

By asking these questions, Demons constitutes a radically reflexive attempt to theorize the nature of personal freedom and to understand History in its full chaotic indeterminacy. Moreover, as a critique of epistemological authority, it displays affectively and remarkably the contours, the boundaries, and ultimately the limitations of its own social-imaginary horizon. As such, the novel exemplifies a deep awareness of its own historicity while remaining cautiously skeptical of the challenge of imaging the form of a reconciliatory future or, for that matter, the definitive meaning of a present which years later might appear in History’s rear-view besmirched by failures of insight and imagination. The novel’s negativity is the source of
its profundity: the recognition that, contrary to the prescriptions of naïve utopianism, the possibility of an improved future requires realizing that we can’t as yet know what it will look like. See Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973) 40-42 for an elaboration of the idea that negation enables a form of freedom from the compulsion to systematize.


3. Ibid., 8
4. Ibid., 17, 18.
5. Ibid., 18.
6. Ibid., 7.
10. Dostoevsky, 15.
11. Ibid., 423
17. Ibid., 603.
18. Ibid., 602, 604.
19. I’m sure there is much to be said against Žižek’s argument as an interpretation of Christianity; for instance, his claim that Christianity
is the first religion without a Sacred seems dubious at best. For the purposes of this essay, I’m more interested in the interpretive lens he offers, provocatively re-imagining the Christian world-view in ways that illuminate problems and issues at stake in Dostoevsky’s novels.

21. Ibid., 63.
22. Dostoevsky, 619.
23. Ibid., 662.
24. J.M. Coetzee has an essay on this subject, with particular attention to the genre of the secular confession, in which he discusses what he calls ‘double thoughts’; Coetzee argues that in secular confessions the attempt to achieve a particular end—call it true self-knowledge, transposed from the idea of ‘absolution’ in a religious context—risks devolving into a series of deferrals and postponements as each ‘revelation’ becomes but another point of departure in a process of self-questioning. See “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky”, Comparative Literature, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Duke University Press, 1985).
25. Dostoevsky, 676.
27. See the chapter “Problema 1” in Fear and Trembling.
29. Dostoevsky, 711.
30. Ibid., 712.
31. Ibid., 619.
A Streetcar Named Desire and the European Gothic Tradition

Written by Zoey Peresman, Vassar College

The Southern Gothic movement’s very name connects it to the seemingly disparate social anxieties and changes that took place during the European Gothic movement. Emerging in 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, the stylistic and symbolic excesses of the European Gothic directly responded to—and rebelled against—Enlightenment rationality:

the nature of the fear represented in these novels—fear of imprisonment or entrapment, of rape and personal violation, of the triumph of evil over good and chaos over order—seems to reflect a specific historical moment characterized by increasing disillusionment with Enlightenment rationality and by bloody revolutions in America and France.¹

Critics thus argue that the European Gothic’s motifs of ruined, haunted castles, threatening sexuality, extreme settings, and emotional states and its use of the supernatural as a manifestation of internal terror are all “linked to wider threats of disintegration manifested most forcefully in political revolution” as well as to the decline of the feudal order.²
The Southern Gothic transposes these motifs onto a post-Civil War landscape to express the South’s identity crisis following the “political revolution” of the Civil War. The Civil War upended the familiar rituals of the Old South just as the French Revolution had upset a long-standing balance of power in Europe. The South’s former genteel men turned into weakened war veterans; Southern Belles lost their dainty image through the hardships and devastations of a war that left them hardened. After the Civil War, the South became the center for a transforming American society. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented rise in numbers of immigrants who quickly climbed America’s social ladder. The South, thus, faced pressure from the rest of the country to assimilate into the ‘new’ American standards of upward mobility and social ‘progress’—societal motors that it had traditionally opposed.

Despite the differences between the specific social conditions that European and Southern Gothic writers responded to, both the European and Southern Gothic traditions shared tropes and fixations underscore that they both chronicled changing human interactions in the face of a decaying socio-political order. The eerie castles of the European Gothic novel that evoked the dying feudal world made obsolete by “Enlightenment rationality” were reborn as the crumbling plantations haunted by the ghosts of plantation life, its ghosts reincarnated as wilted Belles.

Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* encapsulates the ways in which the Southern Gothic tradition uses European Gothic tropes to reflect how a transformed social and political climate upended social conventions and confused boundaries such as prescribed gender roles.—Williams’s play exposes the confusion that remained in the wake of forced changes in Southern life. The play
chronicles the mental decline of faded Southern Belle Blanche Du-Bois in the home of the “animalistic” Stanley Kowalski whose character and environment embody the threat that the post-Civil War’s racially mixed and upwardly mobile American landscape posed to the rigid Old South. Yet Williams complicates the Gothic tradition by revealing the faults of both the Old and New South. Blanche’s forced entry into the post-civil war milieu of class and racial mixing drives her mad. Yet the confines of Old Southern gender roles, especially the demand for pure femininity, harm her just as equally as the North’s demand for change. While many critics contend that the main conflict in the play is “between Old South gentility and a brutal new order,” both ways of life contain elements of the other and are in fact equally brutal. A Streetcar Named Desire adopts European Gothic tropes not only as a stylistic response to sociopolitical change but also to expose how human nature transgresses boundaries set by both the Old and New ways of life, and ultimately reveals that both ways are equal parts brutal and civilized.

