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The Hypochondriac: Bodies in Protest from Herman Melville to Toni Morrison

A Dissertation Presented

by

Maya Lang

to

The Graduate School

in Partial fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

Stony Brook University

May 2007

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2007

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Comparative Literature

Stony Brook University

2007

This project examines hypochondria as a paradigmatic discourse for late-nineteenth and twentieth century literature, illuminating somatic anxieties and obsessions that attest to sites of resistance within mainstream culture. Engaging closely with Freud and his precept that the ego is “primarily a bodily ego,” I define hypochondria as a preoccupied insistence on reading the body’s signifying function in response to cultural pressures. The discourse of hypochondria reveals an anxious subtext in which the body becomes an allegorized site in literature. From the “bachelor hypochondriac” in the works of Henry James and Herman Melville to “assimilative hypochondria” in contemporary ethnic writing, I trace literary instances where the weight of social expectations expresses itself symptomatically. The body in these cases betrays itself, becoming a contested site of battle and expressing ambivalence toward heteronormative demands. The hypochondriac proves to be on strike against his surroundings, unable to comply with what is expected of him.

Each chapter of my dissertation reflects a different way in which the body protests and struggles against normative ideology, whether resistance appears at the level of the family and home in Kafka, or at the level of modernity and culture in Huysmans. Hypochondria offers a discourse of resistance that occurs outside of language, the body betraying its complaints when the demands of societal expectations grow onerous. If ideology and culture operate through a consumptive process of being taken in, then hypochondria presents a place of digestive trouble. It embodies a crisis of sociability and stages a renunciation which, I argue, demands critical attention.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have benefited from the insight and influence of a number of mentors who have aided me and to whom I am very much indebted. Robert Harvey has been the model dissertation director: meticulous in his scrupulous readings, insightful in his commentary, and sympathetic to the ultimate goals of the project. Ed Casey challenged me to think more closely and carefully about the psychoanalytic claims of this book and helped me to be a better reader of Freud; his thoughtful questions and suggestions concerning this project were incredibly useful in the revision process. Simon Critchley's scholarly generosity and philosophical insight have been critical to me, and his work continues to inspire me. Krin Gabbard's cheerful encouragement and ongoing critical input have been crucial to this project and to my work. Finally, Shireen R. K. Patell has challenged me at every turn to pursue the most difficult questions of the project, while also urging me to develop and trust my own voice. I wish to thank each of these five for their time and attention.

A great many teachers and colleagues have also read and commented on portions of this project, and have helped me think about its different facets. I want in particular to thank Avital Ronell, E. Ann Kaplan, Cyrus R. K. Patell, Ira Livingston, Sandy Petrey, Michael Levine, Lee Miller, and Ketty Thomas. I also wish to thank Betsy Bolton, whose rigorous skepticism and tireless work ethic established a standard which I have always attempted to emulate and which I continue to admire.

I am grateful to the Mildred and Herbert Weisinger Endowment, which awarded me a fellowship that enabled me to devote time to research and writing. I am also grateful to my students, with whom I read many of the works discussed in this dissertation.

Finally, this project's most intangible debts are to my mother, Suhas Shanbhag, and to my husband, Noah Lang. Both, in their unwavering support, enthusiasm, and patience, have sustained me. Both continue to inspire me much more than they know.

PREFACE

This is not a work about people who fear illness. Nor is this a work that attempts to “diagnose” hypochondriacs in literature in the vernacular understanding as those who feign illness. Rather, this project defines and explores hypochondria as a paradigm for literary discourse, offering a methodology to illuminate the ways in which the body is a loaded and allegorized site in literature. Through hypochondria, we begin to understand the weight of social injunctions and their material effects, for hypochondria shows us those aspects of ideology which do not sit well and which are unconsciously resisted. Hypochondria shows us a different way to read literature because it is, at its core, a way of reading the body and its signification.

I began this work because I was interested in how the ailing or struggling body functions as a signifier, and what this struggling body might be attempting to convey to us through coded, sometimes indecipherable terms. I was also interested in the idea that the body might voice a “subtext” in literature, alluding subtly to dynamics or tensions that could not be articulated directly through language. I have always been drawn to instances where language reaches its own limits or strains against what it can limn, and so the symptomatic or struggling body seemed a place that would readily speak to such moments. After all, the choice to place a character in an uncertain and unsteady relationship to his body, to render him neither definitively ill nor reassuringly healthy, represents a choice on the author’s part, a choice which seemed to me in need of consideration.

I took the entanglement between bodies and language as a starting point for this work, turning to many of the questions that psychoanalysis and recent approaches to poststructuralist theory ask of us. What are the material effects of language on the subject? How do concepts as abstract and nebulous as ideology manifest themselves on the body? To what extent does the body somatize its grievances, turning its unheeded complaints into symptoms? How does the body “write” or express itself? How do people “read” or interpret their bodies? And how does this discursive body figure into the schema of writing and narrative choice? How do such questions pertaining to the crisis of one body relate to the collective social body?

In this project, which is not clinical in its orientation, I define hypochondria as a preoccupied insistence on reading the body’s legitimacy and failures within a social context and in response to cultural pressures. The body acquires contextual significance as the hypochondriac bears constant vigil over notions of normalcy and normativity. The literary characters considered here, ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to the late-twentieth century in time period, all falter, suffering from a dispossessed relationship to the body. They are not straightforwardly ill, but they also are obviously unwell, and each calls into question the basic tenets of what it means to be healthy in both the psychic and the somatic registers of that word. Each character discussed in this work also struggles specifically as a result of or in response to her social context. The body in these cases speaks to a crisis of sociability, attesting to the unease of cultural and personal context and indicating sites of distress.

This project by no means offers an exhaustive treatise on hypochondria, for to do so would involve turning to several different disciplines at once: psychology, medicine, philosophy, literature, and history, to name a few. Rather, the more limited aim of this dissertation is to explore the discourse of hypochondria as revealing a new way of approaching and reading literature. Hypochondria speaks to a different way of reading because of its endless and deferred quality. The hypochondriac never settles on a single register of meaning or diagnosis, but rather submits his body to a preoccupied and vigilant series of re-readings. This idea, to me, begged the question of what it would mean to approach literature in this way, reading enigmatic figures or unintelligible bodies in narratives without the aim of “deciphering” or “decoding” them. What would it mean to read the body (and the text) as the hypochondriac does, endlessly and vigilantly? What would surface in this sort of reading practice, and how might critical interpretations initiated through the discourse of hypochondria offer value as a scholarly methodology?

The set of readings which follow in this book serve as my response to these questions. And while I do think about and address different literary prototypes for us to consider, from the “bachelor hypochondriac” to the “assimilative hypochondriac,” I also engage with hypochondria as a reading practice, thinking about texts themselves as hypochondriacal, and critical interpretations as symptomatic of a text’s originating traits. Hypochondria has brought to light for me a different vocabulary with which to approach a text, and thus has shown me a different way to read. By considering works within the framework of this project, I became aware of tropes of contagion, somatic indecipherability, and states of malingering. The frail, punctilious hero of *Against the Grain* deems literature to be a toxic influence and declares himself to be on a literary diet; John Marcher of Henry James’ “The Beast in the Jungle” spends his life as though in a waiting room, waiting for a dreaded diagnosis, and declares that he wishes he were ill; the narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* spends what she deems the best year-and-a-half of her life pleasantly convalescing in a rented hospital bed in her living room. These are all examples I did not expect ahead of time to find in these works but which the discourse of hypochondria illuminated.

