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REAL GENDER: IDENTITY, LOSS, AND THE CAPACITY TO FEEL REAL

by

HANNAH WALLERSTEIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

The City University of New York

2016

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Real Gender: Identity, Loss and the Capacity To Feel Real

By

Hannah Wallerstein

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

Real Gender: Identity, Loss, and the Capacity to Feel Real

by

Hannah Wallerstein

Advisor: Lissa Weinstein, PhD

This project concerns gender and feeling real. It begins with a seeming paradox: on the one hand, since Judith Butler (1999; 2011) we can no longer think gender as ontological in any simple sense; on the other, clinical experience and the voices of transgender and gender-queer individuals shows gender to function on an order of reality, and one exceeding the social. In other words, if feeling real depended entirely on being read as such, how would we account for the many who pass easily as “real” men or women and yet feel unreal, or come to feel more real by changing their socially legible bodies to be read differently? Using psychoanalytic theories of reality, identification and symbolization alongside select works of literature, this project offers a framework for thinking the varying subjective experiences of gender’s reality, without collapsing into either a normative or purely social model. In short, it proposes to think gender’s relation to reality in the context of the constitutive relation to the psychoanalytic object. If separation from the object is refused, objective reality collapses and gender feels too real. If connection to the object is refused, internal reality is inaccessible, and gender feels false. If both separation from and connection to the object are tolerated, gender feels true and allows for growth.

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## Chapter 1

### Real gender: identity, loss, and the capacity to feel real

This project concerns gender and feeling real. It begins with a seeming contradiction: since Judith Butler's intervention on feminist theory we can no longer accept gender as ontological truth (1999; 2011). Instead, what appears as the fact of one's gender becomes social performance: a "fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of the body...which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (1999, pp. 174, 179). And yet, clinical experience and the voices of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals<sup>1</sup> teach us that gender functions on an order of truth that exceeds the social.<sup>2</sup> In other words, if feeling real depended entirely on being read as such, how would we account for the many who pass easily as "real" men or women and yet feel unreal, or come to feel more real by changing their socially legible bodies to be read differently? And how do we make sense of this transformation being not simply a political act but a matter of psychic survival?

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<sup>1</sup> The term transgender (trans for short) will be used in this project to refer to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth. It is an umbrella term that includes those who have undergone bodily modification (such as taking hormones or undergoing sex reassignment surgery) and those who have not had or do not want any medical intervention. Gender non-conforming, or gender variance, refers to all behaviors that are outside the socially expected gender performance associated with a particular born physical sex.

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, the word "exceed" is here not meant to suggest an exiting of the social, for such a movement is never possible. Instead, it is being used to mark the place of psychic life, which, while never outside of the social, can neither be flattened into it. It is this paradoxical always-inside-of-but-also-more-than relation between the psyche and the social (Lacan's word "extimate" [1992] comes to mind) that this project attempts to elaborate.

I contend that a more serious accounting for gender's subjective reality is in order. This project attempts as much.

### **What is REAL?**

To orient, let me turn to a story that has little to do with gender but everything to do with feeling real. In Margery Williams' children's tale, the *Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), a toy rabbit does not feel real, or special in any way. He hears other toys "boast and swagger" and "pretend to be real" (pp. 3-4), and he longs for something he does not understand. Luckily, he has someone older and wiser and kind to turn to:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day..."Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become, It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of you hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and vey shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." (pp. 7-8)

What is expressed so beautifully in Williams' book is a relation to reality that is neither ontological nor given but subjective and achieved. It happens "bit by bit." The mutative mechanism is love: "Not just to play with, but REALLY loves you." Our rabbit must be thought of—he cannot simply function as an object of pleasure (something to play with), but must be

treated as a subject with a mind of its own, as a “you.” To be loved, to be thought of, impacts the body—it entails narcissistic loss (“most of your hair has been loved off”).

The Velveteen Rabbit’s process of becoming real is three-part. First, the Boy takes him as a favorite plaything, and after many months pronounces him real. ”He was Real. The Boy himself had said it” (p. 13). Here the rabbit is given a name that has value to him, a container that makes his feel alive and transforms him:

That night he was almost too happy to sleep, and so much love stirred in his little sawdust heart that is almost burst. And into his boot-button eyes, that had long ago lost their polish, there came a look of wisdom and beauty, so that even Nana noticed it next morning when she picked him up, and said, “I declare if that old Bunny hasn’t got quite a knowing expression!” (p. 13)

Second, the rabbit’s internal experience of himself as real, provided by a boy who loves him, hits up against external reality. He meets actual living rabbits, who invite him to play. This he cannot do, having no hind legs to move on. The Velveteen Rabbit pretends he does not feel like playing, and does not want to dance, “But all the while he was longing to dance, for a funny new tickly feeling ran through him, and he felt he would give anything in the world to be able to jump about like these rabbits did” (p. 18). Having once been content with his dependence on the Boy, now the Velveteen Rabbit desires autonomy—to be real all on his own.

The third and last step is object-loss and mourning. The Boy becomes sick with the scarlet fever, and once he is better the doctor orders all play things that kept him company during his sickness to be burned. The Velveteen Rabbit is thrown outside with the other infected objects to be burned, and realizes he has lost the Boy: “Of what use was it to be loved and lose ones beauty and become Real if it all ended like this? And a tear, a real tear, trickled down his little shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground” (p. 26). When he sheds a tear, the nursery magic Fairy comes and turns our hero into a real, living rabbit to go play among the others. “At last! At last!”

(p. 31). The story ends with the acknowledgement of debt: The Boy sees a rabbit that reminds him of his toy, “But he never knew that it really was his own Bunny, come back to look at the child who had first helped him to be Real” (p. 33). After separation, growing autonomy, and the acceptance of loss, comes gratitude to those who brought us to be.

This project, then, is a study of becoming. In thinking gender and feeling real, it attempts to understand how and why gender is such serious business for subjective existence. Its goal is to attend to both the suffering articulated through gender, and the possibilities gender offers for psychic growth. While inspired by transgender and gender variant individuals and relevant to clinical work with such populations, this project is about the stakes of gender for all of us. As will become clear, we all must transform in order to feel ourselves real in a real world. Our question will be less *whether* to transform and more how do we know a transformation is indeed taking place; by what do we measure or even define its “success.”

Velveteen wisdom noted, this project begins again, this time with the history of gender’s relation to ontology, and the theoretical questions that frame this project.

### **The form of the matter**

Let us start with the term. Gender. It is an English word, and although there are related words in other languages (“genera in Spanish, ‘genre’ in French, ‘Geschlecht’ in German) these hold either markedly different meaning or are yet to catch on, leading most non-English writers to use the English term when they want to signify the concept (Nye, 2010). The word’s prehistory can be found in the Greek word “genos,” which referred to both a formal classification (in logic or language) and a biological one (race, kin, offspring, generation)

(<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>). This double sense—both formal and biological—accounts for the term’s first relation to sexual difference.<sup>3</sup> According to Aristotle, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Protagoras created the labels “masculine,” “feminine,” and “neuter” as a system of categorizing Greek nouns (see Aristotle, 1955). Apparently Protagoras wanted the grammatical gender of nouns to correspond with the sex of their referents, proposing that the Greek nouns “*minis*” (anger) and “*peleks*” (helmet) that had “feminine” form be changed to “masculine” form since they related to men (Saghir & Robins, 1971). Aristotle, the famous believer in form, argued against such tainting of grammar for semantic reasons. In *Poetics* he writes of a purely formal system of grammatical gender:

Of the nouns themselves, some are masculine, some feminine, and some neuter. Masculine are all that end in N and P and  $\Sigma$  and in the two compounds of  $\Sigma$ ,  $\Psi$  and  $\Xi$ . Feminine are all that end in those of the vowels that are always long, for instance  $\text{H}$  and  $\text{O}$ , and in  $\text{A}$  among vowels that can be lengthened. The result is that the number of masculine and feminine terminations is the same, for  $\Psi$  and  $\Xi$  are the same as  $\Sigma$ . No noun ends in a mute or in a short vowel. Only three end in  $\text{I}$ ,  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\iota$ ,  $\kappa\acute{o}\mu\mu\iota$ , and  $\pi\acute{\epsilon}\pi\epsilon\rho\iota$ . Five end in  $\text{Y}$ . The neuters end in these letters and in  $\text{N}$  and  $\Sigma$ . (1458a9-16)

But despite Aristotle’s explication of a purely grammatical gender, the original labels (“masculine,” “feminine,” and “neuter”) persisted in texts on classical grammars, and therefore in all Western grammars modeled after them.<sup>4</sup> Linguist Anne Curzan (2003) writes of the ensuing confusion: “These labels have created the pervasive misperception that grammatical gender categories in a language reflect a connection between male and female human beings and masculine and feminine inanimate objects” (p. 11). The confusion becomes deeper when we

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<sup>3</sup> Sexual difference will be defined in this project as the reality of bodies that reproduce sexually.

<sup>4</sup> For those unfamiliar, Curzan defines grammatical gender as a classification system that “divides[s] the nouns in a language into formal classes, which serve as the basis for agreement with other elements in the sentences (e.g. adjectives, pronouns, verbs)” (p. 12). It is found in Indo-European languages (Spanish, German, French, Italian), Semitic Languages, and other families such as Afro-Asiatic and Northern Caucasian languages, and can consist of anywhere from two to over twenty gender classifications (12). See Curzan’s text (2003) for a thorough history.

turn to modern English, where there is no longer a grammatical gender and instead a semantic one. This shift to semantic gender, where masculine and feminine nouns correlate with the traits of their referents,<sup>5</sup> is a highly unusual linguistic development and one that Curzan traces back to a “complex set of related grammatical transformations” occurring in Middle English (p. 11).

If semantic gender is a relatively recent and specifically Anglo-American phenomenon, the use of the term to refer to social and cultural identity is even more locally and immediately situated. Alice Dreger (1998) traces the first such use of the term to British obstetrician William Blair Bell’s work on intersex bodies. In a careful historical analysis Dreger shows how in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, rising anxiety around homosexuality and growing scientific technologies corresponded with a drive to classify sexually ambiguous bodies. This led to the dominance of the “gonadal definition” of sex, a way of determining sexual difference that was both very specific and rather arbitrary:

[T]he widespread adoption of the gonadal definition of sex was driven not by a strictly “scientific” rational but instead for the most part by pragmatism: it accomplished the desired preservation of clear distinctions between males and females in theory and practice in the face of creeping sexual doubt (p. 152)

However this use of biology to create a clear system of two was short-lived, as medical advancements soon allowed doctors to recognize ovarian and testicular tissue in the same individuals. William Blair Bell suggested a different tack. Dreger explains: “If men and women were to be kept distinct, Blair Bell realized, hermaphrodite-sorting would have to be accomplished in such a way as to quiet sex anomalies, not accentuate them” (p. 158). Enter gender. Blair Bell writes:

[O]ur opinion of the gender [of a given patient] should be adapted to the peculiar circumstances and to our modern knowledge of the complexity of sex, and . . . surgical

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<sup>5</sup> I.e. actress/actor—the only gendered nouns are ones that refer to women or men.

procedures should in these special cases be carried out to establish more completely the obvious sex of the individual. (Quoted in Dreger, p. 158)

So gender, in its unusual Anglo-American development as a system of classification that reclaimed a semantic relation to sexual difference, in the face of growing awareness of the variability of bodies and sexualities, came to offer a way out of the confusion inherent in sexed bodies: professing certain boundaries and justifying regulatory interventions to ensure them.

Following suit, forty years later Johns Hopkins scientist John Money invented the concept “gender role” in his work with intersex individuals. He used the term to refer to the social performance of an internal sense of sexual identity, something that for Money was ironically dependent on the appearance of an anatomically correct body (Hausman, 1995; Gherovici, 2011). Using Lorenz’s work on imprinting, Money believed that people were born essentially sex neutral, and that if sexually ambiguous infants had reconstructive surgery to appear more clearly one of the two biological sexes and were raised as the corresponding gender, they would develop into healthy adults (Nye, 2010). Patricia Gherovici (2011) summarizes Money’s contradictory logic: “The liberation of gender from sex implied the conditioning of sex to gender” (p. 147). Tragically, Money’s most famous case David Reimer, a child born with XY chromosomes who was given sex reassignment surgery after a freak accident in which he lost most of his penis, was a marked failure; David suffered severe psychological distress, elected in adulthood to surgically transform back into a man, and eventually committed suicide. David’s death allegorizes the documented plight of many intersex individuals who suffered similar unnecessary and non-consensual surgeries.<sup>6</sup> What William Bell Blair and John Money successfully advocated then, in a bloody twist on the Aristotelian project of cutting bodily difference out of

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<sup>6</sup> See [aiclegal.org](http://aiclegal.org), <http://inter-actyouth.tumblr.com/>, <http://stop.genitalmutilation.org/>, for organizations and resources specifically targeted at documenting and changing the treatment of intersex children.

formal (grammatical) gender, was cutting bodily difference *to* the form of gender, under the auspices of a newly found meaning of the term.

To summarize, two points to note about gender's prehistory. One, that the tension between linguistic form and ontology was present from the start. And two, that the term's modern usage was born out of an attempt to use linguistic form in order to deny and control reality (here, biological variability).

### **Enter feminism**

If gender's modern usage was invented as a discursive tool for the medical manipulation of variant bodies, that went on to foster fantasies of boundless social malleability, this very emphasis on the social was taken up by feminist scholars as a means for articulating the social oppression of woman and possibilities for resistance. It is here that the term gained dominance, and its earlier roots in sexological research faded out of site.

Ann Ferguson (1994) divides Anglo-American feminist scholarship on gender into three phases. The first, heavily influenced by Marxist theory and radical feminist movements of the civil rights era, defined gender as a mechanism of social domination. Following a de Beauvoirian logic of social construction, gender here is understood not as the true form beyond the variability of sex, but as a system of power that intentionally overstates the significance of sex in order to justify unequal treatment of women. Ferguson summarizes:

The spirit of this trend, which continues into the present, is assimilationist, for its assumption is that only socially constructed barriers keep women from doing ...[any] task as well as men. The general philosophical approach is ...that underneath it all, women too are rational self-interested agents the same as men. (p. 202)

In short, difference here is only formal; in reality, all are assumed to be similar.

The next phase took an opposite tack, conceptualizing gender not as a system of false differentiation that covers over similarity, but as a system that creates or names real differences. Feminist scholars of this phase either argue for biologically determined differences between men and woman (e.g. Mary Daly's [1978] work on life and death) or socially and psychologically constructed ones (e.g. Dorothy Dinnerstein [1976] and Nancy Chodorow's [1978] work). Whether biology or sociality are emphasized, gender becomes the arbiter of difference that has been at best under-recognized and at worst intentionally silenced. Where gender remains connected to social regulation in this phase, it also becomes the site of new social possibilities. Gender's difference from sex becomes less clear, or less important, as both are seen as real and needing to be re-claimed.

If the first stage of Anglo-American feminist scholarship uses gender to argue that sex does not matter, and the second stage uses gender to argue that how sex *really* matters has been ignored, both in their own way lay claim to a singular reality of sex that covers over variability. Such is the history that the third phase of feminism intervenes on, and where we start our project.

### **Butler's gender**

While there are many authors whose work is situated in the third, or post modern and deconstructionist phase of Anglo-American feminist scholarship, here Judith Butler's work alone will be outlined, as her work is undoubtedly the most influential and where this project situates itself. Butler uses the Foucauldian idea that "regulatory power produces the subjects it controls" (2011, p. xxix) to intervene on the discursive distinction between gender as culture and sex as nature that began with Bell. She argues that gender is not a form inherent "in" sex (as Bell and perhaps some second phase feminists would have it) nor simply exploitative of it (a de

Beauviorian first phase model), but creative of the very concept of sex, feigning its own materiality. She writes:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “pre-discursive,” prior to cultural, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. (1999, p. 11)

For Butler, then, gender is a system of signification that creates the belief in sex as “natural.”

She uses the metaphor of performance: “[A]cts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” (1999, p. 173). It is precisely such self-naturalization that hides and thus makes more trenchant gender’s political work; namely, the “regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (1999, p. 173). In short, men become men by desiring women, and women become women by desiring men.

Where Butler destabilizes the relation between gender and nature, she is careful to distinguish her position from one that claims nature fallacious:

To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the “real” and the “authentic” as oppositional. As a genealogy of gender ontology, this inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of “the real” and confiscate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization. (1999, p. 43)

In other words, Butler’s position is not one that denies there is a reality to bodies and sexual difference, but that denies any ability to access such a reality outside of the structures of symbolization through which we make sense of it. For Butler, then, symbolization does not create reality in the sense of fabricating bodies out of thin air, but it does create reality in the

sense of marking the parameters for what is accepted as reality and what is not: “To the extent the gender norms ... establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be “real,” they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression” (1999, xxiii).<sup>7</sup>

While the cutting off from direct access to reality is an important intervention, Butler’s rejection of any capacity to access reality beyond discourse risks a different collapse of the subject into the social. In the extreme, the subject becomes not only regulated by discourse but flattened into it—her agency is relegated to the act of political resistance. There is no inner life, no subjective truth, simply a push/pull in which one is either subservient to one’s constitutive constraints or resisting them from within, likely both. In the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler herself recognizes this danger:

Does this mean that everything that is understood as “internal” about the psyche is therefore evacuated, and that internality is a false metaphor?...Although I would deny that all of the internal world of the psyche is but an effect of a stylized set of acts, I continue to think that it is a significant theoretical mistake to take the ‘internality’ of the psychic world for granted. (xv)

Here I would wholeheartedly agree. Indeed it is precisely because internality is not a given, that we must keep thinking about how and why and what it is.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Important work has been done by psychoanalytic, mostly relational thinkers to chart out the clinical consequences of Butler’s thinking on gender as regulation. See Dimen & Goldner (2002) and Corbett, Dimen, Goldner & Harris (2014) for overviews.