Like its European Gothic ancestors, A Streetcar Named Desire depicts a culture in the midst of social change. Williams’s South is far removed from plantation days; in the New South, various cultures mingle with one another, making social change and progress possible. He sets the play in New Orleans, “a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races.” African-Americans are no longer subordinate to Caucasians; they are their neighbors. In the part of New Orleans where former plantation-dweller Stella lives, “you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers.” People speak a hybrid language, evidenced by the Caucasian Eunice’s use of Spanish (“Por nada!”). In the first exchange of dialogue a white woman and a black woman easily converse while sharing the same staircase.
However, Gothic fiction does not simply react to social change; it conveys its’ characters’ mindsets in the midst of upheaval. Williams uses theatrical devices to render Blanche’s subjectivity objective, and thus continue Gothic fiction’s fixation on representing subjective states of mind. While European Gothic writers externalized their characters’ fears and fantasies in the form of supernatural figures and excessively wrought language, as a playwright Williams can use sound and lighting, rather than language, to “objectify subjective states of feeling”. Traditionally in Gothic fiction, “the emotions of these characters are externalized…their deepest passions and fears are literalized as other characters, supernatural phenomena, and even inanimate objects.”

One way Blanche’s mental state is manifest objectively is through Williams’s expressionistic use of setting. The term Gothic implies “not just a particular setting but a particular use of setting.” The gothic use of setting creates an outer sense of entrapment and despair parallel to the characters’ inner sense of entrapment. While the Kowalski’s modest apartment in Streetcar possesses no superficial resemblances to the grand castles of Walpole and Ann Radcliffe’s works, it functions as a Gothic space because it manifests the terror Blanche DuBois feels towards the new integrated South. The play is set in New Orleans, an epicenter of the racial mixing, alcoholism, and urban cynicism that threaten Blanche’s grasp on the fading Old South. Thus the cramped atmosphere of Blanche’s apartment “is always threatening and never comfortable” to a woman who is out of place in the modern urban and societal landscape. Williams’s opening stage directions, which point out the building’s “rickety outside stairs” and “weathered grey” paint, describe a house in ruin that seemingly manifests the moral and mental decay that will occur inside it throughout the play.” The house, inhabited by her brother in law’s crude urban working-class friends and alcoholic, violent
neighbors, is falling apart. Williams directly links its outer decrepitude with its proximity to African-American communities (to signify that Blanche perceives the decline of her strictly Caucasian world as destructive, not to explicitly vilify African-Americans, although the two are interrelated) by associating the “atmosphere of decay” with “a corresponding air…evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a bar around the corner…Two rooms can be seen, not too clearly defined.” Viewers and readers, therefore, see from the start of the play that the apartment is not merely a place but a sight of significations that assumes Blanche’s fears towards the New South that it embodies. The house’s physical decay reflects both Blanche’s fears of a decrepit modern world and foreshadows her eventual mental disintegration.

Similarly, Blanche’s hysterical body expresses her inner turmoil. Gothic works often feature a hysterical female body that becomes an object, an instrument that expresses mental pain and hysteria. Their heroines exhibit “a tendency to faint and a need to be rescued—frequently” that reflects their inability to cope with the forces of evil that threaten their purity and their very lives. From the first scene, Williams specifies in his stage directions that Blanche is physically weak and has highly wrought nerves; she speaks her first line “with faintly hysterical humour.” Williams’s use of the word “humor” recalls the old European notion that one’s balance of inner “humors” determined the personality, and this word choice therefore not only links the play to European tradition but also indicates Blanche’s unbalanced internal state. Later, the stage directions directly state, “The utter exhaustion which only a neurasthenic personality can know is evident in Blanche’s voice and manner.” The play’s stage directions are replete with references to Blanche’s hysterical mannerisms, filled with the “shrieks, horror, and surprise” characteristic of tormented Gothic bodies: “Looking down at her glass, which shakes.
in her hand,” “She is shaking all over and panting for breath as she tries to laugh.”17 The bottle nearly slips from her grasp,” “No coke honey, not with my nerves tonight!”18 Her convulsive movements indicate her madness and make her grotesque, as a woman whose body cannot conform to ladylike stillness and composure. We can, therefore, read Blanche’s hysterical body not simply as a physical sign of her mental inability to cope with the changing South, but as a transgression of the composed femininity that characterized the Old South. Blanche’s physically and psychically unsettling movements fulfill Gothic scholar George E. Haggerty’s theory that Gothic bodies are “both physically gruesome and psychologically alarming,” and that they embody the terror that fills the character’s mind.19