To me, much of the value and appeal of hypochondria as a reading strategy is that it throws the very diagnostic process into crisis—partly because of the way it calls into question what constitutes health to begin with, but also because of its displacing quality. The questions posed by hypochondria, and its history of unsettling the line between health and illness, strike me as an especially poignant way to approach literature. The hypochondriac embodies a certain hermeneutic position, simultaneously inviting interpretation while also refusing to be interpreted, seeking to be read while also insisting that no single reading is correct or accurate. This, to me, is also the position of the literary text, which incites interpretation while refusing to yield to any one interpretive register. If literature could somehow take form and find embodiment, it might in fact be a hypochondriac: baffling, unsettling, and unable to be pinned down.

Introduction: Mapping Hypochondria

Part One. Ideology and Language: The Social Body

It is the dream with which I identify myself.

—Lacoue-Labarthe

It may seem counterintuitive to discuss a subject as tangible and materially immediate as the body in terms of language and ideology, for the experiences of the body, particularly in the realm of illness, can seem definitive and concrete, removed from such abstract and cerebral concepts. Yet, as recent contributions to considerations of subjectivity have revealed¹, the body, precisely in its most material respects, is not only subject to the effects of language and ideology, but is produced and shaped by them. As Athena Vrettos points out on the subject of illness in literature, “to the extent that language has the power to shape and filter human experience,” we see that “narratives chart the available categories through which people [come] to understand themselves” as well as the “structures of social interaction.”²

As the title of my project suggests, I read the hypochondriac in mid-nineteenth and twentieth century literature as being unconsciously “on strike” against heteronormative ideological protocols. It is worth pointing out here that the bodies which this book examines are already discursive ones, for they are bodies constructed through the literary imagination and produced in and through narrative space. Yet such bodies should not be dismissed as “merely” fictional, for literary characters attract readers for the way in which they resonate with us, and how they echo our own structures of experience. Further, and more importantly, I see the discursiveness of the fictional body as emblematic of our own relationship to the body, which is similarly produced through narrative space, as a function of discourse.

Louis Althusser, in his famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” points out that ideology is most invasive when its workings are least apparent, and that ideology dictates the choices and responses available to us, indicating to us how we are to react to experience.³ He speaks of ideology as a hypnotic “dream” that structures the very basis by which an individual perceives herself and her relation to

¹ I am thinking here of Judith Butler, whose work I discuss below, as well as Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau, who shed light on some of practical and material consequences of ideology.

² Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), here p. 3.

³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, tr. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

a community.⁴ Judith Butler, whose work informs this project throughout, argues that “the address” of ideology “animates the subject into existence,” inaugurating the subject through its interpellative gesture and calling the subject into being.⁵ Ideology, in other words, is not just an abstract concept regarding societal structures of dominance but denotes a set of operations by which we come into awareness of ourselves as subjects. It offers a dream by which we identify ourselves.

The characters I examine in this book are primarily caught in a bind relating to ideology and to the social existence of the body. Following Judith Butler’s work on notions of identity and subject construction, I read the materiality of the body as inextricably linked to and produced by ideology and language. As Butler puts it, “bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appear[s] to be quite central to what bodies ‘are.’”⁶ While skeptics of such notions of social construction might contend that “surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure,” and that these ‘facts’ “cannot be dismissed as mere construction,” Butler’s contribution has been to illuminate how certain social constructions of the body are constitutive in nature, shaping us. Accordingly, the materiality of the body always involves a ritualized repetition of norms that form and found us.

Hypochondria offers an incredibly germane discourse to considerations of how the subject is constructed, for it calls into question the nature of the “facts” of somatic experience and the “boundaries” to which Butler alludes. Throughout Butler’s work, one senses that she feels compelled by questions of the “physical,” not only in relation to the idea of gender as a social construct, but in her work on how speech can wound us or how institutional structures of power can shape us.⁷ When arguing that the body is subject to language and ideology and that these have pronounced material effects, the obvious dilemma is how to reconcile notions of social construction with “real” physical experience. We see this anxiety explicitly in the confessional preface to *Bodies that Matter*, in which Butler states, “I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body, only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains.” A sense of thematic failure pervades as Butler recalls that she “tried to discipline [herself] to stay on subject” but could not, and as she parodies her critics’ and colleagues’ taunt, “What about the materiality of the body, *Judy*?” (ix, original emphasis).

One might say that the hypochondriac feels a similarly condescending taunt in the accusation that she is feigning illness (“What about *real* sick people?”). Hypochondria is an illness that calls into question the nature of illness, consisting of symptoms that unsettle symptomology. Because the preoccupation with illness itself constitutes illness in hypochondria, the disorder disrupts any clear separation between health and illness or

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150. For more on ideology as a dream state and its phantasmatic structures, see Anne Anlin Cheng’s discussion of Althusser in *The Melancholy of Race*, pp. 156-157.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), here p. 25.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), here p. ix. Cited within the text hereafter.

⁷ In addition to the works by Butler already cited, I also have in mind here *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

symptom and its absence.⁸ It is a disorder with a meandering and uncertain history, with a host of definitions from colloquial to psychoanalytic to scientific, and an uncertain status as a disorder.⁹ Freud had surprisingly little to say of hypochondria (as I discuss below), though one would expect that its unique features would appeal to his interpretive prowess. Scholarly analyses pertaining to hypochondria also reveal factual errors¹⁰; it is as though the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in hypochondria contaminate the study surrounding it. Yet these features of hypochondria are precisely why it offers value as a discourse, for it asks us to consider how we define health outside of illness, how we distinguish the construction of illness from its “actual” experience, and how we separate the psychic from the somatic. The questions posed by hypochondria and its history are fundamentally questions about the physicality of illness and the nature of symptoms—and thus are fundamentally questions about the materiality of the body.

In her reflections on gender, Butler asks how constitutive factors like ideology and language “not only produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies” (xi). My project takes up the second half of Butler’s statement, attempting to think about that domain of “unthinkable, abject, unlivable” bodies in a variety of literary texts—“unlivable” and “abject” because these characters are unable to function as society expects them to and have difficulty inhabiting their bodies; “unthinkable” because they are denied the intelligibility of an identifiable disease which would make their predicaments more readily understandable. Indeed, some of the characters I treat articulate explicitly a wish for illness, for physical disease might offer both a reprieve from daily life as well as an “excuse” or explanation for why life is such a struggle.¹¹

We might say that the hypochondriac senses the hail of ideology and is attuned to its signal but, for a number of reasons, cannot comply with its call. He protests against his context, unconsciously staging his rebellion somatically, through bodily preoccupations and fixations. The hypochondriac’s behavior is not consciously willed, representing a chosen performance or strategy in reaction to societal demands; on the contrary, each

⁸ Hypochondriasis is defined by the medical community as “preoccupation with fears of having, or the idea that one has, a serious disease,” despite “appropriate medical evaluation and reassurance.” From the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth edition (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

⁹ The ambiguities surrounding hypochondria as a clinical diagnosis are evident in the previous edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The third edition, which is known for its more narrative style, reveals the difficulties of diagnosing the disorder due to the possibility of “true organic disease” (i.e., the patient might actually be ill with the “early stages” of a disorder, or with an illness that affects “multiple body systems”), and because true disease “does not rule out the possibility of hypochondriasis.” Thus one can be misdiagnosed as a hypochondriac because a chronic illness has not yet been diagnosed properly. Conversely, one can be suffering from a “true organic disease” and still be a hypochondriac. See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Third edition (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

¹⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng, whose rigorous and uncompromising work informs much of this project, makes an uncharacteristic error when she states of hypochondria that “the term itself dropped from national and international registers of recognized disorders” (see *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 213). “Hypochondriasis” is in fact listed in the diagnostic manual of psychiatric disorders as discussed above, and is still considered a valid medical diagnosis.