<sup>8</sup> Butler goes on to theorize interior life more explicitly in *The Psychic Life Of Power* (1997), where she reads it through Freud’s work on melancholia. While I align with Butler in thinking interiority in relation to loss (see below), as I argue elsewhere (in press) I believe her exclusive focus on melancholic process glosses over the variety of ways loss, reality and identity can function together. In the end, Butler’s reading convincingly explains a gender that feels *fixed*, but does not, I believe, account for a gender that feels subjectively *real*. In later work (2004) Butler revises her initial claims on gender as necessarily melancholic, but she continues to leave the felt

Returning to the transgender subject, I contend that such a collapse of the subject into the social has made it impossible to think with her. Her gender variance becomes either a strange twist on Bell and Money's fantasies of boundless social domination, or an act of political resistance. The felt sense of an internal truth beyond the social is left under-theorized, either taken at face value as somehow outside of the purview of theory or dismissed as dubious. While we could refuse the trans subject as a social dupe, or valorize her as a post modern trickster, I think it a more interesting and honest response to let her raise a question for all of us: if gender is no more real than illusory, how is it that gender comes to feel real for some and not for others, and what are the stakes in such a feeling?<sup>9</sup> I contend that psychoanalysis offers a unique answer. As a point of entry, this project turns to the psychoanalytic literature on identification.

### **Identification**

As Laplanche and Pontalis point out (1973), Freud's theory of identification changed and gained importance in concurrence with his growing development of the Oedipus complex, and was left in a form even Freud did not feel was complete. Freud's first use of the term preceded Oedipus, and referred to hysterical symptoms in which patients would imitate others, or contagion of symptoms would spread among a group. He described this not as simple imitation for attention but as expressing an underlying unconscious identification: an "assimilation on the

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sense of gender as real on the side of power and regulation. It is in this conflation of "feeling real" with social regulation that my project attempts to intervene.

<sup>9</sup> Many analytic theorists have articulated this paradox of gender being both constructed or "external" and subjective or "internal" (Goldner, 1991; Harris, 1991; Benjamin, 1992; Corbett, 2008). My thinking follows their lead in attempting to formalize different ways of inhabiting this paradox. In Corbett's terms, it attempts the work of "untangle[ing] that which cannot be untangled" (p. 849, 2008).

basis of a similar aetiological pretension; it expresses a resemblance and is derived from a common element which remains in the unconscious” (1900, p. 149). So a woman envious of her salmon-loving friend dreams of denying herself salmon in order to both deny her friend salmon and take her friend’s place. From the beginning, then, identifications for Freud communicate something from beyond—offering form to unconscious desires otherwise in-articulate.

Identification becomes affiliated with gender with the rise of the Oedipus Complex. Here incestuous desire is staved off and resolved by way of the development of a gendered self. This through two essential steps. First, the child simultaneously registers sexual difference and Oedipal prohibition through the myth of castration. The boy comes to believe in castration (the woman’s must have been cut off) and the girl comes to believe she has been denied a penis, motivating both to relinquish an incestuous relation to the mother.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, neither version of castration is correct. They are universal myths that inspire development, but ones that necessarily turn the evidence of sexual difference into a story that denies it. In short, a complex relation between reality and symbolization is at play in regards to sexual difference.

Second, where investment in the (sexual) body stops the child from acting on incestuous desire, identification with the social fantasy ascribed to such a body allows him to move his desire beyond incest: “object-cathexes are given up and replaced by identifications” (1924, p. 176). So the boy who desires his mother and feels rivalrous with his father identifies with his father both out of admiration and a wish to take his place. Such identification has a double and

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<sup>10</sup> Note that this moment of investing in the (sexed) body is also a moment of recognizing a limit in relation to the object. Oedipal loss is articulated alongside and through fears of bodily loss or mutilation. In other words, fantasies of completeness and separation take place on the body as well as with primary objects. In addition, this moment of recognizing sexual difference is also the moment of recognizing generational difference.

contradictory function: it both enacts what cannot be (i.e. assuming the place of the father in fantasy), and establishes the structure to protect against this very transgression, “secure[ing].. the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis” (pp. 176-177). This allows the subject to move forward, clearing the way for future objects and engagements in the world.

In short, gender identity for Freud offers both form to incestuous desire, and a means for moving beyond it. It is not only a system of social regulation, but a system that performs subjective work: namely, the structuring of the drive beyond the forbidden object.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> While this project introduces the term “object” vis-à-vis the mother as first love object, a note on the broader meaning of the term is in order. LaPlanche and Pontalis (1973) outline three separate and interconnected meanings of the “object” in psychoanalytic theory that are relevant to my argument. The first and primary definition concerns the object’s relation to the drive: “The object of an instinct is the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim.” (From *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, cited in Laplace and Pontalis, p. 274). The prototypical or first object in this context is not the mother qua mother but the mother qua breast—a thing in relation to which the infant first experiences satisfaction of hunger. The second meaning of the term refers to the object of love/hate, or the “whole” object. Here the mother as other is the prototype, leading the way developmentally to a series of other love-objects. This “undeniably import[ant]” (p. 275) distinction between the object of the drive (or “part object”) and the object of love/hate (or “whole object”) entails nuances and contradictions outside the scope or use of this definition, but for our ends suffice it to say that the distinction involves the transition from a position of contingency in which the object is in complete “subordination to satisfaction” to a position of otherness in which the object is both satisfying and frustrating to a formed ego. Third, and equally important for this project, is the philosophical definition of the term “object” as that which is perceived and known about: “an object is whatever presents itself with fixed and permanent qualities which are in principle recognizable by all subjects irrespective of individual wishes and opinions (the adjective corresponding to this sense of ‘object’ is ‘objective’” (p. 276). Here we find an explicit relationship to reality that the following chapters will further interrogate. Laplanche and Pontalis elegantly connect the object of inquiry to the object of the drive through the object of love: “If we think of an evolution of the sexual object and, a fortiori, if we see this as leading up to the constitution of a genital love-object defined by its complexity, its autonomy and its total character, then we are unavoidably bringing this object into relation with the gradual construction of the object of perception” (p. 276). In sum, then, this project defines the object along three vertices: as a form through which the drive is experienced, as an other in relation to a subject, and as the inspiration for/focus of knowledge. Returning to the forbidden object of Oedipus, it is only through relinquishing this primary satisfying other that the drive becomes capable of circling new objects, encountering difference, and producing knowledge.

As Freud moves on to theorize the girl's Oedipal complex and the negative Oedipal Complex for both boys and girls, the problems of distinguishing between different positions in regards to the object becomes more central. With the introduction of the structural theory, Freud reaches his most developed theory of identification (*The Ego and the Id*, 1923). Here Freud introduces two new distinctions. First, he divides identification into primary and secondary. Primary identification precedes object-cathexis proper: "This is...a direct and immediate identification and takes place earlier than any object-cathexis" (p. 30). It follows the logic of the oral phase and the process of incorporation in which "object-cathexis and identification are no doubt indistinguishable from each other" (p. 28). Freud links secondary identifications to an already formed sense of self and object, and thus to object-loss and relinquished desire: "When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia." He struggles with the relationship to loss:

It may be that by this introjection, which is a kind of regression to the mechanism of the oral phase, the ego makes it easier for the object to be given up or renders that process possible. It may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects. At any rate the process especially in the early phases of development, is a very frequent one, and it makes it possible to suppose that character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices. (p. 28)

Whether secondary identification regressively denies loss (through fantasied incorporation) or allows its acceptance ("the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects") remains unclear throughout Freud's writing.

Second, when Freud returns specifically to the Oedipus Complex, he distinguishes those identifications which lead to the development of the super-ego:

The broad general outcome of the sexual phase dominated by the Oedipus complex may...be taken to be the forming of a precipitate in the ego... This modification of the ego retains its special position; it confronts the other contents of the ego as an ego ideal or super-ego. (p. 33)

Although Freud is clear on Oedipal identifications forming the super-ego, he is not clear on what makes them different from other secondary identifications which form the ego. One potential answer is the quality of ambivalence and prohibition in Oedipal identifications. Freud writes of the dual nature of Oedipal identifications as follows:

The super-ego is...not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: 'You ought to be like this (like your father).' It also comprises the prohibition: 'You may not be like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative.' This double aspect of the ego ideal derives from the fact that the ego ideal had the task of repressing the Oedipus complex; indeed, it is to that revolutionary event that it owes its existence. (p. 34)

Although Freud is convincing about the ambivalent nature of Oedipal identifications, as Laplanche and Pontalis point out, given Freud's later theoretical developments such ambivalence is "probable" in all identifications (p. 207).

To sum, where Freud ties gender to Oedipal identifications categorized by self and object constancy with its consequent ambivalence and prohibition, he leaves the questions of how such identifications build structure and navigate loss unresolved. Other authors have taken this up. Here Hans Loewald, Edith Jacobs, and Roy Schafer's contributions will be outlined.

Loewald (1962; 1973) proposes a more coherent system for distinguishing between Freud's concepts. He maintains Freud's distinction between primary and secondary identification as respectively prior to and after self and object have been established as distinct entities. He then calls all secondary identifications Oedipal, reiterating the centrality of loss. Also following Freud, Loewald proposes that identifications may or may not move towards mourning:

“The object lost by separation or death may not be mourned, but either the existence or the loss of the object may be denied” (1962, p. 487). Here Loewald introduces a new distinction between internalization and identification to capture the difference. He proposes internalization to denote the process of separation from the object, where “both the libidinal-aggressive as well as the identification elements in object relations” are given up (1973, p. 15). Objects relations are transformed into “internal, intrapsychic, de-personified relationship[s], thus increasing and enriching psychic structure” (1973, p. 15). In contrast, Loewald defines “identification” as the denial of separation: “identification as such leads to an identity of subject and object or of parts or aspects of them...they become identical, one and the same, there is a merging or confusion... [that] tends to erase a difference” (1973, p. 15). Although the two serve opposing functions, Loewald is clear that it is only through first identifying, that one can move on to internalization: “identification is a waystation to internalization” (1973, p. 15).

For Loewald it is the productive tension between super-ego and ego that allows for identifications to proceed to internalization. Again beginning with Freud’s distinction between primary identifications being ego identifications and Oedipal identifications being super-ego identifications, Loewald outlines the trajectory of super-ego identifications. He notes their origin as “early hallucinatory wish-fulfillments” which gradually become “something to be reaching for, wished for in the future” (1962, p. 496). Over time, the fantasied perfection confronts its necessary disillusionment: “Such fantasies, based on old longing in all concerned, in normal development are gradually being cleared and modified in accordance with a more realistic comprehension of the potentialities and limitations of the object relation involved” (1962, p. 497). It is through this process that “the internalized demands lose their archaic insistence on narcissistic perfection” (1962, p. 497). Thus the contents of the super-ego change over time:

Some [demands, expectations, hopes and ideals] are reached and fulfilled and are no longer beckonings from a future; others are not. Some are given up, others remain as ideals and demands though never reached and fulfilled. New demands and ideals arise... (1962, p. 498)

Those aspirations that are met move into the ego proper, as they are now actual and not wished for states. This continues the differentiating process:

The changing of superego elements into ego elements involves a further desexualization and deaggressivization; it involves a return, as in a spiral, to the type of identifications characterized as ego or primary identifications. (1962, pp. 499-500)

Thus it is precisely the always-shifting “distance from the ego core,” or “tension” between super-ego and ego that inspires development.<sup>12</sup>

To sum, Loewald performs two clarifications of Freudian theory: first, that identifications can either lead to internalization, in which they become de-personified, build structure, and emancipate from the object, or they can stay as fantasied object-relationships in which no separation from and mourning of the object occurs. And second, that super-ego differentiation inspires further development and differentiation by functioning as an “inner future” and “distance from the ego core” that in healthy development is continuously revised and shifting.

Along similar lines, Edith Jacobson (1964) theorizes the transition between primary and secondary identification as a move from merging to separating from the object. She emphasizes a primary boundary-less state in which “as yet undifferentiated psycho-physiological energy [exist] within the primal, structurally undifferentiated self” (p. 14). For Jacobson the initial stage of development is fantasied fusion between self and object: “induced by such repeated unpleasurable experiences of frustration and separation from the love object, fantasies of (total) incorporation of the gratifying object begin to arise, expressive of wishes to re-establish the lost

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<sup>12</sup> For a more in-depth exploration of Loewald’s super-ego and its relevance for current psychoanalytic thinking see Jurist (2014).

unity” (p. 39). Following from receptive fantasies are the infant’s active imitations, which are at first “only formal ‘as if’ activities...founded merely on the close links of empathy with the mother” (p. 43).

Like Loewald’s move from identification to internalization, the transformation from imitation to identification proper for Jacobson occurs through the giving up of object-ties: “The main progress manifests itself in the child’s growing desire to achieve this [his] goal no longer only through sensual gratifications and physical closeness with the love object but also by activity of his own” (p. 43). In other words, what was originally imitation meant to promote merging, transforms into a tool for separation meant to increase individual capability. This through repetition and pruning: by “becoming enduring, selective and consistent,” identifications can “become part of the ego, permanently modify its structure, and support the organization and stabilization of the ego’s defenses” (p. 68). Similar to Loewald, the inspiration for this “change of function,” to use Hartmann’s (1939) term, is significantly tied to Oedipal development, where there is strong impetus to identify both differences and similarities with the rival parent.

Jacobson’s theory of super-ego development is also similar to Loewald’s in that she speaks of it as a tension between magical ideals and realistic demands:

On the one hand, there is the reemergence of castration fears; imagery derived from the child’s own instinctual strivings which induce irrational, physical retaliation ... On the other hand, there is imagery more closely related to reality, to verbally expressed parental prohibitions and demands....And finally, there is the imagery derived from the child’s narcissistic, omnipotent, and eventually moral perfectionistic strivings: the idealized object and self images from which the ego ideal the moral guide of the ego, is coined. (p. 124)

Where Loewald defines a healthy super-ego by the capacity of its contents to shift in distance and relationship to the ego over time, Jacobson defines it through the predominance of guilt over castration anxiety. Where guilt predominates, the super-ego becomes more abstract, and its drive

energy more neutralized. Despite the differences, for both Jacobson and Loewald the divide between pathological and healthy super-ego development lies in the capacity to accept loss and allow for identifications to change over time.

Roy Schafer offers an additional and in many ways similar account of identification (1968). For him the distinction is between introjection and identification. Again, denying or accepting loss is the primary distinction. He defines introjection by a fantasied incorporation of the object: “it aims to continue a relation with an object, but to displace this relation from the outer world to the inner world; the object is preserved, though perhaps transformed, in the inner world” (p.153). Alternately, and counter to Loewald’s use of the term, Schafer defines identification as the process by which the object transforms the self and therefore become depersonified as its own entity: “the object is implied in the identification, and is, thus, carried into the inner world too, but not as an altogether separate object” (p. 154). This allows for separation; whereas in introjection “one imagines having what one lacks or may lose; in identification, one becomes what one needs to be” (p. 154).

Schafer seems to diverge from the others in regards to the function of merging. Whereas for both Loewald and Jacobson merging is opposed to and staves off loss, for Schafer it is the refusal to merge that holds the object close: “Introjection . . . does not aim at likeness, sameness, or merging” (p. 153). It is precisely by not merging or integrating the object’s attributes that the ego remains in dependent and continuous contact with the object in its unchanging form. Indeed in this aspect Schafer answers Loewald’s attention to the growth motivating force of distance between ego and super-ego by pointing to the growth motivating effects of merging. Here Loewald’s presentation of a productively oscillating system adds synthesis. For all three authors,

it is the ability to navigate separation from the object, to become depersonified and build structure, and to shift over time that signify healthy internalization.

Returning to our framing question, what the psychoanalytic literature on identification offers, is the centrality of the object to the equation. Gender becomes not simply a social construction masquerading as subjective truth, but a construction used to articulate and potentially transform the subject in relation to her object world. If gender is understood as *either* refusing object loss and so too growth, *or* allowing for mourning and the consequent development of psychic structure, then we can begin to account for the varying subjective experiences of gender without conflating such experiences with or ignoring their relation to the social. I contend that these differences concern feeling real, and that articulating the relation between gender development, mourning, and feeling real will allow us to listen to the gendered subject with more nuance.

In short, my thesis is as follows: that gender feels real when it allows for both separation from and connection to the object. If separation from the object is refused, objective reality collapses and gender feels too real. If connection to the object is refused, internal reality is inaccessible, and gender feels false. If both separation from and connection to the object are tolerated, gender feels true and allows for growth.