Blanche’s body expresses not only hysteria, but sexual aggression as well. This link between her hysterical and sexual behavior suggests that repressing traits as primal as sexuality might engender her hysteria. Blanche’s convulsions and moaning often inadvertently suggest sexual desire. After the disastrous poker game, “Blanche utters a moaning cry and runs into the bedroom, throwing herself beside Stella in a rush of hysterical tenderness.”20 Williams’s language—the “moaning cry” and “hysterical tenderness”—invoke a sexual frenzy seemingly incompatible with the Southern Belle persona she attempts to project. Critic Dianne Cafagna writes, “Blanche uses sex to transform herself; it is the movement of desire into a death-wish, into self-annihilation.”21 Blanche’s sexuality functions as a form of “self-annihilation” because it destroys the façade of the self she presents and exposes her true carnality. Her sexuality often comes through in unconscious mannerisms and words, as when she suggestively unbuttons her blouse while talking about Mitch or when she proclaims, “I shall take a sudden notion to swoop down on [Shep Huntsleigh]!”22 Both of these examples suggest predatory sexuality rather than the passivity expected of a good Southern lady.
Williams also uses Blanche’s enjoyment of alcohol, a traditionally masculine pleasure, to corrupt the Southern Belle’s persona similar to the way in which the Gothic villain strives to defile a maiden. In a manner incongruous to her “delicate beauty,” when she enters the Kowalskis’ apartment Blanche “springs up and crosses to [the closet], and removes a whisky bottle. She pours half a tumbler of whisky and tosses it down. She carefully replaces the bottle and washes out the tumbler at the sink.” Williams’s language emphasizes the contradiction between her aggressive drinking and thoughtful, dutiful cleaning. His choice of the words “spring” and “toss” characterize her drinking as enthusiastic, while her “careful” replacement of the bottle underscores her polite upbringing. When Blanche spills alcohol onto her “pretty white skirt,” the stained skirt neatly embodies her fusion of sexuality and purity. Though Blanche initially appears to embody the Southern Belle archetype, her latent aggression, particularly her sexual aggression, makes her a hybrid figure.

The slips in Blanche’s Southern Belle masquerade reveal how, in a world where the South is no longer powerful, the Old South’s insistence on proper manners has lost to the basic human drive towards sexuality. Blanche’s new world is one in which courtship no longer facilitates romance; instead lust and sex drive relationships. As Stella explains, “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant.” The patriarch is no gentleman. Stanley, for whom the “center” of his life “has been pleasure with women,” makes a former Belle like Stella see gentility and romance as “unimportant.” In a world where standards of gentility can no longer contain human sexual nature, Blanche’s Southern Belle façade accordingly shows glimpses of the sexual woman she is trying to hide. Just as “In…the erotic…tendencies of [the] Gothic there emerges the awful spectre
of complete social disintegration,” the erotic tendencies of the seem-
ingly archetypal Southern Belle, who we first see “daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice,” signal the decay of the old world she ostensibly represents.27

Aside from characterizing sex as a primal yet destructive force, Blanche’s sexual aggression also resists society’s hypocritical demands upon female behavior. Blanche goes mad not only by being exposed to the “New” America of the Kowalskis but also under the strain of fulfilling competing societal pressures to be sweetly feminine yet sexually available. Fred Botting’s contention that “Gothic subjects were…no longer in control of those passions, desires, and fantasies, that had been policed and partially expunged in the eighteenth century” also relates to Blanche’s failure to self-police her behavior adequately enough to meet the traditional demand for feminine propriety.28 Standards of feminine behavior were especially rigid in the American South, which exiled Blanche for seducing a student and forbid women from swearing, getting dirty, or talking to those “beneath” them.29 Southern writer Helen Ekin Starrett’s manual The Charm of Fine Manners defined Southern womanhood accordingly: “One of the greatest blemishes in the character of…any young girl or woman, is forwardness, boldness, pertness.”30 While the Old Southern views represented by Starrett demand chastity, Blanche must use sexuality to succeed in a male-dominated world, violating the traditional caution against “forwardness, boldness, [and] pertness”. Blanche’s failure to negotiate between propriety and carnality exposes the impossibility of fulfilling such contradictory standards of behavior. Williams indicts society for their contradictory demands upon female behavior during Blanche’s explanation of her past behavior:

Have got to be seductive…just in order to pay for-
one night’s shelter!...Men don’t even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you’ve got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you’re going to have someone’s protection.”

Blanche’s monologue reveals the double bind of womanhood: a woman is expected to be delicate, to be considered feminine, but must also use sexuality to be noticed and to survive in a man’s world. However, whatever she gains through sex comes at the cost of her femininity and honor. As a woman, Blanche’s most prized good is her sexuality, yet restrictive standards of femininity punish her for using it. Although Blanche can only “run from protection, from one leaky roof to another” to escape being caught in the “storm” of Post-Civil War Southern poverty, societal standards unfairly force her emerge with no signs of “the struggle for death and bleeding.” While Blanche longs for the Old South, its ideals ignore the reality of a world in which women “have got to be seductive” to survive and instead punishes her for her attempts to survive. Its ideology of domesticity leaves Blanches unable to reconcile her behavior and her beliefs, a schism which causes her madness. The lost world she idealizes, then, is equally as punishing and harmful as the modern, sexualized world she fears yet participates within. Her ensuing madness reveals that attempting to uphold prescribed gender roles forbids human failure and vulnerability, and it can be seen not only as a response to societal pressures in the Gothic tradition but a protest against them.