¹¹ John Marcher of Henry James’ “The Beast in the Jungle,” for example, reflects that “it would have been nice if he could have been taken with fever, alone, at his hotel, and she could have come to look after him.”

character examined in this book seems helpless to his situation, unable to offer much insight into his plight. Indeed, this lack of insight may be a motivating factor in why the hypochondriac's body is uncooperative, refusing to comply with what is expected of him, for the characters treated here are blind to their predicaments. The hypochondriac's body thus speaks in the place of language and insight, which are unavailable to the hypochondriacal subject in any way that would help her "decode" her situation.

Part Two. Intersubjectivity: Body and Social Context

I have given a name to my pain, and call it 'dog.' It's just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog—and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, just as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

"I have always felt the obscurity in the question of hypochondria to be a disgraceful gap in our work," Sigmund Freud wrote in a letter to Sandór Ferenczi. While the dearth of research and insight into hypochondria was something Freud observed, he had surprisingly little to say on the subject quantitatively compared to disorders like hysteria, melancholia, and obsessional neurosis, a fact which is especially curious given his repeated and insistent classification of it as an "actual" and distinct neurosis.¹² His most extensive treatment of hypochondria occurs in his essay "On Narcissism" and spans merely three pages. His other mentions of hypochondria occur in passing or in footnotes, and he does not devote an essay to it, nor does he embark on a case study of the disorder. While Freud thus gives us little to go on, his few remarks concerning hypochondria are poignant nonetheless, particularly for their own hypochondriacal betrayals.

In his essay "On Narcissism" (1914), Freud situates hypochondria in relation to intersubjectivity. He notes that "a strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order to not fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love."¹³ The sweeping set of claims here is startling for its portrayal of illness in relation to *eros*, and for its own hypochondriacal treatment of relationships. Freud depicts love as an immunization of sorts, a protection to be taken "in the last resort" to fend off illness: "we must begin to love in order to not fall ill." As Anne Anlin Cheng points out, "Although Freud's love advice is essentially a call for a movement outward (for the ego to direct its energy outward, toward

¹² In his essay "On Narcissism" and in "The Common Neurotic State," Freud refers to hypochondria as a "pure form of 'actual' neurosis" and seems intent on defining it as a "pure" disorder with its own classification. For more, see Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 14, p. 83; vol. 16, p. 390.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," *SE*, vol. 14, p. 85. Cited in the text hereafter as N.

intersubjectivity), it also articulates Freud's characteristic fear of contact with others."¹⁴ Indeed, love is defined not as its own reward, but as a necessary evil, to be swallowed despite its unpleasant taste because, like a spoonful of medicinal tonic, it will protect against disease.

The foreboding quality relating to health and relationality is underscored in the second clause of Freud's formula, which emphasizes illness as an inevitability should we be unable to locate love "out of frustration (*Versagung*)." This specification warns of the constant, lurking potential of failure, either because love itself proves frustrating, or because the consequences of not finding it do. In other words, one must find love because otherwise one will fall ill; but as we attempt to find it, the very experience may cause us to fall ill. Illness becomes a certainty in what seems like a doomed game of musical chairs: *Try to grab a chair or else!* Freud tells us, *but be careful grabbing that chair.* Thus, "what makes it necessary" in Freud's conception "to pass beyond the limits of narcissism and to attach the libido to objects" is to stave off illness, though this movement outward is so fraught with potential danger that we are left wondering if it is worthwhile (*N*, 85).

What becomes evident in Freud's theory is the way in which disease functions as an organizing trope for sociability and the life of the ego. Freud cites a few lines from the German poet Heine, for example, in which God declares, "Illness was no doubt the final cause of the whole urge to create. By creating, I could recover; by creating, I became healthy" (*N*, 85).¹⁵ The mental creative processes get situated as a productive panacea, "designed for mastering excitations" that would otherwise prove "distressing" or "pathogenic" (*N*, 85). The solitary work of the mind, unlike the pursuit of love, is treated as an unequivocal cure; creative endeavors restore a sick god, enabling him to "recover" and to become "healthy." If the condition of life is fundamentally diseased, then "our mental apparatus" and its activities save us through a kind of psychic lymphatic system, causing "an internal draining away of excitations" (*N*, 85).

Within this schema, external pursuits by the ego are haunted by a foreboding sense of failure. A "strong egoism is a protection against falling ill," but this protection can be weakened by the endeavor of venturing beyond egoic boundaries in the fruitless search for love. By contrast, the process of independent, solitary mental thought and activity "helps remarkably" against the threat of illness (*N*, 85). Thus, any venture outward beyond narcissism becomes risky, equated with "frustration" or *Versagung*: in German, denial, renunciation, repudiation.

What we garner from Freud's discussion is that at issue in hypochondria is the intersubjective relationship. Narcissism would remain a pleasant—and healthy—state, were it not for the limits of the libido's economy, for "when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain amount," the libido is forced "out of necessity" to attach to objects (*N*, 85). Though Freud does not comment on the implicit hypochondriacal content embedded in his own analysis, his discourse underscores the point that hypochondria

¹⁴ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), here p. 76. Cited in the text hereafter.

¹⁵ The actual lines, taken from Heine's *Neue Gedichte*, are as follows: *Krankheit ist wohl der letzte Grund/ Des ganzen Schöpferdrangs gewesen;/ Erschaffend konnte ich gensen./ Erschaffend wurde ich gesund.* Cecil M. Baines translates these lines as "Disease at bottom brought about/ Creative urgency—for, creating,/ I soon could feel the pain abating./ Creating, I could work it out."

arises from a crisis of sociability, and from the unfortunate “necessity” of the intersubjective encounter.

Part Three. Reading Hypochondria

Externally, I look like everybody else; have legs, body and head, trousers, coat and hat... if I nevertheless remained rather short and weak, that just could not be helped.

— Franz Kafka

The theoretical backdrops offered by Butler and Freud inform how I define hypochondria and how I approach this confluence of literary texts. Butler’s interpretation of ideology and her understanding of the materiality of the body allow me to situate hypochondria in relation to the social existence of the body. I am more concerned in this project with the imaginative configurations surrounding the body as these speak to normative protocols of ideology than with individual symptoms or with diagnosing literary characters clinically. Butler’s understanding of the body as a social construct and her readings of Althusserian ideology influence my definition of hypochondria as an unconscious reaction against ideological precepts.

Because Butler shows us the way ideology finds us, we might also describe the internalization of ideology in psychoanalytic terms, as introjected.¹⁶ I have in mind here the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, whose recent work on introjection distinguishes it from “incorporation,” and recasts it from the vocabulary of melancholia.¹⁷ Abraham and Torok argue that introjection is a necessary and vital process for the ego, a developmental process in which the psyche assimilates and adjusts to its environment. Introjection offers a way of thinking about how ideology is inscribed into the subject, a conceptual mechanism for understanding how we consume or take in ideology. Hypochondria might then be described as revealing sites of digestive trouble, or places where the internalization of ideology does not sit well.