The following chapters will elaborate such a framework. To do so, each chapter will read psychoanalytic theory regarding reality alongside a work of literature that takes up gender as a central concern. The reason for such a methodology is two-part. First, this project is born out of a

gap in theory. In turning to literary texts, it attempts to hear what is on the verge of being said, as the aesthetic is often the first arena in which what has yet-to-be-formulated emerges. And second, as will become clear later on, this project is attempting to think gender alongside aesthetic experience—as a symbolization of the self that can offer the kind of truth inherent in art. By looking at works of literature that explicitly concerns gender, it therefore attempts to access the various ways in which gender can operate vis-à-vis the aesthetic. Ideally, through offering a conceptual framework to think gender's relation to subjective growth with more nuance, this project will help shape future research questions that can then be empirically tested.

Chapter two will address gender's relation to objective reality. It will first define objective reality as the capacity to differ from the object, and then read Daniel Schreber's gender transformation in *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1955) as an inability to tolerate such difference that leaves gender feeling too real. Chapter three will address gender's relation to subjective truth. It will first define subjective truth as the capacity to connect to the object, and then read James Baldwin's *Giovanni Room* (2001) as the refusal of such connection that leaves gender feeling false. The fourth chapter will synthesize the prior two, offering a model of gender as involving separation from and connection to the object. It will turn to poetry written by trans and gender queer individuals to begin to apply such a model to thinking gender transition.

Before moving to Chapter 2, a clarification on the place of the social in this dissertation is in order. While this dissertation grows out of post modern gender theory that locates the social front and center, its own focus will remain on psychic life. Rather than thinking the psyche as outside of or contrary to the claims of social-constructionism, this project attempts to think a psyche that is always already socially mediated. Another words, if all genders are made from social materials, how do we nonetheless account for the varying inner worlds gender may

articulate? One way of reading the following chapters, then, is as different possible relations between a subject and her social. Chapter 2 may be said to elaborate a psyche that collapses *into* the social (in which case the social becomes a material reality); Chapter 3, a psyche masquerading *as* the social (in which case the subject tries to disappear all that is subjective about itself); and Chapter 4, a psyche that uses the social to translate and thus learn about itself. Given this project's focus on psychic life, it does not elaborate the social contexts and consequences for the gendered solutions presented. That would indeed be a different project. Nevertheless, the goal of this project is to offer a model of inner life that would not foreclose such work, but instead occur alongside and thereby deepen the nuance it aims for.

## Chapter 2

### When gender becomes too real: a reading of Daniel Schreber's unmaning

Chapter 1 sets up a topography the following three chapters will elaborate. A quick recap: it was proposed to think gender's relation to reality in the context of the constitutive relation to the psychoanalytic object. Three possibilities were outlined: First, gender may articulate fusion with the object, in which case it becomes a psychotic solution and objective reality collapses. Second, gender may articulate a refusal of connection to the object, in which case it becomes a melancholic solution and subjective truth is rendered inaccessible. And lastly, gender may afford both separation and connection to the object, offering access to both objective and subjective reality and the capacity to grow.

This chapter will take up gender's relation to external, or "objective" reality.<sup>13</sup> Its task is twofold: to offer a conceptualization of objective reality that respects the interventions of psychoanalysis, and to articulate the implications for thinking gender. It will first outline Freud's work on external reality and then turn to Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, a text that places gender's relation to external reality at the fore.

### Freud and objective reality

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<sup>13</sup> Alternately referred to as "external" "material" and "objective" reality, the reality in question will here be termed "objective" in order to highlight the centrality of the object to the concept. However since Freud uses only the terms "material reality" and "external reality," it will be referred to as such when referring to his work.

Freud's theorizing of objective reality is a complicated one. In one sense, Freud's entire project is to convince us of an alternate, psychic reality, which functions separate from and outside of objective, or "material" reality. Michael Parsons(1999) charts the first formulation of such a distinction back to the *Project* (1950[1895]), where Freud writes: "Indications of discharge through speech are also in a certain sense indications of reality—but of thought-reality not of external reality" (Freud, 1895, cited in Parsons, p. 60). Freud elaborates this alternate reality in the *Interpretation of Dreams* with his systemization of unconscious processes: "If we look at the unconscious wishes reduced to their most fundamental and truest shape we shall have to conclude, no doubt, that psychic reality is a particular form of existence not to be confused with material reality" (1900, p. 620). In 1911, Freud warns not only of confusing material with psychic reality, but of applying the rules of material reality to psychical phenomenon at all:

[O]ne must never allow oneself to be misled into applying the standards of reality to repressed psychical structures, and on that account, perhaps, into undervaluing the importance of phantasies in the formation of symptoms on the ground that they are not actualities, or into tracing a neurotic sense of guilt back to some other source because there is no evidence that any actual crime has been committed. (1911a, p. 224)

He uses the metaphor of two countries: "One is bound to employ the currency that is in use in the country one is exploring—in our case a neurotic currency" (p. 224). The economies, here, function independently.

But a closer look at Freud's writing on the development of material reality shows it to be intimately connected to psychic reality. While much is anticipated in the *Project* (1950 [1895]), Freud first explicitly theorizes the development of external reality in his short paper "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911a). Here he presents an initial state dominated by the pleasure-principle which strives towards pleasure and draws back

from un-pleasure through hallucinatory wish-fulfillment. External reality comes to have importance only secondarily:

It was only the non-occurrence of the expected satisfaction, the disappointment experienced, that led to the abandonment of this attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination. Instead of it, the psychological apparatus had to decide to form a connection to the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavor to make a real alteration in them. A new principle was introduced... what was presented in the mind was no longer what was agreeable but what was real, even if it happened to be disagreeable. (p. 218)

It is precisely a disconnect then between the subject and material reality (the hallucination fails to satisfy) that inspires any “connection” to material reality at all. Put differently, it is material reality’s limitedness and otherness in relation to the subject that produces a demand to be thought. In one sense this is a turning away from psychic reality; the subject “abandon[s]” the pleasure principle, becomes increasingly interested in sensory information, and develops consciousness with its capacities for attention, memory, judgment (the capacity to accept and reject), and action. However the institution of the reality principle also leads to a growth in psychic space: “With the introduction of the reality principle one species of thought-activity was split off; it was kept free from reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone” (p. 221). Here is the inauguration of phantasy, so important to the sexual drives and neurotic pathology. Hence psychic reality as such comes about precisely at the moment the reality principle is instituted.

A few years later Freud offers a more complex process for the development of both material and psychic reality. In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915) he theorizes three stages of ego-development<sup>14</sup> and consequent relations to reality. First he introduces an initial stage called the “reality-ego” (p.133) in which the material world is synonymous with the act of

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<sup>14</sup> Note that Freud here is using ego interchangeably with the self, as he has yet to theorize the ego as a structural aspect of the psyche.

perceiving. The material world is here not registered as something other (it is a matter of “indifference,” p.135). With the experience of dissatisfaction comes the “pleasure-ego,” which takes in what it perceives as pleasurable and evacuates what it deems un-pleasurable—this by means of hallucinatory wish fulfillment. Here the external world becomes synonymous with what is “not-me,” and is hated (p. 135). Lastly, comes the “final reality ego” in which representation is distinguished from perception through the work of “reality-testing” (p. 133).

Freud elaborates this last phase in his paper on Negation (1925). If the first ego offers no division between the organism and its environment and the second offers them as mere opposites of one another, this last development presents both a distinction and relationship: “What is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal; what is real is *also* there outside” (p. 237, italics mine). This spacing works through a temporal division and repetition: “The antithesis between subjective and objective...comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind something that has once been perceived” (p. 237). It is thinking’s ability to re-present a prior material reality that allows psychic and material reality to be distinguished. The logic seems to go like this: since thinking recalls in the present a past perception it has the capacity to differentiate the present from the past. Or put differently but no less confusingly, it is because the thinking subject remembers his past surroundings that he can tell the difference between himself and his present ones. This subjective capacity for history institutes futurity; by bringing the wished-for past into the present, the subject directs himself towards attaining it (goal).

To complicate matters more, if thoughts are re-presentations of past perceptions, they are not necessarily “faithful” ones; they “may be modified by omissions, or changed by the merging of various elements” (p. 238). In other words, psychic reality is not a direct harbinger

of history, but of a history that has been subjected to formal work (is omitting and merging not the most basic formal elements?). The task of reality-testing, then, becomes two-part: to ascertain both *if* a re-presentation is also present in material reality and *how accurate* the representation is, given it is not mere hallucination (p. 238). Just as the ground seems to be falling away Freud reassures: “But it is evident that a precondition for the setting up of reality-testing is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction.” (p. 238). His reassurance is two part: an object has been lost, it once brought satisfaction. What must be real—the object and its ability to satisfy—is precisely what is missing. It is indistinguishably material and psychical (the object is here synonymous with satisfaction). Put succinctly, if we work to distinguish material from psychic reality they must have once been incontestably linked—the objectsatisfaction.

To summarize, Freud posits material reality as the outcome of a series of spatio-temporal divisions inspired by an original disconnect between the subject and his environment. It develops in tandem with psychic reality; first as opposition (psychic/me vs. material/not-me) and second as relation (representation/psychic vs. perception/psychic and also material). In its final stage, material reality is experienced as progressively more nuanced error<sup>15</sup> (what I think is not quite what is there...), which informs the subject that more work needs to be done.

In “The Ego and Reality” (1951), Hans Loewald highlights two consequences of this developmental trajectory for thinking objective reality. First, if objective and psychic reality are from the start not yet distinguished, then what we call the “reality principle” is not the demand to encounter an alien objective reality but instead to lose a “primary narcissistic position” in

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<sup>15</sup> Note the etymology of error being “to wander, to go astray,” taking us back to the initial absence that initiates the reality principle.

which the ego and the environment are not yet separate (p. 14). In other words, instead of thinking of objective reality as something confronted or avoided, we must think of it along an axis of differentiation. Secondly, this differentiation is not only a threat to the subject's connection with her environment but also and primarily the precondition for her separate existence in the first place. Loewald points to dreams of drowning, being devoured, and sucked in, reminding us that were this "primary narcissistic position" to be re-established in would "engulf" the ego in an "original unity and identity, undifferentiated and unstructured" (p. 15). This would be the annihilation of the subject as her own entity. Thus the differentiation the reality principle institutes is not only repressive but first and foremost "essential" to the development of a subject (p. 16).

Following Freud and Loewald's reading, this paper proposes to think objective reality through this principle of differentiation; as the capacity to differ from the satisfying object, thereby experiencing its "object-ive" existence. This, I will argue, is what Schreber's fantasy of becoming God's woman undoes while attempting to minimally salvage.

### **Schrebers's rent**

Published in 1903, Daniel Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* is likely the most famous autobiographical account of psychosis written. The text was used by Schreber to win his discharge from hospitalization in 1902. It was taken up immediately in psychiatric circles and several years later by Freud (1911b) as the primary case study for his work on paranoia and psychosis. Freud's interest in Schreber was likely manifold: Schreber was highly intelligent and articulate about his experience of psychotic process, offering Freud entry into a phenomenon he otherwise had little access to. And then there was the remarkable affinity between Freud's ideas

and Schreber's hallucinations. Freud is made anxious by this; so much so that he reminds his readers that his ideas developed prior to encountering Schreber (p. 79). To distinguish his theories about Schreber from Schreber's own, Freud sets up a rule: "It will be an unavoidable part of our task to show there is an essential *genetic* relation between the...two principle elements of his delusion" (p. 34, sic). Freud is referring to Schreber's delusional transformation into a woman and special relation to God. His task is to find a common origin, a point prior to the development of both delusions that explains their production and different but related functions. In other words, to differentiate himself *from* Schreber Freud must use his capacity to chart out a process of differentiation *in* Schreber. He offers a not insignificant metaphor: "Otherwise our attempts at elucidating Schreber's delusions will leave us in the absurd position described by Kant's famous simile in the Critique of Pure Reason—we will be like a man holding a sieve under a he-goat while someone else milks it" (p. 34). Ungrounded theorizing is directly linked to a non-recognition of sexual difference (the goat is not a she); as if sex was critical to grounding.

Freud goes on to narrate a story of sexual origin. Schreber's is a tale about homosexual desire, he tells us. A man who feels attraction towards men, who is cloaked in the fantasy of becoming a woman and later *God's* woman in order to make his desire acceptable to himself. Freud uses temporal priority to construct his argument—Schreber first has the thought of being a woman and only later understands this becoming woman as redeeming mankind, thus the former thought must instigate the later, which in turn must offer a resolution of sorts. This attention to sequence is the brilliance of Freud's reading. But in concretizing Schreber's becoming woman into the wish of a man to love a man, I contend that Freud falls victim to the very phenomenon he warns against. Like the man holding the sieve under the he-goat, Freud takes for granted the

operation of sexual difference—he assumes a man in Schreiber, when Schreber is very clear that one no longer exists. To elaborate, this chapter will first outline the coordinates of Schreber's falling ill, and then turn to implications for his transformation into a woman.

Schreber narrates his fall into illness as follows: There has been a “rent” in the order of the world, caused by a breach in the usual separation between the human and the supernatural (p. 33). In normal circumstances God contacts living humans only as the “exception” and in altered states such as prayer and dreams. But an abuse occurred in the person of Schreber's doctor Fleschig, who continued contact with God through Schreber's “over-excited nerves” (p. 123). This led to first “tested,” or impure souls and then ultimately God himself being helplessly attracted to Schreber and because of this wanting to destroy him: “All the attacks made over the years...were and still are based on the same idea: to withdraw again as far as possible from the power of attraction of my over-excited nerves, which far surpasses anything that has ever existed before” (pp. 123-4). So to begin, there has been a de-differentiation—the usual separation between God and man has come undone.

This leads to a period of further de-structuration. First, the barrier between thought and objective reality collapses through the establishment of a “nerve language” that forces contact (p. 55). Unlike normal humans who command their own thoughts, Schreber is subjected to a “nerve language” which puts his thoughts in “motion *from without* incessantly and without any respite” (p. 55, sic). He receives continuous communication from tested souls, often has to finish their thoughts which are then taken as his own, and is commanded to think at all times: “man's natural right to give the nerves of his mind their necessary rest by thinking nothing” has been denied (p. 55). He who is not allowed to think for himself must also not stop thinking.

Second, the division of space and time collapses. Schreber experiences visions of traveling in a railway carriage in which “the shaft collapsed behind” him, building a wall to “protect against tide,” and abandoning a castle due to “threatening floods” (pp. 79-80). All admit an insecurity of containment. In addition time slows down to the point where “single nights had the duration of centuries,” and “wandering clocks” appear around Schreber (p. 98). This external spatio-temporal dis-ease is matched by a collapsing of the integrity of Schreber’s body: His lungs are the “object of violent and vey threatening attacks” with “lobs...at times almost completely absorbed” (p. 143), his ribs are “temporarily smashed,” his chest wall is “compressed,” his stomach is taken away, his skull “sawn asunder” and his spinal chord “comes out in clouds” through his mouth (pp. 143-147). The body escapes, collapses, and disappears. Perhaps the most direct articulation of the problem of space and time is Schreber’s inability to stay in place: “I was not allowed to remain for long in one and the same position or at the same occupation...Rays did not seem to appreciate at all that a human being who actually exists must *be somewhere*” (p. 151, italics mine).

Finally, the collapse of interiority, space, and time is accompanied by visions of the end of the world. Schreber is told that the earth’s allotted time span was only 212 years more, and then later that this time had passed; he believes all other humans have been replaced by “fleeting-improvised-men” set down by the souls; he envisions catastrophic changes to the planet (pp. 78-80). Schreber concludes that based on the evidence of destruction, “I could no longer count on any possibility of a return to human society” (p. 85). Alternately, he imagines his own death—Schreber is told to commit suicide and makes several attempts, is the victim of murder plans, and reads his own obituary in the newspaper.

In Freud's analysis this last theme of the end of the world is central, representing the loss of libidinal investment in objective reality: "the end of the world is a projection of [an]...internal catastrophe; his [Schreber's] subjective world has come to an end since his withdrawal of love from it" (p. 70). While Freud notes Schreber's images of his own death, he explains these as opposite visions of the end of the world—the manifestation of a tug-of-war in which both the ego and world are fighting for libidinal investment. What defines a paranoiac trajectory for Freud is that the ego wins: "it may be concluded that in paranoia the liberated libido becomes attached to the ego and is used for the aggrandizement of the ego" (p. 72).

Returning to Freud's developmental theory of objective reality, we can take more seriously Schreber's experience of his own death as well as the breakdown of interiority and spatio-temporal boundaries Schreber witnesses. If we understand objective reality as emerging through a process of differentiation, then Schreber's loss of libidinal investment in objective reality is certainly not the loss of *connection* to it. Instead, it is the establishment of an all-too-closeness—the return to a state prior to separation between the ego and its world. Put simply, Schreber's ego does not abandon the world, but merges with it. This is indeed the end of both as autonomous entities.