Blanche’s placement within a double bind manifests itself in her interactions with potential suitor Mitch. These interactions display her vacillation between the docility that men claim to desire from women, and the sexuality that men eventually demand. Since dictates of pure femininity make Blanche feel “obliged to discourage”
Mitch’s kiss, she feels conflicted because she “didn’t resent [the kiss]! Not a bit in the world.”\textsuperscript{33} When she sexually propositions him, she does so in French so that she can express herself without him understanding what she means, and possibly disrespecting her as a result. Blanche’s use of French, the idealized Romance language, in a sexual proposition characteristically mixes delicacy and degeneration in concert with her conflicting personalities. After Mitch learns of Blanche’s past, he announces his disgust at her sexual actions and declares, “You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother.” However, he also tries to have sex with her, and the contradiction between his disgust and desire expresses men’s impossible expectations for women to be both dainty and carnal. Blanche cannot help but collapse under competing notions of appropriate female behavior. “I try to give [magic] to people,” she explains to Mitch, “I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth.”\textsuperscript{34} Caught between competing “truths”—that women are pure and that women must use sex to succeed—Blanche is left without a stable self. She is both the defiled maiden and the lascivious villain of Gothic literature, a hybrid creature whose contradictory characteristics contribute to Williams’s portrait of a society in flux.

Williams’s attitude towards the Gothic tradition is ambiguous; while his nostalgia for the Old South invokes Gothic writers’ desire for order, he also confuses the boundaries of appropriate female behavior and class rigidity that traditional Gothic writers ultimately reaffirm. Williams’s reactionary attitude towards changes to the Old South aligns him with Gothic writers who mourned the loss of simpler times. Fred Botting argues, “Gothic novels seem to sustain a nostalgic relish for a lost era of romance and adventure, for a world that, if barbaric…was also ordered.” Tennessee Williams’s famous remark that he “write[s] out of love for the South…it is out of regret
for a South that no longer exists that I write of the forces that have destroyed it” recalls Botting’s notion that the Gothic is based upon nostalgia for a vanished past. By characterizing the new American man, Stanley, as a barbarian, and the modern, racially mixed urban milieu as threatening, Williams exposes his own bias against post-Civil War social mobility for the lower classes and oppressed races. It is thus tempting to believe that Williams’s rigid stance towards race and class make A Streetcar Named Desire accord with Botting’s contention that the Gothic “enables the reconstitution of limits and boundaries.”

However, Williams’s characterization of Blanche complicates his relation to Gothic tradition because it explodes the binaries that the Gothic attempted to reconstitute. Blanche’s transgression from the role of the Southern Belle does not reaffirm standards of good and evil female behavior. Rather, Williams interrogates the docile and sexual extremes of women’s prescribed social roles to ultimately expose them as false societal constructs. Blanche DuBois is neither demon nor saint, but simply a conflicted human trapped in a liminal space between two exaggerated notions of womanhood, neither of which leaves room for a coherent self. Although Williams romanticizes the Old South, he also reveals that its expectation of female propriety was just as brutal and dehumanizing as the change forced upon Blanche in New Orleans. His use of Gothic tropes such as a decayed home and a hysterical female body externalize Blanche’s internal state so that audiences can understand the societal changes and standards that produce her madness. By ultimately exposing human and societal ambiguity, Williams proves that Gothic excess and imagination can paradoxically present a realistic, complicated portrait of the world.
NOTES

2. Ibid., 5.
5. Ibid., 1.
6. Ibid., 6.
8. Ibid., 6.
11. Williams, 1.
12. Ibid., 5.
15. Ibid., 67.
17. Williams, 7.
18. Ibid., 8.
20. Williams, 46.
22. Williams, 56.
23. Ibid., 53.
24. Ibid., 53.
25. Ibid., 53.
26. Ibid., 16.
27. Botting, 5.
28. Ibid., 12.
31. Williams, 60.
32. Ibid., 15.
33. Ibid., 56.
34. Ibid., 99.
35. Botting, 8.
The Theatricality of Form and Language in Racinian Tragedy

Written by Vivian Wenwen Meng, Homerton College, University of Cambridge

1. Introduction
Roland Barthes famously defines theatricality as “theatre-minus-text.”¹ For him, as for many critics, Racinian tragedy is merely a “commentaire tragique” (tragic commentary) characterised largely by pure text with only a few theatrical features.² Racine’s plays are therefore often viewed as beautiful literature but unsuited to the theatre. However, this dichotomy between theatre and literature—that critical interpretations of Racine assume—according to Raymond Williams detracts from a proper critical appreciation of his plays.³ In order to truly grasp the tragic beauty of Racine’s plays, it is imperative to bridge the gulf between the texts to be read on the page and the lines to be acted on the stage. My contention is then that the genius of Racinian tragedy resides precisely in its literary and theatrical dimensions, which operate in parallel.