Hypochondria as I define it also speaks to the “frustration” which Freud describes for, keeping in mind that *Versagung* derives etymologically from *sagen* (to say), hypochondria performs a somatic form of speaking, a speaking against, a repudiation of heteronormative expectations. Hypochondria is in this regard the embodiment of *Versagung*, or the somatic articulation of particular forms of frustration. Through hypochondria, we can better understand Freud’s declaration that the ego is “first and

¹⁶ See Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁷ “Incorporation” and “introjection” are terms associated with melancholia and the ego’s relationship to loss. Both denote mechanisms by which the lost love object is retained in the ego. Abraham and Torok discuss the differences between the two processes in “Mourning *or* Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation” (1972) in *The Shell and the Kernel*.

foremost a bodily ego,” a precept upon which Freud did not elaborate.¹⁸ If the ego is the “mental projection of the surface of the body,” then hypochondria reveals this projection, affording us a glimpse of the ego’s self-concept.¹⁹

Freud also facilitates my reading of the relational aspects of hypochondria, for through his discussion, we understand that hypochondria is not intra-subjective or asocial, but occurs precisely because of the ego’s attempts to move beyond its own boundaries. This distinction is important because it counters a vernacular understanding of hypochondria as a disease of the socially isolated subject. The fact that hypochondria is mobilized by a movement outward in the attempt to locate intrasubjectivity is crucial to my reading of hypochondria in the schema of social context, particularly when I turn, for example, to notions like the “filial hypochondriac” or to the hypochondriac in narratives of cultural assimilation.

The central project of this book is to examine the ailing body from the mid-nineteenth century to present in relation to social context and as a complex textual articulation of crisis. I am interested predominantly in how the discourse of hypochondria can offer an alternate and necessary strategy for reading the body in literature, and in how it can reveal the body to be a social site, indicating a world beyond its physical boundaries. This project seeks to identify some of the figurative and ideological spaces the body attests to, and to explore the domain of unintelligible bodies in literature as speaking to heteronormative pressures. Calling on the psychoanalytic and ideological registers discussed above, I define hypochondria throughout this work as a preoccupied insistence on reading the body’s legitimacy, failures, and signifying function in response to cultural pressures. The hypochondriac reads his or her body endlessly, vigilantly, and as directly linked to social context.

Because I was interested in thinking about hypochondria in a range of ideological settings, I chose a variety of literary sources, from Melville to Kafka to Rushdie. While these works may initially seem disparate, they speak collectively as narratives to modern subjectivity. From Bartleby, the Wall Street clerk, to Georg Bendemann, the fatally obedient son, to Sufiya Zinobia, the postmodern daughter of Pakistan, each character I discuss reveals a different embodiment of social crisis. In each, the onerous weight of social expectations expresses itself symptomatically; the body in these cases betrays itself, becoming a contested site of battle and expressing ambivalence toward heteronormative demands. I organize these different cases as facets or manifestations of hypochondria to indicate the cultural context in which I am reading each work.

In my first chapter, I examine the notion of “textual hypochondria” in Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Against the Grain* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Treating emerging modernity as a virus, Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray shield themselves from bourgeois society and its trappings. Both characters reveal a preoccupation with texts as sources of contagion, eschewing literature after an initial embrace of it and deeming it poisonous. The text becomes a source of contamination, particularly as Huysmans’ work infiltrates Wilde’s in the form a little yellow book which Dorian Gray then cannot forget.

¹⁸ Freud articulated this idea in a footnote to the 1927 English translation of *The Ego and the Id*; the statement does not appear in the original German editions. See Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1960), p. 20, fn. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 20.

The phobic relation to reference evinced by each work reveals an anxiety of influence, a fear of being affected by external sources that speaks eminently to what Wilde termed the “stain of the age.”

I continue in Chapter Two with the figure of the narcissistic male hero in turning to the works of Herman Melville and Henry James in my explorations of the “bachelor hypochondriac.” Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s idea of the “saintly hypochondriac,” I read “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” *Billy Budd*, and “The Beast in the Jungle” as emblematic of bachelor hypochondria; Freud’s discussion of love and illness is particularly relevant here. Bartleby, Billy Budd and John Marcher, solitary wanderers, appear to be at odds with societal norms, unable to fit in or to behave expectedly. But—as with the hypochondriac—the failure to conform somehow seems like a physical disposition that is beyond one’s control. These three protagonists thus constantly bring to mind the hypochondriac, for they struggle in their daily functioning and we struggle to understand why. Indeed, much of the literary criticism concerning these particular works attempts to decipher or “diagnose” the problem faced by these protagonists, just as the characters around them become invested in what ails them. These characters thus incite a diagnostic quest which, though not clinical nature, evokes the interpretive challenges and questions raised by hypochondria.

We see in the third chapter a juvenile version of the bachelor in the works of Franz Kafka in the figure of the “filial hypochondriac.” In “The Judgment,” *The Metamorphosis*, and “The Stoker,” I assert that the physical body becomes an extreme source of vulnerability, attesting to the persecutory vigilance of paternal authority. This helpless relation to the body which the sons experience in Kafka’s work is underscored in his own letter to his father, in which Kafka confesses feeling so oppressed by him that he thought that even his body was not his own—a sentiment which takes form, for example, in Gregor Samsa’s famed “metamorphosis.” Hypochondria speaks here to the trauma of being a son; in the collision between paternity and justice in Kafka, the filial body suffers.

In my fourth and final chapter, I turn to the later half of the twentieth century and consider hypochondria in the context of race and ethnicity. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*, we witness the body come under uncomfortable scrutiny in the process of cultural incorporation—a word which already places the body, or corpus, at its center. I chose these three texts to demonstrate that narratives of racial assimilation (in Morrison), immigration (in Kingston), and postcolonialism (in Rushdie) reveal the ways in which the minority body figures as the site of ambivalence in assimilative projects. In ethnic literature, we witness incorporative fantasies rooted in bodily obsessions and phobias that speak to the fraught nature of the assimilative process.

Each chapter of this book reflects a different way in which the body protests and struggles against what is expected of the modern subject, whether resistance appears at the level of the family and home in Kafka, or at the level of modernity and culture in Huysmans. But this resistance is figured in an ambivalent way, for each character considered in this work seems unintelligible, and not fully conscious of his own plight. Indeed, the hypochondriac is in a certain way unintelligible to himself. Hypochondria thus offers a discourse that reveals the hermeneutic bind surrounding a character, and the impossibility of a simple “diagnosis” or process of “decoding” by which notoriously

enigmatic figures like Bartleby or Des Esseintes would suddenly become demystified. Hypochondria reveals a discourse of defiance that occurs outside of language, as the body betrays its complaints when the demands of ideological expectations grow onerous. It embodies a crisis of sociability and stages a renunciation which, I argue, demands our attention.