### **To unman**

Now on to gender and Schreber's position vis-à-vis sexual difference. If Schreber's process is not simply losing reality but instead fusing with it, what are implications for his transformation into a woman? To answer, this section will chart Schreber's transformation step by

step. Schreber first thinks of being a woman immediately before his second illness.<sup>16</sup> He describes it alongside dreams that his illness has returned. While still in bed in the morning Schreber has the thought: “it really must be rather pleasant to be a woman succumbing to intercourse” (p. 46). Certainly a connection between the thought and illness is suggested by the concurrent dreams of both. Freud theorizes this connection to be the doctor who treated Schreber: “[A]t the same time as his recollection of his illness, a recollection of his doctor was also aroused in his mind, and that the feminine attitude which he assumed in the phantasy was from the first directed towards the doctor” (p. 42). For Freud then both the dreams of illness and of female embodiment hide a resurgence of forbidden homosexual libido he places at the fore of the whole catastrophe. But returning to the orienting question, if we take seriously Schreber’s process as one of merging with reality then it cannot involve a consistent (i.e. consistently male) object around which disguises form. Something more radical has occurred with Schreber’s libidinal investments and identifications.

In her essay “Paranoiac Fantasies: Sexual Difference, Homosexuality, Law of the Father” (1988) Micheline Enriquez offers a reading of Schreber’s homosexuality that takes us further. She interprets Schreber’s pre-delusional thought of being a woman as a primal scene of sorts. In contrast to the three players of the usual primal scene (the mother, the father, and the child watching), Schreber’s fantasy of being a woman succumbing to intercourse names only one (a woman succumbing to intercourse). While this could be read for what is missing (the penetrating male object), Enriquez reminds us that it could also be read as not missing anything, as a “regressive narcissistic identification with the mother at the level of identity, not similarity” (p.

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<sup>16</sup> It is this second illness that leads to Schreber’s delusion formation and that he focuses on in his memoirs. Schreber categorizes his first illness as an episode of hypochondria that was cured in six months.

113). Here homosexual comes to have new meaning—not the desire for a similarly gendered, albeit separate object but a love of the similar; a “libidinal cathexis of the same” (p. 115). In other words, what is cathected is not an object qua object, but the fused object/subject prior to differentiation. Read this way the wish to be a “woman succumbing to intercourse” does not represent the wish to love a man, but to love prior to the inauguration of (sexual) difference; to return to a primordial maternal woman-ness<sup>17</sup> that precedes man and woman as distinct categories. It is, in short, a fantasy of non-differentiated union with the not-yet-sexed mother.

Opposite Schreber’s fantasy of becoming one with woman, his first delusion of being “unmanned,” or transformed from a man into woman, articulates a darker story. It follows the de-structuration described above, elaborating a culprit, reason, and plan for the suffering Schreber is experiencing:

In this way a plot was laid against me...the purpose of which was to hand me over to another human being after my nervous illness had been recognized as, or assumed to be, incurable, in such a way that my soul was handed to him, but my body—transformed into a female body and ...left to that human being for sexual misuse and simply forsaken, in other words, left to rot. (p. 63)

In this first version, Schreber’s soul and body are handed over to another man. While the soul is offered as is, the body must first be transformed into a “female body.” This will allow it to be sexually misused, forsaken, and “left to rot.” Feminization becomes synonymous with violation, abandonment, and decomposition. All three outcomes name a threat to subjecthood (is rotting not the perfect metaphor for a de-differentiation that entails subjective death?). Thus we arrive at the Loewaldian counter to the “era of bliss” (Enriquez, p. 116) articulated in the pre-delusional

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<sup>17</sup> To be clear, woman here is being divided into two separation significations: one, as the merged subject/object prior to sexual difference (“primordial maternal woman-ness”) and two, as the other to man that follows the introduction of sexual difference.

thought. If the initial fantasy elaborates the push towards a regressive maternal identification, this first delusion voices the protest of the subject such a state would destroy.

In its final form, Schreber's delusion of unmanning creates room to both rest and enjoy. This through several changes—first, the perpetrator of the process switches from Fleschig to God. Where Fleschig is a man and so the marker of a certain functioning of sexual difference, God offers a different sort of other. This becomes clear the first and apparently only time Schreber experiences God's "omnipotence in its complete purity" (p. 131). Schreber's experience of God is direct—God's rays are "reflected" on Schreber's "nervous system" and God's voice "resound"s in a "mighty base" (p. 131). Schreber is filled with God in sound and sight—it is a communication without separation. Indeed even after Schreber resumes belief in the existence of others, he continues to be skeptical that anyone else existed at this moment: "One of the many things incomprehensible to me is that other human being should have existed at that time apart from myself" (p. 132). God is not simply an other among others, but the only other, the "total body" (p. 114) of Enriquez's equation.

But importantly, God is depicted as *male*. In other words, although Schreber has entered a symbiotic relation prior to the symbolization of sexual difference, on another level he had used it. This becomes clear in the content of God's communication: God names Schreber "wretch[Luder]," which Schreber defines as "an expression ... to denote a human being destined to be destroyed by God and to feel God's power and wrath" (p. 131). The word "Luder" also connotes "bitch" and "slut," evoking the sexual relation Schreber protests with Fleschig. But what previously signified annihilation to Schreber here becomes his destiny—a name that feels "genuine" and with which Schreber can identify (p. 131). This shift speaks to the reconfiguration of subject and object that has in the interim taken place. When sexual difference

was functioning as such, being a Luder implied loss of Schreber's autonomy. Now that subject and object are symbiotically tied together, being a Luder inscribes a minimal difference between the two that saves Schreber from the "chaos of non-alterity" (Enriquez, p. 115) complete fusion with God would entail. In other words, gender is transposed onto Schreber's relation with God to stabilize a mode of difference prior to the recognition of sexual difference. Returning to Freud's three stages of ego development, we find in Schreber's use of God's maleness the "pleasure ego" (there is not complete fusion, but an evacuative/symbiotic relation to a total other). If woman first signified a wish to merge with the maternal, and second the subject's fear of doing so, in this final form it offers a compromise: a name Schreber can use to afford a rudimentary place for himself, albeit one confined by the restrictions and fluctuations of the symbiotic bond it covers over and stabilizes.

This stabilization of a basic identity leads to the development of a new space and time.

Schreber describes the feminizing impact of God as follows:

So-called *Moonshine-Blessedness* fluttered toward me in long flights (the image is hard to describe, one might perhaps compare it with so-called gossamer, not in single threads but in a kind of denser texture); this was to represent the female state of Blessedness. (p. 113)

The image is light (it "flutter"s) but not loose (a "denser texture"). He compares it with a "gossamer"—which means both a spider's web (place/home) and fabric (something to clothe/contain). Schreber later describes his female body as a similar logic of being wrapped in something: "When I exert light pressure with my hand on any part of my body I can feel certain string or cord-like structures under the skin" (p. 246). To become a woman here is to create a certain spatiality. And it is awareness of this new spatiality that affords Schreber room to rest: "Through *pressure on one such structure* I can produce a feeling of female sensual pleasure...I

am absolutely compelled to do so if I want to achieve sleep or protect myself against otherwise almost unbearable pain” (p. 246, italics mine).<sup>18</sup> I am reminded of Freud’s metaphor in “Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911a), written at the same time as the Schreber case. He is describing the psychical system when it is dominated by the pleasure principle and “shut off from the stimuli of the external world”: “a neat example...is afforded by a birds egg with its food supply enclosed in its shell; for it, the care provided by its mother is limited to the provision of warmth” (p. 218). Like Schreber’s delusional spatiality, this is one of being wrapped completely. No exchange between inside and outside, ego and object, but instead a fullness supported by continuous contact with the warmth of an other. A protection that is complete; to use Freud’s term, an autistic solution.

In line with Freud’s understanding of spatial difference (internal vs. external reality) working through temporal difference (memory vs. perception), Schreber’s new spatiality makes him available for a new temporality—the development of an “Order of the World” in which Schreber’s unmaning proves redemptive. Schreber outlines it as follows:

[There is] a tendency, innate in the Order of the World, to unman a human being who has entered into permanent contact with rays. This is connected ... with the basic plan on which the Order of the World seems to rest, that in the case of world catastrophes... the human race can be renewed. (pp. 59-60)

In the face of catastrophe one human is spared destruction and “transformed into a woman in order to bear [God’s] children” (p. 60) through “divine fertilization” (p. 164). Schreber connects this only total solution with a return to the human: “Voluptuous enjoyment or Blessedness is granted to souls in perpetuity and as an end in itself, but to human beings and other living creatures solely as a means for the preservation of the species” (p. 249). Where the supernatural

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<sup>18</sup> Such spatial protection also leads Schreber to form strategies for silencing thoughts coming from without; he repeats their own words, recites poems learned by rote, and plays the piano.

experiences pleasure in “perpetuity” and as an “end in itself,” the human acts in real time and space for something outside himself. In “divine fertilization” Schreber finds a bridge—a beginning and end outside of human time that promises to return him to the time of humans. It differs from human time in three ways. First, in giving birth to a new race Schreber becomes the original human. In other words, repetition is taken out of the equation—he does not re-produce but produces. Second, this original production is always waiting to occur. While Schreber does not tell us much about the process of divine fertilization, he does share that for his part it involves a constant making himself available to insemination through arousal. Schreber distinguishes this from sexual desire:

When I speak of my duty to cultivate voluptuousness, I never mean any sexual desires towards other human beings (females) least of all sexual intercourse, but that I have to imagine myself as man and woman in one person having intercourse with myself, or somehow have to achieve with myself a certain sexual excitement. (p. 250)

Schreber’s pleasure is not oriented towards an other. And least of all is it a sexual production (intercourse). He is pleasuring himself. But Schreber is correct that this is no masturbation. There is no self divided from itself that can both give and receive. Instead Schreber must wait passively but aroused for an irrational, immaterial other to finally do the deed and right the un-rightable wrongs. Put simply, action is always in future tense. Lastly, this time of deferral renders Schreber immortal—until he is re-placed in human time he is not subjected to its usual effects. Here in Schreber’s new order we find the limits inherent in sexual difference re-written—Schreber does not come from others, but is himself the origin; he does not desire others, but is instead subjected to the desire of the other; he will not die.

Where, then, does this new order leave Schreber? As previously mentioned, on the one hand it saves him. Schreber is afforded the capacity to exist in space and time. This protects him from attacks and allows for rest and pleasure. But such an order is not without restrictions. For

one, in order to reap the benefits of his new organization Schreber must be perfectly mirrored by the world. He literally must sit in front of the mirror and create the image God asks of him (p. 248). While he can spend much of his time doing so, Schreber is keenly aware that constant mirroring is “naturally impossible” (p. 251). In addition to God’s mirroring, Schreber needs other humans to accept his “proof” of femininity—a proof they ultimately cannot give (p. 247). Secondly, dependence on perfect mirroring renders God’s absences catastrophic for Schreber. Schreber experiences God’s withdrawals as “states of bellowing,” an uncontrollable screaming he describes as “an almost unbearable plague” (p. 241). And finally, while this new space and time offers Schreber protection *from* the world, it does not afford him the capacity to act *in* the world. All he can do is wait for his destiny. Ironically then, Schreber’s regression to a state prior to the symbolization of sexual difference forces him to exist for an ultimate sexual purpose. An existence that in its totality cannot be his own. Thus one could say that gender for Schreber is too real (a presentation, not a re-presentation)—in its certainty and demand, it denies him the capacity to use it for growth. Put succinctly, Schreber has found in unmaning the capacity to be, but this very certainty of being disallows him the capacity to become.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, if Freud theorizes objective reality as the product of differentiation from one’s environment, Schreber teaches us the stakes of such a process for thinking gender. His transformation into a woman outlines two ways gender can function in relation to differentiation from one’s environment. First, gender can be experienced as a merging with the object. In its extreme, this implies the collapse of structure, no difference between the ego and its environment, and thus the annihilation of both. Second, gender can stabilize a symbiotic relation

to the object that saves the subject from total annihilation. Here it functions as a last ditch effort to carve out a minimal difference from the object, affording a place (space and time) from which one can exist. When operating as such, gender must be continuously reflected and affirmed; misattunement or loss of the object prove catastrophic. Consequently, growth cannot be risked.

Returning to gender identity more broadly, it is important to note that the issue is not whether some aspect of objective reality (say, assigned gender) is accepted or rejected. We all accept and protest various aspects of our present objective realities all the time, and thank goodness! Otherwise there would be no change. Rather, the significant factor is whether such an acceptance or rejection expresses a fusion with the object and thus a loss of autonomy, or tolerates difference and uses it to act.

### **Clinical vignette: “Don’t talk about my genitals”**

In order to highlight the problems of differentiation that can be at play in gender identity, I will share a short clinical vignette. Ashley is a 24-year-old transgender woman<sup>19</sup> I first met on an acute inpatient psychiatric unit. She was admitted for attempting to kill herself by overdosing on pills her doctor had given her.<sup>20</sup> Coming from a history of complex trauma, Ashley was convinced she had dissociative identity disorder. She was constantly searching for others to confirm her diagnosis, something providers were hesitant to do. This because her multiple personalities more often than not felt manipulative. Ashley would interrupt a conversation mid-sentence, saying things like “I am five and so now I can’t talk.” By forcing others to mirror what they did not see, Ashley would continuously confirm that indeed she was the one in control,

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<sup>19</sup> Transgender woman refers to someone who was assigned male at birth but whose gender identity is that of a woman.

<sup>20</sup> Right from the go, contact with an other is deadly.

making her objects safe but ineffective. Here I'll share a vignette which I think highlights how Ashley used her gender identity to similarly control her objects, thereby giving evidence to their far-too-closeness.

Ashley was discharged from the inpatient ward into a partial hospitalization program, a six week "step down" day program within the same hospital. During her tenure there, the program experienced a traumatic event—another participant ran to the 16<sup>th</sup> floor and jumped into the middle of the staircase, dangling from the railing and screaming "don't touch me!" while she contemplated falling to her death. Ashley was one of the peers who had attempted to intervene and had been yelled at. "Don't touch me!" The participant was eventually able to be talked down and was immediately hospitalized, leaving the program with her absence.

The following day, Ashley began community meeting with a warning and a command: "If anyone asks me about my genitals I'm going to freak out!" She prohibits and thereby evokes a fantasied voyeuristic other, telling them to stand back. This specifically in relation to gender and sexual difference: Ashley assumes (and not necessarily incorrectly) that because of her gender identity, others are voyeuristically curious about her sex. This intrusive other is commanded to not think about Ashley's sexual body. By naming her genitals, Ashley undoes the privacy she is entitled to in regards to her body; by commanding the other to not follow suit, she projects her sense of overwhelmed boundaries onto the other's violating desire. Returning to the traumatic event from the day prior, in which the stakes of subject and object contact reached literal annihilation (do not touch me or I will die), Ashley's warning could be seen as an assertion of a too-closeness as well as an attempt at resolution. The genitals become the traumatic event that needs to not be spoken about—all of a sudden they loom large, being on everyone's mind. Ashley then attempts to resolve this momentary collapse of self/other

boundaries by asserting her own: do not think or speak about my sexed body. She lays claim to her sexed (i.e. differentiated and private) self here only through an assertion of control. While this allows Ashley some space to rest, it is a space she must be radically alone in. For an other who cannot speak has no possibility of marking his separate existence, and thus can offer nothing Ashley does not already have.

### Chapter 3

#### When sleeping men lie: evacuative gender in *Giovanni's Room*

Recall Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. To de-stabilize the ontological status of gender, she uses the metaphor of performance: "[A]cts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (1990, p. 173).

What appears as the fact of one's gender becomes shared belief, a "performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (1990, p. 179). By substituting social belief for inner truth Butler elucidates the social-political work at play in gender identity. Yet such a substitution glosses over the different subjective experiences of authenticity in relation to social recognition.

Returning to Schreber, one could say he believed in his gendered performance so strongly it reached certainty, while the social script was hardly followed. And then there are those who do not believe. Who feel false, or unable to buy in, regardless of how convincing their show. This chapter proceeds to explain such a disconnect. It will first posit a psychoanalytic definition of subjective truth, and then turn to James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (2001) and implications for gender identity. It will argue that gender feels false when it refuses engagement with the object and so, too, the drives.

#### Truth, the sham, and the transfer

In "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937a) Freud writes: "The analytic relationship is based on a love of truth—that is, on a recognition of reality... it precludes any kind

of sham or deceit” (p. 248). Two relations are proposed: truth as the recognition of reality, and as opposed to the sham. We will come back to both. But first, what truth is Freud speaking about? And what does it mean to “love” it?

Freud’s essay on “Screen Memories” (1899) is his first to explicitly take up the question of truth. The paper introduces the concept of screen memories to explain seemingly “emotionally insignificant” memories from childhood. Freud proposes that these early memories hide while bearing evidence to other conflictual (i.e. repressed) memories: “What is recorded as a mnemonic image is not the relevant experience itself...[but] another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one” (p. 307). This due to conflict: a compromise has been formed between the “principle which endeavors to fix important impressions” and that which “resists” objectionable ones. To begin, then, Freud posits a double relation to truth—on the one hand a desire to recognize reality (“to fix important impressions”), on the other, a resistance to any such effort.

To elaborate his theory, Freud sets up a dialogue between himself and a fabricated analysand, a “man of university education, aged thirty-eight” (p. 309), in which the unconscious meaning of a screen memory is revealed. We now know the content Freud offers is entirely autobiographical. This screening of his screen memory is striking, since as Evelyne Ender (2005) points out, Freud’s generous use of personal examples in the *Interpretation of Dreams* makes it unlikely Freud would resort to such a rhetorical strategy out of bashfulness. How, then, do we account for Freud’s use of a fictional dialogue in order to reveal the truth behind memory?