Many critics have attempted to reconcile literature and theatre in their analysis of Racinian tragedy, such as Michael Hawcroft in Word as Action: Racine, Rhetoric, and Theatricality. However, by exploring theatricality as separate from the stage and actual performances,
these studies rarely analyze the ways in which a particular verse directs and determines the voice and gesture of the actor. Moreover, they fail to explore the form and structure of Racine’s plays in terms of their intrinsic value as performances. It is therefore the aim of this project to propose a more complete criticism of Racinian tragedy, one that incorporates and extends previous studies. Literary analysis of the text will be combined with studies of actual performances in the exploration of the theatricality of discourse and dramatic form in Racine’s work.

I will start by examining how written verses subtly but efficiently guide the actor’s voice, tone, gestures, and movements on stage. Furthermore, by exploring what the actor owes the verses and what the verses owe to the actor, I will argue that speech is both performative and active and thus is at the heart of the tragic experience, rather than merely providing an account of it. After setting up this framework, I will consider the elements that are opposite to speech yet central to it: the act of listening and silence. It is within and through the structural elements of Racine’s plays that speech and other non-verbal components assume their overall dramatic and theatrical qualities.

2. Speech and Performance

Roland Barthes describes theatricality as “une épaisseur de signes.” He argues that the voices and gestures of actors are essential to this “informational polyphony,” which assists the spectator’s understanding of the play and enriches his/her theatrical experience. One way of reconciling literature and theatre within Racinian tragedy is by analyzing the inseparable relationship between verse, voice, and gesture. Like all great playwrights, Racine seems always aware that written verse should direct the actor’s performance of the verse. Indeed, the movement of the voice is inseparable from the
movement of emotions and the progression of action. If we put aside the view that Racinian tragedies are merely tragic commentaries, we can analyze them as dramatised verses meant to be acted, heard, and seen.

In Racine, when a character’s suppressed emotions come to the surface through verbal expression, the actor is asked to find within the lines the particular feelings and directives for his intonation and voice. It is, first and foremost, through the actor’s vocal contribution that the desired theatrical effects on stage are achieved. An actress playing Phèdre will know when she speaks the lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{J’aime… A ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frisonne,} \\
\text{J’aime…’}
\end{align*}
\]

that her voice must “tremble” and “frisonne” (shiver).\(^5\) The content of the verses, the broken rhythm, the accented syllables of “tremble” and “frisson,” the repetition of “j’aime” (“I love”) and the poignant pause that follows all direct the speaking. Jacqueline Bir, who used to play the role of Phèdre, praised Racine as a playwright with an incredible aural imagination.\(^6\) She specifically mentions these two verses and says that the sound and arrangement of the words naturally directed her to deliver them with affected slowness in a low and trembling voice, one which rightly reflects both the heroine’s emotional vigour and pain. In fact, the emotion that comes through in the actress’s voice is an emotion that is directed by the text: when it is conveyed, it becomes possible for the audience to actually ignore the precise text itself. It is precisely at this point that Phèdre’s so-far silent passion and inner turmoil find an outward expression, but it is also this same verse that marks her last attempt to retain the secret of her forbidden love. “J’aime,” delivered in a trembling voice, is a secret half-told, and it already forebodes and constitutes her tragic
outcome. Through the verses themselves Racine subtly controls the rhythm of the speech and the actor’s tone of voice, which then give a definitive direction to the audience’s theatrical attention.

However, text is not only used in Racine to direct dramatic intonation, but it is also alive with implied gestures that prompt subtle bodily movements from the actors, despite his preoccupation with preserving the “bienséance” (decorum) and the “vraisemblance” (realism). Part of Racinian tragedy’s reputation as restricting stage action has been due to a tendency to focus on explicit stage directions in Racinian tragedy, noting that they are infrequent and insignificant. Yet such a methodology ignores the fact that 17th century French theatrical convention required stage directions to be contained within the speech of the characters. For example, in *Berénice*, the eponymous protagonist addresses Titus, “Sans me répondre,/ Vous détournez les yeux, et semblez vous confondre!/ Ne m’offririez-vous plus qu’un visage interdit?.” She thus indicates that Titus was previously turning his face away from hers. Similarly, in *Bajazet*, Acomat’s says to Roxane, “Madame, quel regard, et quelle voix sévère, /Malgré votre discours, m’assurent du contraire?” Parish refers to these verses as “functional language,” because they serve as a means to direct acting: the voice, facial expressions, and even body language of the character in question are commented upon by his/her interlocutors. The function of the text therefore stretches far beyond the scope of personal expression. The text functions as stage directions that guide actors in their performance and theatrical directors in their productions of Racine.