Chapter One: Textual Hypochondria

The Jeweled Shell of Reference and the Anxiety of Influence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Against the Grain*

It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come.
—*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

And he had the sudden vision of a humanity ceaselessly mined by the virus
of ages past.
—*Against the Grain*

The Picture of Dorian Gray addresses itself as a novel explicitly to philosophical questions of morality and human nature through its Faustian framework, provocatively asking readers how they might conduct themselves if the wish of immortality and eternal youth were granted through a magically brokered deal. While much has been said concerning the psychological terrain of the novel, producing, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan points out, a “large amount of psychoanalytic commentary” concerning character motivations and impulses in the novel, comparatively little has been said about what may seem to be a trivial detail from the text: a briefly alluded to yellow book lent to Dorian Gray by Lord Henry early in the narrative, which Dorian then has difficulty forgetting.¹ Indeed, Joyce Carol Oates dismisses the little book that obsesses Dorian as “rather silly,” treating it as a narrative flourish on Wilde’s part meant perhaps to amuse him, or as a tip of the authorial hat to those among his readers who would have recognized the reference.² Though the title of the book is never mentioned overtly within the novel, Wilde later revealed it to be Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Against the Grain*, and obvious thematic parallels between the two texts have led most scholars to recognize it as such.³

¹ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, “The Phenomenon of Aging in Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*: A Lacanian View” in Kathleen M. Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz, eds., *Memory and Desire: Aging—Literature—Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), here p. 114.

² Joyce Carol Oates, “*The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Wilde’s Parable of the Fall,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter, 1980): 419-428 (here p. 419). To clarify, Oates does not devote much of her essay to *Against the Grain*; I do not wish to mischaracterize her as discussing it in depth. Her analysis makes clear, however, that she views Huysman’s novel in terms of the self-referential quality of art, which is to say in terms of Wilde’s views of aesthetics,

³ While most critics concur that the book is indeed *Against the Grain* given Wilde’s own identification of it as such during the Queensberry trial, Michael Patrick Gillespie insists that “the case for identifying it as *Against the Grain* is weakened by the evidence,” and that the text Wilde had in mind “was largely

It is clear that Huysmans' intriguing novel—described famously in *Dorian Gray* as a “novel without a plot”—made a significant impression on Wilde, appealing to his own sensibilities and ideas concerning aesthetics.⁴ Significantly influenced by Walter Pater, Wilde throughout his works toys with different perspectives on art and modernity; his characters, much like the hero of Huysmans' text, experiment ceaselessly with identity, treating it as a subtle art of aesthetic experimentation. It is therefore not surprising that he would have been drawn to Huysman's text, which is widely considered exemplary of European decadence and which languishes in the glorious and minute details of the hero's aesthetic exploits. However, I wish to suggest in this chapter that the relationship between the two novels is not so straightforward as affinity, and that Huysman's work does not merely embellish Wilde's as an inside point of reference for literary intellectuals. I argue in this chapter that, more accurately, *Against the Grain* infiltrates and contaminates *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and that its originating anxiety of influence infects the latter, producing effects not only on the protagonist who reads it, but also on the text that struggles to contain it.⁵ As Ragland-Sullivan puts it, there is a “pathogenic” quality to Wilde's novel; its diseased quality evokes a sense of virulence, suggesting that novels and portraits have corporeal effects and that ideas can infiltrate the body like disease. Both *Against the Grain* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* speak eminently to hypochondria, in an immediately apparent way relating to a fear of contamination, and in a less obvious way that I will show pertains to textuality and to the materiality of the signifier.

The male heroes of both texts reveal a preoccupation with achieving a beautified condition of stasis, embracing a highly ornamented life of, as Rita Felski puts it, “decoration over function” and “appearance over essence.”⁶ This aesthetic of ornamentation is put at such a premium that the protagonists treat societal influence as a contaminating germ that must be held at bay. Both treat daily reality, with its heteronormative traps of marriage and morality, as vulgar, and they thus immediately see the appeal of “deadening the thunderous din of life's inexorable inactivity” and “hiding away” from society.⁷ However, both also come to experience a deep and “overpowering tedium” from a hedonistic lifestyle of indulging without restraint in vice (9). Wilde and Huysmans show that the dandy prizes the work of art he can cultivate and nurture within

imaginary.” As we discuss below, the thematic and stylistic references to Huysmans are too strong to conclude that the yellow book was only “partly suggested” by *Against the Grain*, as Gillespie does.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 2007), here p. 104. Further references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

⁵ While I use the term “anxiety of influence” in this chapter, my intention is not to invoke Harold Bloom's work here. Bloom argues that literary texts, particularly in the poetic tradition, are a response to the ones that precede them, and that literature occurs as a response to and a product of the author's internalized literary canon, by which he is unconsciously haunted. My work in this chapter is less interested in tracing literary debts, and I consider the anxiety of influence in a perhaps more literal way, pertaining to what characters fear as sources of contamination.

⁶ Rita Felski, “The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch,” *PMLA*, Vol. 106, No. 5 (Oct., 1991): 1094-1105, here p. 1096.

⁷ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, tr. by Robert Baldick (New York: Penguin, 2003), here p. 9. Further references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text. I have chosen to represent the title as *Against the Grain*, which I feel is a more accurate rendering of the (untranslatable) French title, *A Rebours*.

himself, at the cost of withdrawing from society and from personal relationships. Yet in pursuing and indulging in aesthetic experiments to achieve the transformation of the self into a work of art, both characters must submit themselves endlessly to influence. Lamenting that the little yellow book Lord Henry loans him has poisoned him, Dorian reveals the bind he and Des Esseintes are in: attempting to cultivate themselves to reach an idealized state of signification, they cannot control how various signifiers will affect them. It is impossible, they find, to be both master and subject of self-experimentation, to be in control of a process that puts the subject at the mercy of his senses.

Dorian and Des Esseintes are thus in an unsteady relationship with influence, at once inviting it while also eschewing it, and they cannot readily control or select how agents of influence affect them. In attempting to create what Charles Bernheimer terms “an encrusted verbal surface” of aesthetic references to supplant reality, they must submit themselves to an intertextuality they cannot control or contain.⁸ This unstable relationship to reference also pertains to Wilde, whose novel is a meditation on influence not only in the abstract but in practice as well; *Dorian Gray* is very much a response to Pater’s writings on aestheticism and, throughout, Wilde struggles in how to take up and address Pater. As John Paul Riquelme germanely notes, “In this allegory about art, Wilde’s book and its producer are themselves implicated,” for there is no separate, clean “realm of clarity” that is “somehow insulated” from its persistent questions about the vexing nature of influence.⁹ First taken up by *Against the Grain*, this anxiety of influence seeps into *Dorian Gray*. It is as though a textual hypochondria originating in Huysmans’ work reverberates through to Wilde’s novel, infecting the author along the way. We will thus begin our discussion with *Against the Grain* before turning to Wilde’s novel.

Part I. A Crisis of Health:

The Sickroom and the Simulacrum

The hero of *Against the Grain*, characterized aptly by Oates as “sickly” and “simpering,” phobically boards himself up in his staffed mansion in an effort to shield himself from *fin de siècle* Parisian bourgeois society.¹⁰ Censoring the materials brought into his house and conducting a fastidious and carefully controlled series of aesthetic experiments, Des Esseintes is a finicky, punctilious germophobe who attempts with desperation to order his reality. He reveals a preoccupied fear of contamination over a threat that is amorphous and vague in nature—for how does one protect oneself from

⁸ Charles Bernheimer, “Huysmans: Writing Against (Female) Nature,” *Poetics Today*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2 (1985): 311-324, here p. 323.