Ender answers that such a dialogic structure both articulates the undecidability of memory’s relation to truth, and allows Freud to express his ambivalence towards such

undecidability. She compares Freud's dialogue to the act of remembering itself: "Like any other rememberer, Freud must have felt the split between the 'I now' and the 'I then' ... offer[ing] a vivid reminder that we all ultimately view the 'film' of our memories through the eyes of a self very different from the subject in the picture" (In Mellos, p. 35). This split contaminates any sense of memory as an accurate (read, honest) harbinger of objective reality. Ender goes on to chart how Freud uses the two characters to voice his own ambivalence about such implications: his analysand gets carried away, asserting that the screen memory is pure fiction, while Freud plays the scientist who cautions against such radically constructivist claims.

But in addition to the problem of accuracy Ender elucidates, there is a different type of truth at stake in the dialogue. Regardless of whether the screen memory has some connection to past material reality or is entirely fabricated, it serves a *purpose* both Freud and his fabricated analysand come to be certain of. Freud summarizes: the memory "is calculated to illustrate the most momentous turning points in your life, the influence of the two most powerful motive forces—hunger and love" (p. 316). What is most "true" then about the memory is not its rendition of objective reality but the unconscious drives it screens. Freud compares it to the sham: "There is a common saying among us about shams, that they are not made of gold themselves but have lain behind something that is made of gold" (p. 307). Thus we arrive at an unconscious truth of the drive that is not opposed to deceit but expressed through it and only revealed, I contend, in dialogue with an other.

Freud's concept of the drive is famously opaque. He writes in his 'New Introductory Lectures': "The theory of the instincts<sup>21</sup> is so to say our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness" (1933, p. 95). Indeed such "indefiniteness" permeates three out of the four qualities Freud assigns the drive: its "source" in the body is "often not known"; its "aim," while ultimately satisfaction, may take any number of "paths" which can be "combined or interchanged"; and its object is the "most variable" of all, "not originally connected with it[the drive], but becomes assigned to it only in consequences of being particularly fitted to make satisfaction possible" (Instincts and Their Vicissitudes, 1915, p. 122). The only consistent aspect of the drive is its "pressure," a quantitative measure of "force" which "demand[s]..work" (1915, p. 122). And what type of work is this? Specifically that of translation: located at the "frontier between the mental and the somatic" the drive concerns pressure "originating from within the organism and reaching the mind...[a] demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body" (1915, p. 122). This transfer from the body to the mind leads to an additional transfer from the organism to its environment: unlike external stimulation which can be fled, the drives "make far higher demands on the nervous system and cause it to undertake *involved* and *interconnected* activities by which the external world is so changed as to afford satisfaction to the internal source of stimulation" (1915, p. 120, emphasis mine). Thus it is through the drive that the external world comes to have import. This connection between the drives and engagement with the environment leads Freud to go as far as theorizing the drives themselves to be "precipitates of the effects of external stimulation, which in the course of phylogenesis have brought about modifications in the living

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<sup>21</sup> While Strachey translates "trieb" here as 'instinct,' I use the term "drive" following Lacan's reading (2004, p. 225), as Freud importantly uses a different term when he refers to the biological instincts.

substance” (1915, p. 120). In short, if the drive is “pressure,” it is pressure to transfer—from the body to the mind, and from the organism to the environment.

When Freud returns to a conceptualization of psychoanalytic truth in his late paper “Constructions in Analysis” (1937b) he places it specifically in this act of transfer, elaborating the dialogic structure he intuited in “Screen Memories.” The paper is responding to the critique that psychoanalysis follows a “Heads I win, tails you lose” logic: if the patient agrees with an interpretation, the analyst assumes himself correct, if the patient disagrees, the analyst still assumes his accuracy, chalking the patient’s refusal up to resistance. Freud argues that while psychoanalysis does not take a patient’s conscious rejection of an interpretation at face value, neither does it hold her conscious acceptance in high regard. Nor is the analyst’s determination of what is true trusted in and of itself. Instead, Freud points to the importance of the intersubjective exchange. He defines the two roles: The patient has knowledge (it is the truth of his experience that is at stake) and also the need not to know it (the experience of interest is that which is repressed). The analyst has neither the experience nor the inhibition, and thus acts as the decoder: “His task is to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to construct it” (pp. 258-9). Like the screen memory, his task is ambiguously both passive (hearing “traces”) and active (constructing their meaning). How then does he know when his “decoding” is correct “enough”? Only through its effect on the patient: “if the construction is wrong, there is no change in the patient; but if it is right or gives an approximation to the truth, he reacts to it with an unmistakable aggravation of his symptoms and of his general condition” (p. 265). Put differently, we know we are wrong when no contact is made, when there is a lack of transfer. Indeed Freud points to confirmation being clearest when the patient continues with a translation of his own: “when a patient answers with an association

which contains something similar or analogous to the content of the construction” (p. 263). It is the indirect response, the translation into the patient’s own language that marks the arrival at subjective truth. If the push towards transfer is the truth of the drive, it is the act of transfer that signals its engagement.

### **Bion’s contribution**

Where Freud raises the importance of exchange to unconscious truth, Wilfred Bion expands on the necessary context for such an exchange to lead to growth. Truth is arguably one of Bion’s most central concepts, leading neo-Bionian thinkers to theorize a truth-drive at the heart of his contribution (Grotstein, 2004). He famously compares truth to food: “[H]ealthy mental growth seems to depend on truth as the living organism depends on food” (1965, p. 38). Yet regardless or perhaps because of its central import, truth is difficult to define in Bion’s work. He relates it and even exchanges it for O, the “unknowable and formless infinite,” and “ultimate reality.” But there are subtle differences. For one, truth and falsehood relate to the realm of thoughts, where reality is thought about (recall Freud’s positing of truth as the *re-cognition* of reality). In addition, while reality encompasses all that is, truth seems to be particular to and possessed by individual entities. So Bion speaks of the “absolute truth in and of an...object” (1970, p. 30). Grotstein follows out both these distinctions by defining truth as a personal relation to reality: “Truth... constitutes our emotional comprehension and acceptance of reality, both inner and outer... Put another way, reality always is. Truth constitutes our personal, emotional, subjective acceptance of it as our truth and the truth” (p. 1094).

The capacity to accept reality is for Bion no easy task. It is never entirely possible, and only approached through the alpha function, or the transformation of unbearable experience into

thoughts. This is in its origin an entirely interpersonal affair. Bion narrates its development through the metaphor of breast-feeding. First the infant is hungry, and experiences this sensation as a bad object: “[It] is associated with a visual image of a breast that does not satisfy but is of a kind that is needed. This needed object is a bad object. All objects that are needed are bad objects because they can tantalize” (1962, p. 84). The infant thus attempts to evacuate the bad breast (1962, p. 37). If he is fed with “milk, warmth and love,” he experiences taking in the good breast and at the same time and “indistinguishable” from the taking in, “evacuating the bad breast” (1962, p. 34). Over time the bad object is felt to be “removed [from the good breast] and re-introjected” (1962, p. 90). If the mother is able to receive the infant’s projected objects and provide meaning to them, “they [the objects] are felt to have been modified in such a way that the object that is re-introjected has become tolerable in the infant’s psyche” (1962, p. 90). Bion terms this maternal receptiveness “reverie”: a “state of mind which is open to the reception of any ‘objects’ from the loved object . . . whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad” (1962, p. 36). In her reverie the mother acts as a “container” to the unbearable experience that, now “contained,” is transformed into something thinkable. Put back into the breastfeeding metaphor, the “‘wanted’ breast is [now] felt as an ‘idea of the breast missing’ and not as a bad breast present.” (1962, p. 34). The infant has thus accepted a piece of reality, encountered true thought, and can now do something to alter his situation.

Alternately, when maternal reverie is absent and relations between the infant and breast are dominated by envy, projected elements are not contained but instead “stripped” of the “good and valuable elements,” leaving the infant forced to re-introject only “worthless residue” (1962, pp. 96-7). In contrast to the experience of containment, Bion describes this as a state of “withoutness”: “It is an internal object without an exterior. It is an alimentary canal without a

body” (1962, p. 97). Such a structure cannot think about reality but can only evacuate it—thus truth is inapproachable and growth does not occur.

Bion applies this same interpersonal exchange to the analytic dyad’s elaboration of truth. He writes of the analyst’s reverie as a receptiveness to the patient’s projected elements, or a “becoming O”: “In order to know the truth one must become it.” This “at-one-ment” can be “felt” but not directly known. It is importantly not identification: “There can be no geometry of “similar”, “identical” “equal”; only of analogy” (1970, p. 89). The contact of becoming is not merging, then, but translation. Grotstein clarifies:

To become not as fusion but in the “become” process the analyst is evoked, provoked or ‘primed’...to respond to the analysand’s emotions and associations with his/her private, native emotions that are independently summoned within him/her...to enter within his/her own unconscious to locate and to summon (unconsciously) those emotions and experiences that are apposite to the hidden emotional truths of the analysand with which they symmetrically resonate, thereby achieving a ‘common sense’ (1963, p. 10). (p. 1085)

It is specifically the resonance between two, a resonance dependent on both the willingness to be impacted by the other and the capacity to translate such impact into a personal language that leads to the progressive uncovering of truth.

In contrast to the receptiveness necessary for truth, Bion defines the lie by the evacuation of O and so too meaning. The liar “denudes the environment of significant...[only] harbor[ing] thoughts if he does not need thoughts to contribute to his significance and [only tolerating]...thoughts that do not do so” (1970, p. 104). This is both a rejection of the environment (opposite “becoming O”) and of its impact on the self (a fantasy of omnipotence).

To summarize, subjective truth is here defined as the truth of the drive. It is a truth only graspable in hidden form and only encountered in the transference between two; it is itself the

push towards transfer. Bion adds the necessary context: a receptiveness to the object (“becoming” or “at-one-ment with” O) and the capacity to reflect on such contact, or transform it into personally rendered meaning. To elaborate this definition and apply it to gender identity, I turn to James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*.

### **Part two: *Giovanni’s Room***

Written in 1956, *Giovanni’s Room* inspired discomfort from the start. Baldwin was told to “burn” the book by his editor because its themes of homosexuality and lack of black characters would alienate his black American readership (Eckman, 1966). And indeed, its publication did mark a radical drop in interest from the Black American press, and scathing reviews from white and black American critics alike (Corbman, 2012). Yet the novel went on to be one of Baldwin’s most acclaimed texts (Corbman). The story is told in hindsight by its narrator David, a young American living in Paris in the 1950s whose girlfriend Hella has gone off to Spain to contemplate marriage. Left alone David begins to have an affair with an Italian man, Giovanni, whom he eventually leaves to marry Hella.

Although so often articulated as a novel about homosexual desire, Baldwin felt this was a misreading of his text. He explained in an interview near the end of his life: “It is not about homosexuality at all, except as an aspect. It is about what happens to one... what happens to a liar really, and about the pressures to lie” (conversation with Gary Sheinfeld, 1987). Following out the definition of truth just proposed, this chapter will argue that it is no accident one of the most beautiful accounts of the consequences of lying is steeped in the language of gender.

*Mirrors and mothers, or how truth dies*

*Giovanni's Room* is a story of the night. A night, tells our narrator David, "leading...to the most terrible morning of my life" (p. 3). Alone, drunk, and staring into a mirror, David sits on the eve of his ex-lover's execution recounting his tale. He begins with an image:

My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. (p. 3)

The image is phallic ("tall...like an arrow"), white ("blonde hair gleams"), a familiarity without specificity ("a face you have seen many times"). It is both powerful and dispossessed--related to David (*my* reflection) but not synonymous with him (the referent is the reflection itself). Later David writes of the key to his downfall as "trapped in that reflection...and yet more foreign to me than those foreign hills outside" (p. 10). Opposite Schreber who finds himself fused with his mirror image, here the mirror is other—the container of knowledge that cannot be known.

Alternately, moments David does recognize himself in his reflection are catastrophic. The first time David sleeps with a boy he experiences it as a terrifying self-exposure: "But Joey is a boy!... A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words...How could this have happened to me. How could this have happened *in me!*" (p. 9). David projects the image onto his lovers body: "That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came" (p. 9). The mirroring internal/external caverns scare David into abandoning his lover and disowning his experience: "I could not discuss what happened to me with anyone, I could not even admit it to myself" (p. 16).

If the mirror holds mystery and danger it is also for David a constant companion. The scene through which the story is told involves David moving from one reflective surface to another, at pivotal moments in the plot David looks at his reflection, and in Giovanni's parting

words he accuses David of loving his mirror over any actual person (p. 141). In addition to literal mirrors, David is constantly assuming and fearing recognition from others. This specifically in moments he feels desire or loss: upon meeting Giovanni, David experiences his desire “as visible [to others] as the wafers on the shirt of the flaming princess” (p. 42); in longing after a Sailor, he sees in the Sailor “a look...as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eye” (p. 92); and after leaving Giovanni he imagines a policeman will know what he did, “feeling foolish for feeling shaken” when the policeman of course has no idea (p. 143). Lastly, descriptions of internal states are often immediately followed by mirroring descriptions of the land. So David compares his “foreign” inside to the “foreign hills outside,” he asserts “I will be stiller” and then “And the country side is still tonight” (p. 44), and after he leaves Giovanni he observes: “It was apparent that the sun would soon give up the tremendous struggle it cost her to get to Paris for a few hours every day” (p. 146). Put simply, it is not clear whether David is running from his mirror, or running towards it; whether it impedes knowledge, or overwhelmingly supplies it; whether it claims David, or David claims it.

David dreams of being claimed by his dead mother. She is “blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body, that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive” (p. 11). She is castrating/ed (blind with worms), decomposing (hair dry as metal, brittle, putrescent), and devouring; she is, in other words, the anti-containing function. David has dreamed this dream since childhood and has not shared it with others, assuming it disloyal to his mother.

Mirroring the mirror, the dead mother is also both un-incorporable (a dream not to be shared, memories “scarcely remembered” [p. 11]) and omnipresent. For instance: David describes the photograph of his mother as “rul”ing his childhood home, “as though ... her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all” (p. 11); other older female characters are described as having an “all-registering eye” and a look that makes David feel “really helpless in front of” (p. 68); and men consistently relate to and speak of women in a way that David associates with mothers (when David’s father speaks of David’s mother “he might have been speaking of his own,” the French women’s “husbands might have been their sons” [p. 65], and then later the American wife “might have been his mother” [p. 90]). What, then, do we make of these foreign while ever-present mirrors and mothers? And how do they concern gender and telling lies?

The mirror has been associated with truth seemingly since humans discovered reflective surfaces. As Freud notes in “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), it was believed to be a portal into the soul, the future, and the divine in ancient Egypt, alongside Ancient Greek, Mesoamerican and East Asian societies. Additional associations have often included life, death, protection from and access to evil spirits (often when broken or distorted), deception (“smoke and mirrors”), femininity, and sexuality (Pendergrast, 2004). Etymologically, the word is linked to “wonder” and to “miracle.”

Not so far off from this nexus of associations, Winnicott relates mirrors to mothers: “the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face” (1971, p. 149). He describes the moment the baby looks around and see's the mother looking at him: “the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there*” (p. 151, sic). If the mother is able to respond to the infant empathically and reflect him back, she initiates “a significant exchange with the world,

a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things” (p. 151). Returning to Bion’s alpha function, here we find maternal reverie visually rendered—the mother takes what she sees and reconfigures it in an expression the infant can learn from. I think to the mirror’s etymological associations with wonder—it is the mother’s curiosity, her desire to know that allows the infant to experience connection as revelatory. Over time and through weaning such a capacity is internalized and the mother as mirror fades into an internal structure (Bion’s alpha function, or what Andre Green terms a “container for representational space” [1997, p. 166]). The infant is now able to cathect his own object/mirrors in the world, which have been accepted as separate and different from him, resonating nonetheless.

What happens, then, when the mother/mirror dies mid-reflection? When she has yet to meet the slow and tolerable fading of a weaning gone well? Baldwin offers a hint—following David’s encounter with Joey (his first male lover), he describes his active forgetting as follows: “while I never thought about it, it remained, nevertheless, at the bottom of my mind, as still and awful as a decomposing corpse” (p. 16). I contend that what *Giovanni’s Room* tells us is that the truth dies with her—or to be more exact, that the unmournable dead takes possession of it. Unrecognizable and non-transferrable, the truth of her presence remains a secret between two.

Andre Green (1997) writes of this secret relation to the dead mother. He is referencing mothers who, once vibrant and alive, becomes psychically dead.<sup>22</sup> In response to such a catastrophic loss the child performs two simultaneous defenses: First out of hopelessness he de-cathects (disowns) the maternal object, performing a “psychical murder of the object,

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<sup>22</sup> He is clear to differentiate such a phenomenon from mothers who die in reality. Although since we are dealing with fiction, I am not going to follow his warning sign too strongly, as I think there is overlap to how Baldwin uses the dead mother and what Green writes of.

accomplished without hatred” (p. 151, 1997). Second, unwillingly and unconsciously the child takes the dead mother into himself through the mode of primary identification. His love is “frozen,” unconsciously “mortgaged” to the dead mother inside. Thus his capacity to elaborate his separate existence and transfer to new objects is unwittingly forestalled. Green summarizes: “To nourish the dead mother amounts...to maintaining the earliest love for the primordial object under the seal of secrecy enshrouded by the primary repression of an ill-accomplished separation, of the two partners of primitive fusion” (p. 168). It is a love affair that cannot be known about, lest it either overtake the subject or threaten to dissipate.