It should be noted, however, that not all directives for the actor are explicitly stated in their speech. Maskell rightly points out that the choice of words and even the structure of the speech are relevant to the actors’ performance and the overall theatricality of the tragedy.
The analysis of Bérénice’s final speech, together with Julie Rocoing’s interpretation of it in Brethome’s production, supports this claim.12 The tone and gesture of Bérénice are already implied in the first words of her final speech, “Arrêtez. Arrêtez” (“Stop. Stop”).13 The double imperatives mirror the two men she is addressing, one after the other, seemingly to compel an accompanied hand gestures that reinforce these words on the part of the actress. The use of a full stop between both words lengthens the pause, adding both authority and poignancy to her voice. Bérénice’s last speech is thoroughly measured, severe and deliberately out of key as opposed to her previous emotional state. Her bodily movements on stage are arranged to emphasise this change. Whereas she rushes into Titus’ room furiously in the previous act, her bodily movements in this closing scene are whittled down to a minimal level fitting the nature and content of her speech. The radical change in Bérénice’s way of speaking and acting allows the spectator to perceive the heroine’s incredible development as a character. Although there is no gore or death on stage, the shock, the pain, and the full tragic force derived from Bérénice’s final decision are fully felt by the spectator due to the subtle but powerful visual and verbal unity created by the speech.

In Phèdre, Racine is equally careful in creating visual and verbal unity to achieve theatricality. Rawling’s discussion of her role as Phèdre is particularly pertinent.14 Paralysed by passion, Phèdre says these words at her last breath,

\[
\text{Et la mort, à mes yeux dérobant la clarté,} \\
\text{Rend au jour, qu’ils souillaient, toute sa pureté.} \]

Despite all her sin and guilt, Phèdre’s last breath is on the upward note of “toute sa pureté” (“all her purity”), and not on a downward one of “la mort” (“the death”). Rawling says that this particular arrangement
of words has inspired her to deliver the verses with a dignified tone of voice and subtle gestures. She lifts her head and raises her hand with great difficulty to indicate Phèdre’s last attempt to restore “toute sa pureté” at the very moment when her life is leaving her. With the hints of words and gestures, the spectator witnesses a tragic but ultimately glorious death, which secures our final impression of Phèdre. She does not die on the downward meaning of “la mort” as a punishment for her transgression, but rather uses it as the last opportunity to bring her virtue back to daylight, re-conquering her purity. A reader who analyzes Phèdre’s final speech merely as poetic may see her death as being tragic and moving, but only a spectator who perceives the verbal and visual unity in these lines can feel the full dramatic and theatrical force of the dénouement. Phèdre’s death ceases to be a static end that marks the finality of her life; instead, it demonstrates the final victory of the tragic heroine against her sinful self. In this way, every dramatic speech in Racine’s plays is given a certain tone and gesture corresponding to its meaning. The actors’ performance is guided by the verses: they greatly enhance the theatrical experience of the spectator, guiding actors and directors alike, and are key to our understanding of the theatricality of discourse.

3. Speaking and Listening as Action
If speech constitutes action and is an essential theatrical element, it is impossible for us to explore the theatricality of discourse without considering both the speaker and the listener. Verbal action simply cannot have taken effect without the receiving end. Indeed, Phèdre would not have felt so ashamed and guilty of incest had Hippolyte not “trop entendu(e)” (heard too much). Likewise, the manipulative words of Hermoine, Andromaque, Roxane, and Bérénice would not have set tragedy in motion had their admirers reacted less violently. In Racinian tragedy, the first indicator of
listening being more than a passive equivalence of speaking is the specific pattern of verbal exchange. A prominent example can be found in Act IV Scene 2 of *Britannicus*. Néron, the listener, is only given forty-six lines out of a hundred and ninety in a dialogue that Agrippine dominates. Another instance of characters occupying the listening roles is to be found in *Iphigénie*. Agamemnon has only 71 lines out of 234, although he is present on stage for the whole of Act 3 Scene 5.

The theatrical importance of the act of listening for Racine is further emphasised by its performative nature. Elaborating upon Barthes view that to listen is to do, Styan points out that listening ought to be acted out on stage as much as speaking, because the act of listening also determines the nature of the theatrical experience through its engagement of the spectator.17 Jadoul’s production of *Phèdre* best illustrates this point of view.18 In Act II Scene 4, the actor who plays Hippolyte assumes an unusually stiff body gesture and facial expression that suggest unease, shame, and his wish to escape from the scene. He faces the spectator throughout Phèdre’s confession, which not only makes it convenient for the spectator to observe his increasingly tense facial expressions, but also helps him keep at a ninety-degree angle from the speaker. By avoiding both Phèdre’s touch and glance, Hippolyte’s desire to keep her at a distance is made apparent. Even before he gives any verbal response, his rejection of both Phèdre’s words and being is clearly communicated to the spectator. By “inventing” a performance for his role as a listener based both on the context of the scene and the implicit stage direction in Phèdre’s speech,