⁹ John Paul Riquelme, “Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic Gothic: Walter Pater, Dark Enlightenment, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 46, Issue 3 (Fall 2000): 608-627 (here, p. 610).

¹⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, “Wilde’s Parable of the Fall,” here p. 427.

society? His obsession is such that it consumes him, fatiguing him and inevitably wearing on him. Just as hypochondria itself constitutes illness, the obsession with malady functioning in turn as malady, so Des Esseintes' fear of contamination debilitates him; as he himself puts it, "My dread of the disease will bring on the disease itself if I keep this up" (75). His belabored project of protecting his sanctity or "essence" amidst what Wilde termed the decadent "stain of the age" is what unravels him. He anticipates the bachelor hypochondriac I discuss in the third chapter, but he differs from John Marcher and Bartleby in his hedonistic self-experiments. His hypochondria is more closely that of the mad scientist's, for his aim is not merely to protect himself from the external world, but to cultivate himself to reach a state of glorious perfection through a meticulous set of experiments and obsessions.

While references to hypochondria, contamination, and an obsessive fretting over one's health abound throughout the novel, some are especially worth noting. Des Esseintes' origins themselves are sickly, for the prologue to the novel informs us of the "degeneration" of the aristocratic family line, "with the men becoming progressively less manly" in a "ruinous process," made worse by the Des Esseintes' habit of "intermarrying among themselves" (3). The product of incest and decay, our hero is the "only one descendant" left of "this ancient house," and his physical frailty seems as much the genetic result of inbreeding as an allegorized testament to aristocratic excess (3). Indeed, Huysmans takes pains to equate the degeneration of the family with the social decay of modernity, for the verb he uses to describe the family's decline was chosen with care: *décadence*. Contemporary readers would have recognized the equation here between the social and the personal, understanding that the hero's health was being textually linked to societal ennui and decline.

As the only living heir of the ancient house, Des Esseintes is thus on one hand an emblem of nobility and aristocracy, for his life of petulant whims and indulgences is made possible only through a scion's inheritance that enables him to contemplate extravagances such as a tortoise encrusted with gold and jewels. Yet on the other hand, his health, dwindling fortune, and the decline of the family line would make Des Esseintes precisely a counter-figure to his aristocratic origins; his physical symptoms in particular place him in a disembodied relationship to his noble lineage. Like a donkey descended from a famed equestrian line, Des Esseintes is the paragon of aristocracy as well as its nervous and faltering antithesis.

His somatic symptoms play a central role in the novel, and are in fact what prompt Des Esseintes to leave Paris. Notorious in the city for his bachelor lifestyle and known to "indulge in unnatural love-affairs and perverse pleasures," he is warned by his doctors there that he must "give up these practices which were sapping his vitality" (9). His unimpeded hedonism has placed him in a state of fatigue and weariness so that, during his last months in Paris, he is "sapped by disillusionment, depressed by hypochondria and weighed down by spleen," and is thus in an extreme "state of nervous sensitivity" (25).¹¹ We see that the question of frail nerves is not a new one for Des

¹¹ Athena Vrettos argues that "competing cultural 'meanings' of nervous sensitivity" are used throughout nineteenth century literature to "define a surprisingly wide range of experiences and beliefs." She notes, for example, that it is used "to describe emotional exhaustion as well as the debilitating effects of modern civilization," and goes on to discuss nervous sensitivity in the framework of Victorian accounts and

Esseintes, for “since his earliest childhood, he had been tormented by inexplicable revulsions” and “shuddering fits” (79); the “threat of scrofula¹² and recurrent bouts of fever” create a childhood that “had been overshadowed by sickness,” and he spends much of his youth in a pleasant convalescence of sorts, spending “hours reading or daydreaming, enjoying his fill of solitude” (4-5).

What we garner from his childhood and relationship to illness is that Des Esseintes is in a crisis of health—not only because he is constantly ill, but because he does not know how to be well. Oscillating between boredom and fatigue, he cannot strike a balance between hedonistic indulgences and monastic asceticism. Rather, he gives into vice but then repudiates it, so that he is caught in an endless cycle of fatigue from overindulgence followed by tedium from self-abnegation. For example, his “overfatigued senses” in Paris, exhausted from having “tasted every imaginable experience,” cause him to embrace “the idea of hiding away far from human society, of shutting himself up in some snug retreat” where he can “steep himself in peace and quiet” (9-10). Once established in Fontenay, however, he soon grows bored and begins seeking out excitation and vice. While he initially resolves to “allow nothing to enter his hermitage which might breed repugnance or regret,” he then decides to seek “evocative works” for “the delectation of his mind and the delight of his eyes” that would “point the way to new possibilities, and *shake up his nervous system by means of erudite fancies, complicated nightmares, [and] suave and sinister visions*” (50, emphasis added).

Perhaps more interesting than Des Esseintes’ fear of contamination is his *embrace* of contamination. As much as he professes a desire for rest and tranquility, he is unwilling and unable to give himself over to these. Ultimately, it seems that Des Esseintes cannot be without vice because he cannot be without illness; his vision of health proves problematic because it involves perpetual proximity to illness. At Fontenay, for example, which is his monastic attempt at a self-cure, he brings with him a faithful pair of servants who are prized for their ability to maintain “a methodical sickroom routine” (18). Intrinsic to the young bachelor’s vision of health and utopian retreat is this pair of dutiful medics. We learn that the husband and wife pair have been “trained to administer spoonfuls of physic and medicine brews at regular intervals” and are “inured to the absolute silence of cloistered monks” (18). Des Esseintes has fetishized the “sickroom routine,” and clearly finds appeal—esthetic as well as somatic—in the vision of being tended to and comforted. It would not be too far of a stretch to say that what Des Esseintes establishes in his utopian home is a luxurious hospital of sorts, a rehabilitation center for him to detoxify from Paris and to indulge in the fantasy of being a patient.

The aural resonance of his name in French, evoking *sein* or “breast,” comes to mind in his vision of being nursed to health. We must not gloss over the fact that Des Esseintes places in his ideal home a married pair significantly older than him, who are installed to replace or play the part of the parents he never knew. We are told expressly that “there was no gratitude or affection associated with the memories he retained of his parents: only fear” (4). While the misanthropic Des Esseintes limits his contact with the

narratives. For more, see Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), here p. 12.

¹² Characterized by glandular swellings of the lymph nodes in the neck, scrofula (also known as scrophula and struma) is a form of tuberculosis. Scrofula became less common in the twentieth century though, with the appearance of HIV/AIDS, it has shown a resurgence because it affects immuno-compromised patients.

pair of servants, prizing his solitude above their presence, he also invests in a particular vision of them, keeping them in his home to tend to him and to be devoted to him. Unlike his biological parents, who “scarcely noticed him” or spent time with him and were like “complete stranger[s]” to him, the parental couple here will stay put, remaining forced in the home to cater to Des Esseintes (4-5). They must learn his elaborate system of signals and codes to be able to respond to his specific wishes, preparing his precisely planned meals and tending to the minutiae of the household. The long neglected domestic sphere of his childhood is thus vigilantly attended to by the pair of servants he appoints.