Returning to David’s nightmare, we can read the monstrous figure as both David’s own projected rage and need left by an intolerable loss, as well as his longing for and terror of a fusion he can neither let go nor be aware of. So David offers himself as border patrol—mastering the art of running and hiding, avoiding all meaningful connection, evacuating in order to (unconsciously) hold on to his mother mirror at every step.

With this set up, I turn to gender, and to what happens when the son of a dead mother meets the father of a dead son.

*Strutting cocks and dresses that kill*

If David patrols the border between the repressed and conscious, he does so especially with and through gender. He is constantly observing how men and how women are, how they should be, and, most importantly, how they should not be. He describes a sailor walking by as embodying an ideal masculinity:

He seemed—somehow—younger than I had ever been, and blonder and more beautiful, and he wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin. He made me think of

home...I knew how he drank and how he was with his friends and how pain and women baffled him. I wondered if my father had ever been like that, if I had ever been like that—thought it was hard to imagine, for this boy, striding across the avenue like light itself, any antecedents, any connections at all. (p. 92)

The image is tied to the familiar, to youth, to all things good (beautiful, blonde, literally a ray of light). It is self-same (“unequivocally” masculine) and unrelated to (“baffled by”) pain, desire and women. David admires in his father a similar performance of masculinity, describing him as “boyish and expansive...strutting like a cock” (p. 12). I think of Freud’s pleasure ego—the container of all good, without relation to the bad.<sup>23</sup> If Schreber’s femininity is a fusion with the object, David’s masculine ideal is a fantasy of evacuating it, of being the not-mother, in need of nothing.

Where masculinity becomes a container for life (i.e. youth), satisfaction, and the familiar, femininity becomes its split-off other—deathly, wanting, and full of mystery. So David describes his aunt as “dressed as they say, to kill, with her mouth redder than any blood”; Sue, a woman he sleeps with is “rigid as the skeleton beneath her flabby body” (p. 102); and his fiancé begins to make his “flesh recoil...when I entered her I began to feel that I would never get out alive” (p. 158). Indeed femininity seems to be intolerable to all men. David describes his father rarely speaking of his dead mother, “and when he did he covered, by some mysterious means, his face” (p. 13). And Giovanni speaks of women as dangerously fluid: “Women are like water. They are tempting like that, and they can be that treacherous, and they can seem to be that bottomless, you know? —And they can be that shallow. And that dirty” (p. 80).

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<sup>23</sup> Recall that Schreber also utilizes a “pleasure ego” to stabilize a rudimentary space apart from God. But I would argue that Schreber and David come at it from opposite directions—David is painfully aware of falling short of this ideal (he knows he is in need of and so different from others) but attempts to hide this truth, where Schreber must believe full force in this ideal and total relation to God in order to salvage any space to exist at all. In other words, opposition for Schreber is not a defense against difference from the creation of a minimal amount of it.

Such an evacuative system renders the relations between men and women both constitutive and impossible. David's fiancé Hella becomes the spokeswoman for this logic. She tells David that in order to be a woman, she must be possessed by a man: "It isn't [i.e. doesn't matter] what I've got. It isn't even what I want. It's that you've got me...From now on, I can have a wonderful time complaining about being a woman. But I won't be terrified that I'm not one" (p. 126). Relating as a possession, Hella experiences this as a relation to a stranger: "For a woman...a man is always a stranger. And there's something awful about being at the mercy of a stranger...before you can begin to be yourself" (p. 125). David protests that men are dependent on women as well, to which Hella clarifies:

[M]en may be at the mercy of women—I think men like that idea, it strokes the misogynist in them. But if a particular man is ever at the mercy of a particular woman—why, he's somehow stopped being a man. And the lady, then, is more neatly trapped than ever. (p. 125)

If a man must possess a woman in order for her to be, then he cannot experience her as a separate ("particular") object imbued with meaning—this would upset the system. Put simply, if man cannot be known, woman must have nothing of her own worth knowing about—it is a splitting of the world that disallows contact, and so too the elaboration of truth. Thus while such a gendered system protects David from the repressed within, this same protection leaves him with a loss of meaning: his friendships are "bluff," his lovers are "desperate," and his work feeds him "only in the most brutally literal sense" (p. 21). It is this sense that "something has been misplaced" that sends David to France, where he "finds himself," eventually, in Giovanni's room.

*Giovanni and his room*

When David does make contact with an other in the meeting of Giovanni, we know immediately his borders are upset. The night he meets Giovanni, David is visited by a gender queer character as repelling as Giovanni is attractive:

[S]omeone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death. And it walked, really, like someone who might be sleepwalking or like those figures in slow motion one sometimes sees on the screen. It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness...It glittered in the dim light: the thin, black hair was violent with oil, combed forward, hanging in bangs; the eyelids gleamed with mascara, the mouth raged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless with some kind of foundation cream; it stank of powder and a gardenia-like perfume. The shirt, open coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest...He wore buckles on his shoes. (p. 39)

Coming “out of the shadows,” David’s messenger is the embodiment of matter out of place. “It” is the living dead, the sleeping walker, the fantasy (“on the screen”) becoming reality. The description is entirely comprised of markers of femininity, over-laden with the connotations of death, desire and repulsiveness. In stark contrast to the sailor’s skin as metaphor for the self-same, here skin itself is deceiving, stinking of “powder and a gardenia-like perfume.” Indeed David experiences the artificial aspects of femininity as especially aggressive: (the oil in the bangs is “violent”, the lipstick “raged”). Underlining the gender horror is the sudden pronoun switch of the last sentence: “He wore buckles on his shoes.” This ghostly feminine man warns David of Giovanni: “[F]or a boy like you, he is very dangerous” (p. 40). The threat of contact with Giovanni is given both by a gender queer character and as a relation to gender (“for a *boy* like you”).

As David’s gendered system show signs of cracking, we are immersed in a montage of primitive maternal imagery. Giovanni and David travel together, and the text turns to their surrounding environment: They pass a “butcher...already bloody, hacking at the meat” (p. 45),

there is a bounty of food (“It scarcely seems possible that all this could ever be eaten. But in a few hours it would all be gone,” [p. 47]) and also waste (“the pavements were slick with leavings, mainly cast-off, rotten leaves...vegetables which had met with disaster natural and slow, or abrupt” [p. 48]). Giovanni links their environment directly to the feminine body in bed: “This old whore, Paris, as she turns in bed, is very moving,” he comments. David observes one man “black and lone, walking along the river” (p. 45) which he describes as “swollen and yellow” (p. 45). It is as if we have entered the maternal body, with her liquids, food and waste, and one man, alone and black, walking at her side. With this cracking and return, we sense the possibility of a transfer.

The locus of the transfer becomes Giovanni’s room. David describes it as “underwater” and “indifferent” to time (p. 85). It is womblike: private, “not big enough for two” (p. 85), and perpetually in growth (“great plans for remodeling,” [p. 86]). It is also reminiscent of a tomb: the windows “star[e]...“like two great eyes of ice and fire” (p. 87), the wallpaper shows two “archaic lovers...trapped in an interminable rose garden” (p. 86). This womb/tomb feels to David a setting “out of which fiends have sometimes spoken.” In contrast to the sterile and stereotyped lovers on the wall is a “yellow light which hung like a diseased and undefinable sex in its [the room’s] center” (p. 88). Opposite Schreber’s erasure and re-writing of the limits of sexual difference (birth, death and sex), here in this ghostly womb/tomb we find their brutal presence—un-metabolized (“undefinable”) and traumatic (dis-eased).

David understands the room as an evacuative receptacle. He fantasizes the boxes and mess to be “Giovanni’s regurgitated life” (p. 87), filled with “punishment and grief” (p. 87), and assumes indeed a transfer is to take place:

I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's must first become a part of Giovanni's room. (p. 88)

In contrast to the transfer that contains and thus makes palatable, here the transfer is sacrificial—one lives through the other's death. It is an encounter with grief that swallows the container whole. Such a nightmare is also gendered for David. He experiences Giovanni's desire as trying to make him a "housewife" (p. 88): "you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little girl" (p. 142). In short, as David becomes aware of the possibility of transfer, he understands it as one that will leave him without life and without manhood—as the dead mother herself, left by the living to roam the grave.

#### *Evacuative solutions*

In response, David flees from Giovanni and in so doing creates a perfect mirror out of him: the abandoned parent of a dead son who kills a maternal figure and joins his own baby in death. The night David leaves, Giovanni tells the story of his stillborn child: "It was the day of my death—I wish it had been the day of my death" (p. 139). He turns directly from the loss of his son to David's leaving "Don't leave. Please don't leave me... He was sobbing... as though his heart would break" (p. 140). As David walks out, reenacting his own abandonment as well as Giovanni's, he poignantly marks his spatial distance from Giovanni as a temporal distance from himself: "One day I'll weep for this. One of these days I'll start to cry" (p. 145).

Following sorrow comes rage. Giovanni murders his perverse and maternal ex-boss Guillame. David imagines it as a seduction scene:

He [Giovanni] finds himself in Guillaume's rooms, surrounded by Guillaume's silks, colors, perfumes, staring at Guillaume's bed... Guillaume is precipitate, flabby, and moist, and, with each touch of his hand, Giovanni shrinks further and more furiously away. Guillaume disappears to change his clothes and comes back in his theatrical dressing gown. He wants Giovanni to undress. (p. 155)

The nightmare of the devouring, "sickening soft" other here is transposed into reality. Guillaume is feminine, he wears clothes that are "theatrical," and he surrounds Giovanni like "the sea itself" (p. 155).

The final blow is Giovanni's inability to get his end of the deal. Giovanni had come to get his job back, and after having sex with Guillaume attempts it. Guillaume refuses:

Beneath whatever reasons Guillaume invents, the real one lies hidden, and they both, dimly, in their different fashions, see it. Giovanni, like a falling movie star, has lost his drawing power. Everything is known about him, his secrecy has been discovered. Giovanni certainly feels this and the rage which has been building in him for many months begins to be swollen now with the memory of Guillaume's hands and mouth. (p. 156)

Where Guillaume becomes the devouring, seductive dead mother, Giovanni becomes her rage-full child, the "found out" need beneath the masculine ideal. So begins the sadistic exchange between the two leading to a murder drenched in gender: "the fabric was shredded, the odor of the perfume was thick," Giovanni strangles Guillaume "by the sash of the dressing gown" (pp. 156-157). Finally, in response to his rage comes retaliation—Giovanni is to be executed, joining his maternal persecutor in death.

As his victims fall to the wayside, we are brought back one last time to David, to the night, and to the mirror. He begins to merge with Giovanni. "I am terribly aware of the mirror. Giovanni's face swings before me like an unexpected lantern on a dark, dark night" (p. 167). He imagines every detail before the death. He is "sweating, or he is dry"; David too is "clammy," his body "dry" (p. 168). Like all evacuated objects, the mirror comes back stronger than ever—

presenting David ultimately with the dying and fused self and other he never let go of. David speaks to the mirror's power ("I long to crack the mirror and be free") and connects it immediately to sexual difference: "I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed" (p. 168). Unable to mourn the loss of the other, David is left with a sex he can neither "reflect on" nor claim as his own (that cannot be re-deemed). Failing such a meaning-making capacity, gender remains a system of morals that has little to do with David, his sex, and the search for truth.

The final image is of David walking towards the bus in the morning. He tears up a letter with information about Giovanni's death "into many pieces" (p. 169). "Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me" (p. 169). So much is the fate of unbearable loss—uncontained and sense-less, it can only be discarded, blowing back time and again with hopes of being claimed.

## **Conclusion**

If sexual difference is a given reality of human life, its becoming personal truth is anything but given. This chapter has argued that such a process involves translation—a transfer that reveals only partially and always in newly created form. Returning to Judith Butler's metaphor of performance, we could say that it is because gender is performative that it has the potential to express inner truth—in forcing a self outside of the self, it offers a venue for translation, and so the possibility of getting to know. Schreber's suffering could be expressed as an inability to experience this performative possibility. Without separation between subject and object he had no theater. Thus he could neither reach towards truth nor protect with lies but

remained stuck in gendered certainty. James Baldwin elaborates an alternate problem: a performance of gender that seals up contact between subject and object. Here the outside performance stays close to the script and the drives remain the stuff of secret nightmares. When a transfer from one to the other does occur, it is quickly evacuated. There is no process of translation or getting to know and the same scripts and dreams go on like broken records, oceans apart. So where Schreber felt too real, stuck in his mirror image, David feels false, fleeing from the possibility of reflection. In both Schreber's non-performance and David's only-performance we find a problem of failed mourning—the former denying loss of the object, the later denying the importance of the object lost. Neither can tolerate contact with something other, and consequently neither can grow.

### **Case example: Jenner and the problem of passing**

There is a pleasure and relief in passing. For both the performer who sells the part and the audience who gets to believe it. So much is clear from the public response to Bruce Jenner's 1976 decathlon championship. Look for instance at this 1977 Washington Post description of Jenner:

He simply is a real-life version of the American dream, fairly bursting with honest vitality, infectious health and cheerful good humor...Is it his fault that he's direct, self-assured, sincere? The type of person we'd all like to be when we grow up? (Cited in Yahr, 2015)

In the years that followed Jenner appeared on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, *Gentleman's Quarterly* and *Playgirl*, and became a spokesperson for Tropicana, Minolta, Buster Brown Shoes

and Wheaties.<sup>24</sup> Like the sailor David envies, Jenner offered an American gendered dream to believe in.

Thus Jenner created quite a sensation when in 2015 he revealed on 20/20 that he always felt like a woman, and then came out in the Vanity Fair cover article as Caitlyn. Perhaps surprisingly and certainly a marker of growing public acceptance of gender variability, Jenner's reception as Caitlyn has not been all that dissimilar from her reception as Bruce: As Bruce, Jenner won that James E. Sullivan Award as the top amateur athlete in the US and was named the Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year (both in 1976), as Caitlyn, she won Glamour Woman of the year, Teen Choice Award for Choice Social Media Queen and Arthur Ashe Courage Award, all in under one year. In short, both before and after her transition, Jenner has a remarkable ability to pass, to make corporate America believe its gendered fantasies are real.

But there is a danger in passing. Take for example Jenner's employment of gender during a heated interaction in her new reality TV show "I Am Cait"(Jenner, 2016). Authors and transgender advocates Kate Bornstein and Jennifer Boylan spearhead a confrontation with Jenner about her aggressive style of debating politics and inability to take in what others say. Fellow cast members add that they were scared by Jenner's aggression and felt not seen in the conversation. Jenner's response: "I admit I get very upset and become very aggressive when it comes to politics. The old Bruce comes out. Listening is something I have to work on. That is the feminine side of me I am working on." Later, on the bus she adds in an alone moment: "I need to be calmer...let little Caitlyn carry the conversation in a calm way. I have to try that."

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<sup>24</sup> Awards, accolades, and career information found on Wikipedia.com.

It is as if Jenner is training for a new test, studying how to get the part of “little” Caitlyn. Aggression is evacuated onto the “old Bruce” who is being shed. What is missed, is any questioning of what exactly made Caitlyn so angry when debating politics, or why it is hard for her to take others in. Instead of elaborating a truth specific to Caitlyn as a subject, she turns to the work of mastering a stereotype. No translation occurs, and so no possibility for growth.

Returning to the case example from Chapter 2, there are useful comparisons to be made. Like Ashley, Jenner navigates a moment of uncomfortable intimacy by evoking gender. But where Ashley evokes gender’s traumatic underside (the unthinkable genitals) Jenner evokes its fairy tale surface (“calm little Caitlyn”). In doing so, she does not take control as Ashley does, but disinvests from any power or responsibility.<sup>25</sup> She must simply learn a role. In contrast to Ashley’s overwhelming presence, Jenner psychically leaves the scene. This allows Jenner to move forward, but to do so unscathed.<sup>26</sup> In short, it is precisely because Jenner passes so well that transformation becomes obsolete. She remains, as she keeps telling her friends “the same person with the same heart.” One we know very little about.

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<sup>25</sup> This could also be seen a different method of controlling one’s objects. Where Ashley must explicitly be in a relation of domination (“do not speak about...”), Jenner uses the social symbolic in order to control what is and is not seen about her. Such a possibility—of using shared social meaning in order to manipulate the ways we are received—is an important psychic tool, and one Ashley is unable to trust. However as Jenner exemplifies, it is a mode of interacting with the symbolic that disallows an encounter with otherness (both within and without).

<sup>26</sup> Like with David, movement becomes flight.

## Chapter 4

### “Who is ghost”: gender as significant form

Sometimes, gender grows us. Like our velveteen rabbit’s journey towards life, gender, too, can help subjects become. While this project has so far focused on gender as a means for disavowing loss (either the loss of the object or the object lost are refused), here it turns to a different traversal of object loss that moves towards truth. It will first present Susanne Langer’s concept of Significant Form as a way of thinking gender’s possibilities, and then turn to poetry written by gender queer and transgender individuals in order to apply such a framework to the explicit relation between gender and transformation found in gender transition.