Ciel! Comme il m’écoutait…
Comme il ne respirait qu’une retraite prompte
Et combien sa rougeur a redouble ma honte
the actor treats listening as a dramatic and fundamentally theatrical act.\textsuperscript{19}

It should be noted that, depending on the precise context, the listener’s eagerness or reluctance to hear the speech, his receptivity or misinterpretation of the speech could enhance the tragic and theatrical potential of the scene. Racine is careful to show us not only the listeners’ own response to the speech, but also the anticipated reaction that speech may provoke. Antiochus predicts that his declaration of love to Bérénice will achieve nothing but “lui déplaire” (“displease her”)\textsuperscript{20}; Titus poignantly imagines the violent impact of his decision on Bérénice: “Je viens percer un coeur qui m’adore, qui m’aime” (“I come to pierce a heart that adores me, that loves me”).\textsuperscript{21} Oreste, too, hears in his head Hermoine’s response long before he even speaks to her. Sometimes the dramatic importance of the act of listening is further emphasised by the voice of the listener. There are occasions where characters in their listening role repeat what they hear to the speaker. For instance, Bérénice fires these words at Titus:

\begin{center}
Cette même bouche, après mille serments
D’un amour qui devait unir tous nos moments,
Cette bouche, à mes yeux s’avouant infidèle,
M’ordonnât elle-même une absence éternelle.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{center}

By condensing Titus’ past and present discourse into four lines, Bérénice places the emperor in her former position as listener. Similarly, Pyrrhus is forced to hear the cruelty of his own words and subsequently experiences the intensity of the torture that he has caused Bérénice. Through this, Racine has created for the spectator an extremely peculiar theatrical experience, as the act of speaking and listening fuse into one at this precise point. Bérénice, the original
listener, Pyrrhus, the speaker-listener, and the spectator, the listener
off-stage, are all put in exactly the same position at this poignant
moment of the play. In this way, by giving dramatic significance
to both the active art of speaking and the passive act of listening,
Racine enriches the theatrical impact that verbal actions have on the
spectator.

4. The Eloquence of Silence
It is not only speech that constitutes action and generates dramatic
tension; the very absence of language can also be theatrical. We are
constantly confronted with different kinds of silence in Racinian
tragedy. The “injuste silence” (“unfair silence”) of Phèdre sends
Hippolyte to his death. The “silence glace” (“cold silence”) that
torments Bérénice, and Hermione’s “calme” “funeste” (“fatal
calmness”) are but a few examples. Richard Parish’s detailed
analysis of silence in Racine’s work is useful for categorizing
different types of silence for a more systematic analysis of their
theatrical potential. According to Parish, Phèdre’s unfaire silence,
which serves to conceal and deceive, is a form of “functional
silence.” Bajazet’s “silence perfide” (“treacherous silence”) that
temporarily saves his life and Britannicus’s “silence farouche”
(“fierce silence”) that allows him to dominate over his entourage
fall into the same category. Far from being a synonym of passivity
and inaction, functional silence can be an effective weapon for
characters to dominate, defend, or destroy. It can be argued that
silence has an active role similar to the power of speech in Racinian
tragedy. The statement “Parler, c’est agir” is only true when speech
“corresponds to a substitute for physical action.” When a certain
dramatic condition is created in which action becomes independent
of language, one may say that “ne pas parler, c’est agir” (“Not to
speak is to act”). Hence, functional silence can constitute as dramatic
an event as speech.
Furthermore, the most unsettling and dramatic type of silence in Racine’s plays has a potentially terrifying outcome and marks a turning point in the play. Hermione’s “calme… funeste” (foreboding silence) is of this nature. Moreau notices the theatricality of Hermione’s silence fully when he comments, “Il y a plus de tempête dans les silences d’Hermione que dans ses cris les plus déchirants” (“Hermione’s silence is more tempestuous than her most harrowing scream”). Indeed, her silence represents a transitional moment from passion externalised through words to passion manifested through fatal actions. The theatricality of this type of silence expresses the potential for further violence and tragedy. As Le Bidois sums up, “Racine semble avoir découvert… le secret d’une éloquence perdue, l’éloquence du mutisme” (“Racine seems to have discovered… the secret of a kind of lost eloquence, the eloquence of silence”). Hermione does not say a word after being betrayed in Act IV Scene 2, but her silence assumes an eloquence of its own. After so many scenes of her indignant words, the spectator cannot fail to feel the force of Hermione’s calm, which encapsulates her darkest passion about to be transformed into irreversible tragic actions.