In this vision of being nursed to health, the maternal figure in particular is seized upon to comply with his fantasy. Des Esseintes adorns the woman in a costume of “Flemish faille” that he has custom made for her, so that when “gliding past” in her “white gown and great black hood,” she evokes those “peaceful, pious communities, those sleepy villages shut away in some hidden corner” (19). The image suggests “an impression of convent life” in its austere and hooded figure, and is compared to the “beguines [...] at Ghent,” thus evoking a monastic order of bucolic asceticism. But the woman also importantly evokes a matriarch or figure of maternal authority from a lower socioeconomic class: a nursemaid or governess, present for the strict purpose of correctly raising her charge. This image is important in the text not only for the fixation it reveals on being nursed puritanically to health, but also for the appeal that it suggests is to be found in austerity and lack as figured by socioeconomic class.

Similarly, Des Esseintes recalls somewhat nostalgically the incident of having to consult a “common, lower-class” dentist when once beleaguered by a toothache (47). The fact of having to “resort” to a common dentist because he requires immediate assistance is met with a curious mix of terror and sublimity (47). Des Esseintes thinks of those “iron-fisted fellows” who, though “ignorant” in the dental arts, “know how to extirpate the most stubborn of stumps with unparalleled speed” (47); their “customers are never kept waiting” because of their alarming and crude efficiency (47). The grotesque account of the tooth’s extraction becomes a highly detailed flashback in the novel spanning several pages. The memory is a significant one, partly because it offers one of the few episodes in the text in which the hero actually leaves his house and in which, remembering Wilde’s characterization of the novel, something finally happens. But the memory is also telling because of Des Esseintes’ unconscious but obvious delight in certain features of the experience: the unsubtle, brute strength of the crude dentist who “lifted his patient bodily” from his chair by the tooth in question (49); the exigency and emergency of needing to “rush out of doors” at dawn (47); and, most tellingly, the experience of crippling pain and its cessation. Des Esseintes recalls vividly “feeling ten years younger” upon leaving the dentist and suddenly “taking an interest in the most insignificant things,” presumably because he is so overjoyed at no longer being in pain (49).

The dental episode in the novel is particularly remarkable because it is the only instance in which our hero is exuberantly happy. Skipping out into the street and “adding his contribution to the bloody spittle” on the dentist’s landing, Des Esseintes seems, for the first time, alive—carefree, animated, and youthful. While the memory of his behavior later causes him to shudder as he thinks back on it in his armchair, savoring his “genuine Irish whiskey” in his library, the moment marks the sole note in the text of youth or jubilation, the only instance when Des Esseintes seems “ten years younger” rather than

geriatric and aged, when he acts viscerally, spitting into the steps, without thought of consequence or aesthetic effect (46/49). Moreover, upon closer examination, what causes Des Esseintes to shudder in recollecting the moment is not the thought of the blood or the pain he experienced, but rather the recollection that he became interested in reality, “in the most insignificant things” (49). To our hero, forever interested in artificial flowers over genuine ones, in perfumes and chemical combinations over natural fragrances, in elaborate and contrived simulations over “the vulgar reality of actual experience” (21), the thought of being interested in the “insignificant” and quotidian is repulsive. To be sure, the experience of being in physical pain is a sublime one: terrifying, and also delightful for its visceral urgency. But it is also one he must repress (“‘Ugh!’ he said to himself, shuddering”), because physical pain, in its immediacy, has no place in Des Esseintes’ simulacrum of existence (49).

The hypochondriac in Des Esseintes thus stands in a paradoxical relationship to illness. On one hand, he welcomes the experience of pain and relishes its memory, for the exigency of the event satisfies the narcissist in him. He recounts histrionically “pacing his room like a madman, blundering into the furniture in his pain,” and melodramatically deeming the “dentists he usually consulted” as out of the question for this particular matter (47). He also, as we have seen, experiences a deep and euphoric relief when the tooth is finally wrenched from his mouth and his pain abates. We might also imagine that, for someone whose problematic relationship to health has always been characterized by nebulous and amorphous symptoms—frailty, fragile nerves, exhaustion—the experience of acute and certain pain with a concrete and readily identifiable source might be welcome. Yet his relationship to the experience is not purely rapturous because of his personal investment in what Charles Bernheimer reads as the sublimating activity of producing “simulacra, without organic content.”¹³ Engaged in “an artistic mode that is consciously antibiological, willfully unrealistic, and artfully superficial,” Des Esseintes perceives the dental episode as having lifted a veil from reality; the cessation of pain causes him to *appreciate* the mundane reality that he typically seeks to subvert. One who is in physical pain does not have the luxury to think about whimsical notions of simulacra, for the corporeal experience is too immediate. The fact that the episode contrasts biological reality with, in Bernheimer’s term, “antibiological” whims is made especially clear when, shaking off the memory, Des Esseintes finds that his precious jewel-encrusted tortoise is dead.

The tortoise is perhaps the novel’s most memorable image, in part because of its sheer extravagance and opulence, in part because it exemplifies the protagonist’s fantastic whims, and in part because it grotesquely begs the question of whether such a monstrous vision could be executed. To recall, “possessed” by the notion of an object that would “move about” one of his Oriental carpets in order to best “set off” its “gleaming tints,” Des Esseintes strikes upon the idea of buying a tortoise to wander across its “woolen pile” (40-41); unsatisfied with the muted result, he then has the tortoise’s shell “glazed with gold” so that “the reptile blazed as brightly as any sun” (41). Delighted but not quite sated, he decides that the project “would not really be complete” until the tortoise is encrusted with an assortment of jewels (41). The ensuing chapter then chronicles his

¹³ Charles Bernheimer, “Huysmans: Writing Against (Female) Nature,” p. 320.

Goldilocks-like quest to decide on just the right combination and pattern of particular jewels—only to, as we have seen, have the tortoise die.

Throughout the chapter, the tortoise morphs from animal to object, from creature to art form; even before its death, it has achieved the status of something inanimate and ornamental. We see this evolution—or descent—reflected in Des Esseintes' thought process, for his idea moves from contemplating the tortoise in animal terms to seeing it only in artistic terms; it goes from “a huge tortoise in its tank” to, more vaguely, “the reptile,” to, finally, his “gigantic jewel” (41). This movement in terms mirrors a movement away from the corporeal and, specifically, enacts a transition from the biological to the anti-biological. The jewel-encrusted tortoise is not merely decorative to Des Esseintes; as Naomi Schor argues, the ornamental should not be conflated with embellishment or accessory.¹⁴ Rather, the tortoise literally embodies the evolution or transcendence Des Esseintes hopes to achieve *in himself* from plain and mortal flesh to lasting *objet d'art*.

The desire to self-ornament, to transcend one's body to attain a metaphysical state of aesthetic glory, is captured in the monstrous experiment with the tortoise. Given that this movement is aimed at subverting the biological and the organic, it makes sense that Des Esseintes' memory of his inflamed tooth is so repugnant to him as a hypochondriac—not because of the pain or discomfort involved, nor because of the medical procedure required, for both prove rather appealing. Rather, the memory repulses him because the organic and corporeal experience of pain brings him back to the very physical body that he seeks to subvert and exceed. As our narrator intones, “The main thing is to know how to set about it, to be able to concentrate your attention on a single detail, to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination *and so substitute the vision of a reality for the reality itself*” (22, emphasis added). If a substitute phantasm of reality is prized over reality, then the immediate and corporeal experience of pain would prove a hindrance, calling the subject back to the mundane existence he seeks to shed.