#### Significant form

In her book *Feeling and Form* (1953) Susanne Langer theorizes aesthetic experience in a way that proves useful for thinking gender as growth. I will first elaborate her model and then turn to implications for gender. Langer begins with a distinction between the signal and the symbol. The signal, which she (importantly for us) compares to the symptom, is of a directional quality. It points to and helps us “notice the object or situation it bespeaks” (p. 26). This is something aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects share; we can infer through both a painting and a chair social context, traits of the creator, or time of production. In contrast, a symbol “expresses an idea” (p. 26). This is a very different expression than the signal’s—it is not raising awareness of something present, but *presenting* something either intangible or absent. Returning to Bion’s alpha function, again we have the symbol in a special relation to absence.

Langer makes an additional distinction between discursive and formal symbols. Where discursive symbols work through relatively fixed conventional references, formal symbols work through patterns and relations that share a “common logical form” with the object symbolized. This creates a different relation to meaning: “we are always free to fill its [the non-discursive symbol’s] subtle articulate forms with any meaning that fits them. That is, it may convey any idea of anything conceivable in its logical image” (p. 31). What makes a non-discursive symbol “significant” is not meaning per se but the presentation of a form or structure to help us produce meaning. For Langer, such meaning-producing forms are always forms of “human feeling...logic[s] of sentience” (p. 27): “It is only when nature is organized in imagination along lines congruent with the forms of feeling that we can understand it...[that] the world seems important and beautiful and is intuitively ‘grasped’” (p. 409). She offers the example of listening to music: we hear “forms of growth and attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm or subtle activation and dreamy lapses—not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either or both” (p. 27). It is this expression of significant form that defines aesthetic phenomena for Langer; I contend it is also a useful frame for thinking gender’s potential.

Langer sets up three qualifications for how an object or experience becomes a significant form. First, it must be rendered other, or drained of its “common” meaning. So in order to become art a chair must be separated from being a thing to sit in, a cup from being something to drink out of, and so on. Langer terms this necessary separation from the object’s practical function the creation of a “virtual” or “illusory” space. She distinguishes it from the work of fantasy:

The function of artistic illusion is not make believe, as many philosophers and psychologists assume, but the very opposite, disengagement from belief—the contemplation of sensory qualities without their usual meanings of “Here’s that chair,” “That’s my telephone,” “These figures ought to add up to the bank’s statement,” etc. The knowledge that what is before us has no practical significance in the world is what enables us to give attention to its appearance as such. (p. 49)

Through the abstraction of “quality” from “practical significance,” forms make themselves ready to be “put to new use” (p. 51).

Second to such othering is what Langer terms making the object “plastic”: it must be “manipulated in the interest of expression” (p. 60). Thus the significant form necessitates work—it must become malleable (the artist’s “material”) and be used with the intention to express. And lastly, through such work form must be rendered “transparent.” It must, in other words, exhibit a “necessity and rightness of expression” (p. 39), akin to the discursive practice of saying what you “mean and nothing else” (p. 39). Such transparency renders the object shareable (it “presents its import directly to any beholder who is sensitive at all to articulated forms in the given medium” p. 59) and growth-producing (its “ideas transcend...the interpretant’s past experience” p. 390).

Langer discusses two potential impediments to the creation of such transparency. The first is simple lack of familiarity or skill with the material. The second and more useful for our purposes<sup>27</sup> is a “lack of candor” (p. 381). Langer writes: “envisagement...may be interfered with by emotions which are not formed and recognized, but affect the imagination of the other subjective experience. Art which is thus distorted at its very source by lack of candor is bad art” (p. 381). Here we have a definition of subjective falseness in resonance with ours: feelings that are refused translation (“not formed and recognized”) impede the capacity to “see...straight” (p.

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<sup>27</sup> I am not actually sure this is correct, since familiarity and skill with material might prove quite useful in thinking about embodiment, and the necessity of “getting to know” one’s materials; perhaps of special import when it comes to trans-embodiment.

381), to render form transparent. So the artist is defined not by his special ability to feel, but by his special ability to *structure* (i.e. translate) feeling: “by virtue of his intuitive recognition of forms symbolic of feeling, and his tendency to project emotive knowledge into such objective forms” (p. 390). Put in Bionian terms, the artist is someone with a robust alpha function. This process of creating new structural possibilities perpetuates itself: “In handling his own creation, comprising a symbol of human emotion, he [the artist] learns from the perceptible reality before him possibilities of subjective experience that he has not known in his personal life” (p. 391). Langer summarizes: “His [the artist’s] knowledge of life goes as far as his art can reach” (p. 391).

To summarize then, significant forms are non-discursive symbols that express patterns of subjective life, thereby developing new possibilities for living it. Their development entails three steps: “abstraction” from common use; becoming “plastic” or able to be changed; and being made “transparent,” or “necessary” and “right” (i.e. with “candor”), thus sharable and transformative.

Let us return to gender by way of mourning. Recall Loewald’s distinction between identification and internalization. He posits identification as the denial of loss through fantasied merging with the object: subject and object “become identical, one and the same, there is a merging or confusion... [that] tends to erase a difference” (1973, p. 15). In contrast, he proposes internalization to denote the process of separating from the object, where “both the libidinal-aggressive as well as the identification elements in object relations” are given up (1973, p. 15). This entails the transformation of object relations into “internal, intrapsychic, de-personified

relationship[s], thus increasing and enriching psychic structure” (1973, p. 15). In short, through internalization content (the personified relationships) becomes form (psychic structure), creating space for new ways of relating to the self and others (the possibility of “filling” the form with new content).

This is also reminiscent of Andre Green’s writing about separation from the mother gone well. When separation is gradual and a mother is “good enough,” “the maternal object in the form of the primary object of fusion fades away, to leave the place to the ego’s own cathexes which will found his personal narcissism” (p. 165). This leads the ego to be able to cathect his own objects, “distinct from the primitive object” (p. 165). But this “effacement” does not make the primary object disappear completely. Instead it becomes depersonalized into a ‘framing structure’ for the ego, or a “container of representational space” (p. 166). In this form the child is accompanied by the “maternal object even when it is not there...the guarantee of the maternal presence in her absence” (p. 166). Again, it is content turned into form that characterizes the work of moving on.

In thinking gender as “significant form,” then, we find a way of conceiving gender as a vehicle for internalization and the work of mourning. Unlike Schreber’s unmaning commanded (i.e. “signaled”) by God, it would become an expression (a symbol) of one’s own import. Unlike David’s masculinity filled with prescribed meanings (i.e. discursive symbols), it would open space for meaning-making. Langer’s developmental trajectory offers us the steps to get there: “abstraction” or separation from the other; the establishment of “plasticity” or the possibility of creative engagement; and the rendering subjective form “transparent.”

### **Becoming real**

All humans are ratios of being and becoming...But I think for trans people, becoming is always going to be in greater proportion to being.  
(Interview with Joy Ladin, 2014)

While this project has so far been thinking alongside issues of gender variance, this section turns explicitly to the potential psychic work in gender transition. It contends that while gender variance can articulate suffering and difficulties in subject/object development, it can also be a means towards mourning and so too growth. To elaborate this potential, this section will return to Langer's three steps in aesthetic development alongside poems from the anthology *Troubling the Line: Trans and Gender Queer Poetry and Poetics* (2013) that explicitly take up gender transition in relation to growth.

### *Abstraction*

Langer's first step, "abstraction" is perhaps the most clearly applicable to gender transition. She describes it as a process of "estrangement," which creates both "otherness" from objective reality and "self-sufficiency": an alternate, "virtual" reality spanning the stretch of the object. Recall from Chapter Two it is "estrangement" from objective reality (the object fails to satisfy) that institutes both objective and subjective reality as such. Like an aesthetic object's separation from both its environment and its own "common use," the developing subject's separation from the environment coincides with a separation within the self: "With the introduction of the reality principle one species of thought-activity was split off; it was kept free from reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone" (1911a, p. 222). In short, to "abstract" is to differentiate from an other that is both external and internal. Returning to our prior case examples, this is the move that distinguishes David from Schreber—where David used gender to separate from the m(other) without and within, Schreber has no such

distancing ability; thus David is afforded both objective and subjective reality, where Schreber is afforded neither.

Sometimes, gender identifications are too steeped in the desire of others. They are experienced as false or even deadly, sucking out any space for a subject to exist. The decision to transition genders here becomes the assertion of oneself beyond the desire of the other, and beyond one's "practical significance." It is akin to saying: there is a subject here.<sup>28</sup> Take for example Lizz Bronson's poem "The Year You Bloom":

You tell your Mom over Pad Thai  
 You want to switch sex  
 She replies it's not the answer  
 You say I am not you  
 You are not me  
 We are not the same  
 The body is not the only ocean.

(p. 352)

To "switch sex" is directly linked to differentiation; through it, Lizz asserts a boundary. Her ending line "The body is not the only ocean," evokes a different type of ocean, beyond the "practical significance" of objective reality. Put simply, Lizz's ocean is the type a subject, and not a body, inhabits.

Trace Peterson similarly narrates gender transition as the emergence of a subject from a body in her piece "Spontaneous Generation":

Breeze, and then they could find it, in a cold room, I was a body beneath the  
 megaphone, body under a sheet, chalk outline drawn around it.

I was pulled outside my own outline by anonymous hands.

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<sup>28</sup> I believe this explains some of the intensity of emotions often evoked in other by a decision to transition genders—being the assertion of subjective space, it is an impingement on the other.

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Outline, you were my livery and sign, Rejoice then, for monster trucks have conquered the stadium! Rejoice for I am endless in a garter belt and slip, rejoice!

(p. 472)

First “it” is found—not yet an “I,” an object discovered. Then we find out “I” was this not-yet-subject: a thing found amidst other things (“beneath the megaphone”), a dead object (under a sheet), a life taken by an other (“chalk drawn around”). Yet out of this dead and stumbled-upon body the “I” is “pulled” by something foreign (“anonymous hands”). This act of literal abstraction by way of foreign-ness becomes the moment of subjective birth: “Rejoice then, for monster trucks have conquered the stadium...for I am endless in a garter belt and slip.” An alternate, virtual and so “endless” space opens as gendered embodiment (“in a garter belt and slip”). The outline with its prior connotations of murder is re-signified as the possibility of birth: “You were my livery and sign,” the “common use” that preceded and allowed for the subject to arise.

While such a realization of one’s own space is indeed reason to “rejoice,” it is not without its pain. In “Gramma’s Boob” Jaime Shearn Coan writes of his awareness of becoming something his grandmother cannot understand. He elaborates a conversation while helping his grandmother pick out bras:

*But Gramma, I used to wear a size B.  
What size do you wear now?  
I don’t wear bras anymore.  
Oh, I’m sorry.*

and that’s where it ends, flat and tidy as the front of my shirt.

I think of her name lining my inner arm, how it took her months to acknowledge the tattooed cursive, that tender spot.

I think of her plastic boob, snug against her heart,

her heart with its man-made valves.

All these stories tucked behind fabric. Someday, I would like to tell her:

We only have to stay alive.

(p. 264)

Coan narrates here two moments of abstraction in relation to the body—one through the removal of breasts, one through the act of getting a tattoo. For Coan, each form a connection to his grandmother—she too has lost a breast, hers is the name tattooed. But for his grandmother they are unintelligible, perhaps even rejections of her desires for him. In his fantasied explanation, Coan asserts the scope of their common ground: “We only have to stay alive.” The “we” is here limited to this one necessity: staying alive. All the rest is free range for difference. But the phrase also implies another sort of explanation “We *have* to stay alive,” meaning do what it takes to ensure survival, both physical and psychical, a process that requires separation and estrangement for all. The deferral of this final conversation marks the distance separation entails— full recognition becomes the stuff of dreams that propel us forward, never a goal obtained once and for all.

### *Plasticity*

Second to abstraction is plasticity. After differentiation the aesthetic object must be “manipulated in the interest of expression” (p. 60). This is a two-part process: the object must be made malleable and used with the intent to express. Returning to *Giovanni’s Room*, we could say that David was unable to render gender malleable (the characteristics of masculinity were not to be changed) precisely because he used it with the intention to *not*-express, to hide from himself and others.

In regards to gender transformation, this process of abstraction may lead to a newfound ability to creatively relate to gender. Take for instance “I Met A Man” by Samuel Ace:

I met a man who was a woman who was a man who was a woman who was a man who met a woman who met her genes who tic'd the toe who was a man who x'd the x and xx'd the y I met a friend who preferred to pi than 3 or 3.2 the infinite slide through the river of identitude a boat he did not want to sink who met a god who was a tiny space who was a shot who was a god who was a son who was a girl who was a tree I met a god who was a sign who was a mold who fermented a new species on the pier beneath ropes of coral

I met a man who was a fume who was a man who was a ramp who was a peril who met a woman who carried the x and x'd the y the yy who xx'd the simple torch

I rest (the man who) a woman who tells the cold who preferred a wind a chime who was a silo who met a corner a fuel an aurora a hero a final sweep

I sleep the planet I call my face scorched

It's been 10 year without a name an ordinary life

(p. 431)

In the first stanza Ace's lyrical play of infinite regress empties out gendered meaning. It reads precisely like a “river of identitude” swirling with substitutions and fast-paced rhymes. But this emptying out does not end by sinking, it comes to a rhythmic halt: “who fermented a new species on the pier beneath ropes of coral.” The cut in pace allows us to catch our breath, and read. Something has been created out of the dizzying plasticity, its location close to the ocean.

The next stanza returns to the lyrical substitutions, but this time a quarter turned towards sense: a man emerges who substitutes for other things (torch, peril, ramp) but not in the continuous flip-flop pattern of the prior stanza. The relations between terms transform from canceling out meaning to something akin to metaphor. Again the stanza concludes with a cut in rhythm: “a simple torch.”

The pace slows—“I rest.” The terms “man” and “woman,” now referring to “I,” are placed next to each other—not a relation of substitution but of separation by parentheses. This encasement of “a man who” in the alternate space of the parenthetical alerts us to both its separateness and importance. I am reminded of the work of abstraction. By the end of the third stanza terms are listed without given relations, a montage of images without the stress to integrate. Finally, we are offered something of a summary: “I sleep the planet I call my face scorched/its been 10 years without a name an ordinary life.” Of course the proclamation “its been 10 years without a name” is not exactly an accurate summary of the text. What has been created is a plethora of names, and even one of highlighted importance: “I call my face scorched.” Returning to the other stanzas, there seems to be a chain of meaning related to fire: a “fume,” a “simple torch,” “fuel,” the “final sweep.” The image of a scorched face also recalls the coral, with its holey and charred appearance. I am less interested in what this chain signifies than in its emergence out of a seemingly endless play of signifiers. In short, Ace’s plasticity is not one that refuses names, but that uses their slippage to name something new.

Where Ace performs the plasticity of gender’s referents through an excessive substitutions of nouns, Ari Baniyas’ “Solve for X” performs similar work by playing with the grammatical qualifiers by which a single (unnamed) noun is given meaning. The poem reads as follows:

if there was a word for it.  
 when pushing down reason.  
 if more than a boy.  
 if shaking took care of it.  
 if cured by looking.  
 if no lemon juice to lighten the hair.  
 if another girl could step out of you, a shared one.  
 if her face was loosened by salt.

if home was unjustly sunlight  
 when the other way around was a mountain.  
 if light curtained it.  
 if less than.  
 if it dodged windows.  
 if maybe is the only thing enormous.  
 if less that a boy is a fruit.  
 if villages of light were pushed down inside you.  
 a sea of anotherness.  
 when the pronoun curtain.  
 if a ring undoes the hand.  
 when a zipper becomes impossible.  
 if a curtain behind the curtain.  
 if girl is less than lace.  
 if barely can pass for maybe.  
 if boy was covered in possible light.  
 if she stiffens when praised.  
 when salt was sung.  
 and a face was just a face.  
 if he bristles always at the name  
 if nostalgia is a kind of blue light.  
 if maybe could still be beautiful  
 if right now is bandaged.  
 when even what didn't happen happened.

(pp. 58-9)

Unlike algebra with its proofs by way of qualifiers, it is impossible to solve for X, to locate the “thing” these qualities define. Indeed this impossible command highlights the absurdity of normative grammars of gender in lines such as “if less than a boy is a fruit.” And yet, it is precisely through this continuous production of new grammars that something emerges. Look, for instance, at the travel of light through different relations: as desired change (“if cured by looking,” “no lemon juice to lighten the hair”), as too close (“if home was unjustly sunlight”), as hidden (“If light curtained it,” “if it dodged windows”), as an otherness within (“if villages of light were pushed down inside you”) and then as gendered possibility and recognition of loss: “if boy was covered in possible light,” “if nostalgia is a kind of blue light.” Similar work happens if you follow other words, like salt (“if her face was loosened by salt,” “if salt was sung”) and

maybe (“the only thing enormous,” “if barely could pass for maybe,” “if maybe could still be beautiful”). This seems to me a poignant articulation of the process of working through and making one’s own. It is the repetition of signifiers within different grammatical relations that allows them to transform into something new and uniquely one’s own.

In both poems then plasticity is not a matter of releasing the self from gendered materials, but of a creative engagement with such materials that allows for movement. I think also of Coan’s “Gramma’s Boob”: a relation to the grandmother is not rejected through gender transition but re-interpreted. If, following Loewald, such re-interpretation allows for progressive de-personification and de-libidinalization, it would facilitate mourning and further autonomy.<sup>29</sup> So much are the stakes of gender’s “plastic” possibilities.