There exists another type of silence in Racine: the literal silence of inarticulacy. It does not necessarily advance the course of action but is nonetheless important to the theatrical experience of the play. A celebrated example of literal silence can be found in Agamemnon’s fragmented exchange with Iphigénie:

Iphigénie: N’éclaircirez-vous point ce front charge d’ennuis?
Agamemnon: Ah, ma fille!
Iphigénie: Seigneur, poursuivez.
Agamemnon
Je ne puis.
Phillips remarks that this kind of silence is an important theatrical device for Racine because it enhances the stage as a place of speech.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, if Racinian tragedy is characterised by the domination of language, then literal silence on stage creates a verbal “vacuum” in the performance, which increases the demand for speech. Ironically, silence exposes imminent danger more explicitly than words, because literal silence in Racine reveals the character’s very attempt to conceal danger. The paradoxical function of silence, which at once conceals and expresses, creates an almost unbearable suspense for the spectator. In the actual performance of Racine’s plays, we often see actors exploit this type of dramatic pause to the full. Rawling’s interpretation of Phèdre in Act IV Scene 5 provides a good example. The actress took the liberty to create a “ghastly, deadly pause” in the soliloquy before delivering the melodramatic line, “Hippolyte est sensible, et ne sent rien pour moi!”\textsuperscript{34} This type of dramatic pause is extremely effective in theatre for two reasons. Firstly, the sharp aural contrast that silence forms with speech stimulates the spectator to be more alert to the performance on stage. Secondly, the dramatic pause prompts the spectator and gives him time to ask deeper questions. In doing so he becomes more engaged in the whole theatrical experience.

5. Conclusion
Through the above discussion, I have illustrated that which makes Racinian tragedy extraordinarily poetic simultaneously makes it dramatic and theatrical. For Racine, text and “theatricality” result not from two separate aims, but from the full expansion of one and the same, which is to elicit profound emotions from the spectator. The genius of Racinian tragedy therefore resides precisely in the seamlessly fused literary and theatrical dimensions that operate in parallel.
In the analysis of the performative nature of speech, I have shown that Racine’s language is too flexible and powerful to be confined within the narrow bounds of a pure tragic commentary. Depending on the context, Racinian verses can serve to describe the theatrical setting, direct the actors’ performance, display the protagonist’s passion, and even push forward and complete action. The close relationship between language and theatricality can also be understood in terms of the importance of both listening and speaking. Also, characteristic of the theatricality of Racine is the use of different kinds of silence. The contrast and interaction between silence and utterance allow Racine to explore a full range of expressive potential in theatre: from the implicit and dangerous (silence) to the apparent and irreversible (utterance).

No doubt a number of other aspects of theatrical analyses could be added to those I have mentioned. For example, it would be useful to assess the theatricality of Racine’s plays not only in their own light, but also in relation to other plays of the period that conform to the same theatrical conventions. Tracing the evolution, from the seventeenth century to modern day, of the theatrical impact that Racinian tragedy has had on its audience could also provide a stimulating angle for further research. Although my analysis of form and language is far from exhaustive, I hope that it will provide some insight into the ubiquitous but subtle theatricality with Racine. His work really is, in the best classical manner, an art that conceals its art, a theatrical masterpiece that conceals its theatricality. Bearing this in mind will help readers, spectators, translators, and actors alike to come closer to appreciate true Racinian tragedy.35
NOTES


5. Phèdre: (1. 3)

6. Phèdre, a theatrical production on DVD (director: Jadoul, B.,)


8. Translation: Without replying to me, / you flee my gaze, and seem to lose all countenance! / Will you offer me nothing but such a cold glance. (2.4)

9. Translation: Madame, your stares, your serious tone/ Despite your words, all declare to me the opposite. (4.6)


12. A theatrical production of Bérénice; directed by L. Brethome, and performed at Théâtre de La Croix-Rousse in Lyon on 17, Nov., 2011

13. (5.7)


15. Translation: And death, robbing my eyes of light/ Shall give back to daylight all its tarnished purity. (5.7)

16. Translation: Understood too well. (2.5)

17. John L. Styan, The Elements of Drama (Cambridge:
18. *Phèdre*, a theatrical production on DVD (director: Jadoul, B.,)
19. Translation: Oh heavens, how he listened to me.../How he wished for a quick escape!/ And how his blushes added to my shame. (3.1)
20. Translation: Displease her. (3.3)
21. Translation: I come to pierce a heart that adores me, that loves me. (4.4)
22. Translation: These same lips, after a thousand oaths/ of a love that should unite us till our deaths,/ These lips, admitting their infidelity to my eyes,/ condemned me to eternal banishment. (4.5)
23. (5.7)
24. (5.6)
25. (4.2)
27. (3.4)
28. (5.8)
32. Translation: Iphigenia: Will you not drive away the worries that cloud your face?/ Agamemnon: Ah my daughter!/ Iphigenia: Pursue, my lord./ Agamemnon: I cannot. (2.2)
35. The translated versions of the quotations in the paper are largely the author’s own translations.
Follow us on Twitter @CJLC1

And On Tumblr: http://columbia-journal-of-lit-crit.tumblr.com/

Check out the online version of the Journal: http://english.columbia.edu/undergraduate/columbia-journal-literary-criticism

Email us with submissions or if you’re interested in getting involved at: submittocjlc@gmail.com