### *Transparency*

If abstraction affords a separate space and plasticity enables a creative relation to gender, it is only by using such creative possibility to render form “transparent” that gender becomes a vehicle for meaning-full engagement with reality. Recall that transparency for Langer is defined as a “necessity and rightness of expression” akin to “saying what you mean and nothing else” (p. 39). This having to do with contact with reality: “when insight into the reality to be expressed, the Gestalt of living experience, guides its author in creating it” (p. 60). Etymologically, “transparent” means to “appear,” or to “shine light” [parere] “through” [trans] (<http://www.etymonline.com>). It necessarily involves two spaces, and the movement from one to

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<sup>29</sup> Returning to the path of light in “Solve for X”, we could read the trajectory along these lines— as moving from concrete bodily solution (lemon juice to lighten hair) in direct relation to others (if cured by looking), to an abstract relation to both the future (“boy was covered in possible light) and the past (if nostalgia was a kind of blue light).

the other. This is similar to the word "insight," which also necessitates a making visible of something not directly graspable. Put simply, both concepts entail translation.

To render form transparent, then, is to create a form that structures/translates an otherwise unknowable experience. Its difference from the pure creative pleasure of plasticity can be summed up by Coleridge's distinction between "fabrication" and "generation": "the latter is ab intra, evolved; the other ab extra, impressed—that latter is representative always of something not itself...but the former [of] its own cause within itself" (Notebooks; 1957, Vol II, no. 2086 in Williams, p. 151). To move from pure creative potential to transparent form, is to move from fabrication to generation—to establish a receptive relation to another space that limits and informs creative work.

Returning to gender, recall the double position Freud outlines vis-à-vis the oedipal complex. Gender for Freud not only allows the object to be relinquished, but, through this, re-orientates the drive and propels the child forward. In other words, it concerns not just separation and autonomy, but also the structuring of a new relation to the other without and within. Ideally, then, gender is not simply a barrier to the object but something akin to Bion's contact-barrier: a division between self and other (both internal and external) that connects and protects by way of progressive symbolization. It is this receptive relation to the drive/object that is at stake in rendering gender "transparent."

While many poems called to mind this final step, here I will mention two. To start with one that more directly expresses gender's relation to receptivity, read two stanza's from Jenny Johnson's "Aria." They are in reference to a friend's top surgery:

Sometimes the page  
too goes quiet, a body that we've stopped

speaking with, a chest out of which music  
 will come if she's a drum flattened tight, if she's  
 pulled like canvas across a field, a frame  
 where curves don't show, exhalation without air.

Then this off-pitch soprano steals through.

(Printed in Best American Poetry 2012, p. 61)

The page is such a nice metaphor for the body, because it never speaks. It is a space or material that can be claimed and shaped in order to speak (I think of Trace's outline as "livery and sign"), but it can just as easily lose its symbolizing capacity. Johnson imagines chest surgery as a reclaiming of such expressive possibility: "a chest out of which music will come if she's a drum flattened tight." Here the active forming re-establishes a relation between subject and body that allows for symbolization ("music will come"). Following the imagined sculpting and in a stanza all its own is a cut: "Then this off-pitch soprano steals through." Difference is encountered at the moment such expressive possibility is restored.

Where Johnson writes of gender transition as restoring the capacity for symbolization and so too contact with others, in "Who is Ghost" Ari Baniyas elaborates these capacities as wrought through loss. I will print the entire poem:

who is ghost, is the translucent almost  
 who is flotilla, is footless  
 is died and come back, who is sheet  
 and *oooo* who is remembered

is ghost is flicking  
 on and off the lights is brush  
 the shoulder with gauzy touch  
 who is whisper in ear whisper  
 of curtain in and out with breeze who is  
 flash is haze is gone

forgotten is ghost  
 the ones with different names now

the girl they say became who is he  
 who one time got kissed in a field  
 it was summer bare ankles dampened by night grass  
 who was uncurled is shook out

the candle with four matches sunk in its wax  
 who any flame is

is the prairie taken by it  
 the half made bed the half said word  
 before it folds up into the throat

the first time someone took off your clothes  
 the clothes themselves  
     is ghost

(pp. 55-6)

The first two stanzas read lyrically, on the border of sound and sense. The repeated “s” sounds throughout, the alliteration of “f” and “she,” the rhythmic swaying, all evoke an early time.

Sense is not rendered as much as ab-sence: “is flash is haze is gone.”

The next stanza connects this present absence to gender transition: “forgotten is ghost/ the ones with different names now.” Ghost is tied to a gendered past (“the girl they say became”), a gendered present with a past (“who is he”), a present contrasted with the past by its finding of form: “what *was* uncurled *is* shook out” (italics mine).

Stanza four switches to a different shape—a candle formed by the four matches that lit it. The four “o”s from the first stanza come to mind; the impact of objects with which the flame no longer burns. I am reminded of the mother’s empty space framing the infant’s possibility to symbolize. Indeed it seems to be this border between what is symbolizable and what is not that is evoked; a state of almost-grasped: “the half-made bed, half-said word.”

This incantation of absence concludes with an encounter: “the first time someone took of your clothes/ the clothes themselves/ is ghost.” It is the presence of absence then, rendered out of loss (of the past, of old objects), that provides the possibility of encountering someone new: of both having clothes (protection) and the possibility of their removal by an other (the process of getting to know). Gender transition here is not a refusal of loss or difference but instead a forming of the self that engages and articulates both, thus allowing for progressive symbolization and connection to the other without and within.

### **“Gender and the syntax of being”**

Before closing, I turn to a final case example. It is an interview from Krista Tippett’s podcast “On Being” with Joy Ladin, the first openly transgender professor at an Orthodox Jewish institution (Ladin, 2014). During the interview Ladin discusses her subjective experience prior to, during, and after gender transition. Here all three phases will be outlined.

#### *A cross between a mask and a tomb*

Prior to her transition, Ladin describes herself as without subjecthood: as “a persona not a person.” She articulates a state of absence: without a relation to space (a “cardboard cutout”) and embodiment more generally (“without a body,” “with a body that felt like a cross between a mask and a tomb”). At best, she remained hidden; at worst she had already passed. At another point Ladin describes her prior experience of gender as “eating her alive.” Clearly, subjective existence is at stake.

Without space to be, Ladin describes others as both out of reach and far too close. She narrates an inability to make contact with her children: “When my children hugged me, it felt like they were hugging nothing, like their love was pouring into an empty space where I should have been.” Simultaneously, Ladin describes a need to fend off and control the other’s gaze, lest it be too humiliating and/or rejecting. She developed a system of rules meant to keep herself in hiding (don’t play with dolls, don’t look at women, don’t use flowery language). Paradoxically, because Ladin’s gender felt so wrong, it took over everything: “I was thinking about gender all the time. It was boring. It was exhausting.” Gender became itself an impinging and annihilating object.

Thus Ladin describes her decision to transition genders as choosing to live. She narrates contemplating suicide as a way out of the impact her gender transition would have on loved ones, and a particularly useful moment when her therapist commented, “you have to stick around for your children to reject you.” I find this statement quite lovely, because it gets at two different types of aggression: one in which the self is sacrificed in order to bypass (and thus protect from) the suffering and aggression of others, and the other in which the self asserts its presence, something akin to Winnicott’s “ruthlessness” (1945) where space is claimed from the other in order to exist. In the suicidal act the object looms unbearably large and in need of protection (it cannot tolerate my being), in the ruthless act there is faith in an object relation that withstands aggression and difference; rejection becomes not destructive, but foundational to growth (generational and otherwise).

*From the outside in*

Ladin discusses early transition as a process of discovery from the “outside in.” After the initial recognition of a self (“I was somebody who had never seen somebody who looked like me in the mirror”), comes a process of “trying out” various ways of being in the world. Here we find the plasticity of Langer’s definition:

I had no idea what I looked like. I couldn’t even make choices about what colors look good on me or not, what do I like what don’t I like, because I had never seen myself. So the external was my gateway into a whole bunch of self defining preferences, choices, decisions, experiments... Who was I? Was I ethical? Was I brave? Was I a coward? Was I loud? Was I shy?

Ladin describes this process of plasticity as not simply play, but as a process of discovering what is most true about her:

“I’m going to wear that because I love that.” The love is what’s the real self and the expression is more superficial but for me I needed to create a ...visible female self first and then that self had to go out in the world and start developing a history and establishing a history with people.

Unlike Jenner who used gender to evade the drive (be calm, not aggressive), Ladin narrates the use of gendered grammars as a means of accessing the drive and making it her own (“preferences, choices, decisions”...“I love that”). In short, plasticity gives way to transparency. She describes this process as constituted first and foremost in relation to others: “That’s why a lot of us are like vortices that are consuming the gazes of those around us. ‘Who do I look like to you now?’” Where the other’s gaze was previously avoided at all costs, here it is intensely sought out. Over time, Ladin speaks of learning to allow others to have reactions apart from her own sense of herself. But regardless of the eventual space that builds, a self is discovered here in the context of the specific objects it comes across.

*Now, I don’t have that out*

After her process of transitioning, Ladin articulates shifts in her thinking about humanity and God that I believe reflect shifts in her relation to the originary object. She describes her experience of humanity as follows:

I grew up having as dim a view of humanity as you could because when you live in hiding, when you live convinced that you are surrounded by hatred and rejection, that's a pretty lousy species...And what I discovered when I transitioned, was that there were so many people who were able to see my humanness—you know, gender is something that enables us to recognize one another as human. I was astonished that people could see me as a human being even when I really didn't have a gender that would enable them to do that and that they would respond with love, with compassion, with honest questioning, with what I saw as great courage, and I thought you know what, this is a great, great species.

Prior to her transition, Ladin's object world was hateful and annihilating, a monolithic entity that "surrounded" her. When Ladin risks separating (allowing herself to move beyond what is recognizable), she is able to rework her object relation into one that tolerates her existence ("people could [still/finally?] see me as a human being"). In the place of a singular and devouring other, Ladin encounters a collection of different individuals ("so many people") who surprise her.<sup>30</sup> Returning to Andre Green's language, it is as if the primary maternal object has finally been "effaced," leaving room for new objects and ways of relating. Such a shift leads to gratitude, as the articulation of subjective space is always experienced as taken from and at the cost of the other.

Second to surprise and gratitude comes a newfound experience of personal responsibility.

Ladin articulates this in reference to God:

For most of my life, my male life, my version of Descartes dictum would have been "I cavetch, therefore I am." You know I was a walking complaint about existence because it all felt wrong to me, and I felt like it wasn't my fault. And you know that was actually

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<sup>30</sup> This is the step that unfortunately Ashley is unable to risk. In controlling her objects, Ashley forecloses the experience of others as separate and alive in their own right. Therefore, she is unable to be surprised by their capacity to tolerate her, and unable to use them for growth.

not true. I still was a responsible human being but I felt like basically I can't be who I am and so I am really suffering existence rather than being given a gift...In Judaism I would say the two most important things about being a Jew are living in gratitude and living in joy. And I wasn't able to do either, and I would say to God, you know, that's your fault. And now that I live as myself and I've been given this incredible miracle, now, unfortunately, I don't have that out. So when I'm talking to God I am obligated to be grateful and joyful. ...I'm often not, but now I see that that does reflect ways that I need to grow as a person, and not some existential raw deal that I was given. And that's pretty extraordinary. I feel that only recently have I been able to serve God. You know, to voluntarily feel like you have given me so much, what can I do for you.

Through the act of gender transition, Ladin moves from a place of contingency (the “raw deal I was given”) to responsibility for a life that is decidedly hers. God's dictum (“be grateful, be joyful”) becomes not the words of a taunting object impossibly out of reach (an “existential raw deal”), but instead an ideal just far enough as to inspire work (“I need to grow as a person”). In short, God becomes not the stealer of Ladin's being, but the object/satisfaction (“gratitude and joy”) enough out of reach as to allow for becoming. So much is the fate of a separation gone well; what was loved and lost propels forward movement; a path radically other and uniquely one's own.

## Conclusion

It is one of the facts of life that there are two sexes, which fact has given the world most of its beauty, cost it not a little of its anguish, and contains the hope and glory of the world. And it is with this fact, which might better perhaps be called a mystery, that every human being born must find some way to live. (Baldwin, 1998, p. 234)

How to be natural does not seem to me to be a problem—quite the contrary. The great problem is how to be—in the best sense of that kaleidoscopic word—a man. (Baldwin, p. 232)

To say that the existence of two sexes is a fact of life, is not to say what this fact means.

As per the anxieties that colored Bell Blair's work, it does not mean all human bodies fit neatly into two categories, and certainly does not mean that the boundaries between categories should

be policed or secured. What the sexually dimorphic nature of human life does tell us, is that difference is at the heart of human sexuality, that we come to exist always and only in relation to an other.

This project has contended that gender development concerns the coming to terms with such a reality. The task was articulated as follows: to establish a self separate from but connected to the object, thereby allowing for an encounter with difference and the possibility of growth. To briefly outline, I began with Freud's theory of gender identity as both an articulation of and solution to incestuous desire. In its simplest form, the boy who desires his mother and feels rivalrous with his father identifies with his father both out of admiration and a wish to take his place. What was previously a battle between the haves and the have-nots, with gender moves into the space of analogy and deferral: *one day* I will be *like* my father, *one day* I will find someone *like* my mother. Through such a gendered structuring, the drive moves past the forbidden object, becoming available for new objects and experiences.

Further interrogation of Freud's writing on identification, along with Loewald's, Jacobson's and Schafer's readings, reminds us that identification does not always allow for such a structuring and moving beyond the object it engages. The mourning necessary for such work may or may not occur: to use Loewald's terms, "either the existence or loss of the object may be denied" (1962, p. 487). Given the different possible relations between identity and object loss, I set up three coordinates for thinking the psychic work gender identity may engage in.

First, gender may articulate a fusion with the object, in which case it feels too real. Here the boundaries between subjective and objective reality fall short, symbolization does not quite work, and the materiality of the body proves overwhelming. I outline two ways gender can

express such a collapse of space from the object. Either gender can signal the collapse itself, in which case there is no limit or difference; or it can be an attempt to salvage minimal space from an overpowering other, fending off intrusion by way of control and perfect attunement. Ashley's command, "if anyone asks me about my genitals I'll freak out," is a good example of the later: she makes room for herself only through controlling an intrusive other, and a body that has not yet become private property.

Second, gender may articulate a denial of the object, in which case it feels false. Here difference is on the one hand used—symbolization (or the performative function of gender) works and subjective and objective reality are kept in their places. But on the other hand, difference is not trusted but maintained with an iron fist—the social performance becomes a wall, covering up a fused relation to the object that has not been mourned but simply repressed. Put simply, the object here is not controlled through gender, but hidden under it. When some aspect of the object relation does transfer to the external world, it is quickly evacuated. There is no process of translation or getting to know, and thus no elaboration of truth. So Caitlyn Jenner passes under the gendered script of "calm little Caitlyn" to escape the reality of, say, her anger in political debate.

Lastly, gender may allow for both connection to and separation from the object, in which case it brings the subject towards the experience of feeling "true." Here gender functions akin to aesthetic phenomena—a form that translates/organizes the drive, offering both protection from and access to the object within and without. When it functions as such, gender affords a receptivity to the object that does not overtake the subject but instead grows her. Susan Langer's trajectory of significant form offers the steps to get here: an assertion of self beyond the desire of the other; a capacity to play with expression and recognition for the purpose of discovery; and

finally a tolerance of the deferral inherent in creative expression— gender becomes a form never fully accomplished, nor fully recognized, but an ideal towards which one imagines themselves, with a necessity that is personal and foreign and mysteriously alive.

In developing such a framework for thinking gender identity, this project offers more questions than answers. I'll end by naming several. For one, what is the role of actual early objects in the development of a gendered self? Why do some identifications, always learned through early caregivers, feel too saturated with the object/desires of others, while other identifications become available to structure subjective growth? Bion's difference between the container that contains and the one that strips and evacuates seems useful here.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, The role of trauma in relation to gender identification, and the need to reclaim a body that has been taken from a subject demands further consideration. Second, why is it that sometimes gender transition can be an assertion of the self that leads to a new capacity to tolerate otherness, while other times it becomes an assertion of the self that remains stuck in omnipotent control (of the likes of Schreber and Ashley)? What are the mechanisms or pathways that make the difference? And how can clinical work support the mourning necessary for the former to occur? Third, where does the body fit in this subject/object paradigm? Is it a transitional object between the two? A skin dividing them? How does gender's relation to the object help us think the various ways the body is acted upon in gender transition? Fourth, what are the implications of such a framework for thinking sexuality? If gender offers a structure that organizes the drive, then it certainly occupies a primary relation to sexuality. How do we understand this connection

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<sup>31</sup> An identification in the context of parental reverie will likely be more "usable" for a subject than one in the context of parental disavowal.

without collapsing gender into sex, or pretending a non-relation? And lastly, how do we understand the psychic work of gender in relation to the changing socio-political landscape? As this dissertation has argued that the social symbolic is the material out of which psychic life is formed, how do we both understand the current social-political shifts in gender expression, and how do these shifts effect the psychic work involved in gender identity, for both normative and gender variant subjects? Such are some of the conceptual territories this project hopes to help open.

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