Throughout the novel, this simulated vision—a nineteenth century version of “virtual reality”—is prized above actual reality, and the desire to “forget” oneself through imaginative transport is pitted against somatic boundaries (22). For example, a favorite pastime of Des Esseintes' involves an exercise of playing with scents using his endless and elaborate collection of essences, oils, vaporizers and ventilators so that he can ritualistically indulge in his hobby. The tenth chapter of the novel tracks a series of these experiments, which are perhaps best characterized as a game of olfactory masturbation. Attempting to “roam” through certain “aromatic stanzas” and play with various scents, he “inject[s]” into the room a series of essences (109-10). The language in the chapter is heady, sensual, and synesthetic: smells become equated with bucolic strolls and musical stanzas, and our hero recalls past lovers who responded to different scents. But the coital ritual of communing with these essences is interrupted when Des Esseintes collapses. At the end of the chapter we find him in “such a state of prostration” that he falls “fainting, almost dying, across the window sill” (115). The allusion to mortality here recalls the fate of the jeweled tortoise; the text intones that, like the animal, Des Esseintes risks reaching

¹⁴ For more, see Naomi Schor. *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

his somatic limit through his constant experimenting. While Des Esseintes likes to feel that nature “has had her day,” he cannot transcend it, for he is constantly limited by his own physical boundaries (110). Wanting to supercede nature and biology, Des Esseintes is constantly reminded that he is subject to these through his somatic limits.

Part II. A Crisis of Reference

Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel!
—*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

At their core, Des Esseintes’ experiments involve not merely aesthetic manipulations to transcend nature, but a play of signifiers to transcend textuality; Huysmans’ novel above all else recounts and bears witness to a crisis of reference. Charles Bernheimer aptly points out that the objects catalogued in the novel, such as its perfumes and jewels, are treated “as texts, written in a coded language with various dialects and styles.”¹⁵ These objects are described in a relentless and tireless stream of detail, and they are treated not as two-dimensional material items but as three-dimensional worlds. Objects deemed important to Des Esseintes occupy their own realm, and are accorded unique textual space and privilege: names of exotic plants are listed in Latin, types of teas are described from China at length, and the resulting effect is that any item—a certain hue of orange, or a particular piece of furniture—might become the focus of a whole chapter. Indeed, Huysmans was both attacked and lauded in this respect; according to his contemporary Arthur Symons, Huysmans conducted “modern experiments upon language to their furthest development” in weaving dizzying and obscure references into the novel.¹⁶ A referential pastiche, the novel quilts together details, facts, and attributes, sometimes encyclopedically, sometimes fetishistically, so that any material object might offer the richly textured experience of a symbolic world.

Repeatedly, however, Des Esseintes treats these symbolic worlds *as* texts, and it becomes clear that his aesthetic experiments are motivated by a relationship to language. He alludes to the “complex language” of smells, for example, that is “as subtle as any human tongue,” and he describes his attempt to “master the grammar, to understand the syntax of smells” (106). He studies “the idiom of essences” and the “language of scents,” and the diction here, importantly, is not comparative but transitive: scents are not akin to language, but *are* language (106). His experiments thus mark a deliberate exercise of referential play aimed at a new vocabulary of signifiers. He compares himself to a “Balzac,” and thinks of his hesitation in how to combine smells as “familiar to writers who, after months of idleness, make ready to embark on a new work” (108).

We begin to see that Des Esseintes is invested not only in forgetting his existing reality, but in creating new and artificial symbolic orders to *supplant* that reality. Further, his attempt to restructure his world specifically occurs through a referential play of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

¹⁶ Arthur Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” tr. by Patrick McGuiness, p. 227.

discovering new frames of signification to be used in the place of language—a labor which recalls Nietzsche’s famous declaration that we cannot be rid of religion so long as we have grammar.¹⁷ Attempting to formulate his own grammar, Des Esseintes attempts to master his universe, to restructure it according to his direct senses rather than through the intermediary of language. His frequent allusions to language are thus hardly incidental or subsidiary, but rather reveal a crucial desire to locate another realm of signification that would function in the place of language.

Des Esseintes’ experiments thus reveal a broader attempt to control signifiers and their effect. As Lacan discusses, however, attempts to circumvent or control the play of signifiers inevitably end up undoing the subject. To put it another way, the signifier “anchors itself to the subject, marking its place with a letter, and whether or not the subject knows, reads, or denies it, the subject will function like a signified and will always slide under the signifier.”¹⁸ Des Esseintes’ aesthetic experiments might thus be interpreted as an attempt to duck the signifier and evade its disruptive effects. He specifically attempts to evade nature, but he more broadly attempts to escape the material effects of textuality. His quest to find an alternate “grammar” in the world of scents speaks to a deep suspicion of language and a desire to find a mode outside of it.

We see this suspicion towards language throughout the novel. While Des Esseintes “would spend hours reading” enjoyably as a child, and often recalls passages from books fondly, he later comes to view texts as a source of contagion (5). We learn that during his study under the “Jesuits’ supervision,” he became “pensive” and “troubled by a nagging fear” related to certain texts (74); he is torn between what “the novelists talked about” and what “a number of theologians spoke of” concerning the nature of experience (75). “Supposing they were both right” causes him to dejectedly think that “there was no longer any point in practicing self-analysis” or in reflecting over life: “things happened because they happened, and that was the end of it” (75). He feels persuaded by Schopenhauer, who “undoubtedly” was “in the right” in his “resignation” to the “deplorable state of affairs” of the world, but he also cannot forget “the poetic and poignant atmosphere of Catholicism in which he had been steeped as a boy” (79). It is in this vortex of nihilism that he makes his most hypochondriacal pronouncement: “‘Damn it, I’m going crazy,’ Des Esseintes said to himself. ‘My dread of the disease will bring on the disease itself if I keep this up’” (75).

Texts have dizzied him with their conflicting lessons and philosophies, to the point that he is affected physically. Des Esseintes is thus not only struggling with the conflicted messages he finds in texts—he is also resentful of the fact that texts have the ability to contaminate and override his mind in a way he cannot control. What becomes apparent to him is, in Lacan’s terms, the “play of displacement and condensation” of the signifier “to which he is destined in the exercise of his functions.”¹⁹ Des Esseintes feels the material effects of the signifier and the *Spaltung* (splitting) that Lacan describes. His

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), see p. 48.

¹⁸ Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, eds., *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (New York: Free Association Books, 1996), here p. 116.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), here p. 277.

anxiety arises not merely because the texts he reads confuse him, but rather because he cannot control or be maestro to their voices as they infiltrate his consciousness.

This textual anxiety is linked explicitly to his health, for he finds that “his brain [is] a seething mass of paradoxes and sophisms” after reading, and “for several days in succession” he experiences a dizzied sense of vertigo (76). He also observes that “these fearful intimations of faith” are “troubling him more particularly since his health had begun to deteriorate” (79). It is as though his weakened somatic condition renders him particularly vulnerable and susceptible to the nefarious influence of texts. Thus, the “great German aphorisms” tend to return when “certain nervous disorders” surface (79).

Noteworthy in the descriptions of textuality and linguistic effect is Des Esseintes’ lack of agency. He does not orchestrate or command his memories from passages; they come upon him and descend, “troubling him,” haunting him (79). Unlike his experiments, which offer him the chance to be in complete control of colors or scents or objects, these recollections render him powerless. The contrast between his paralinguistic aesthetic experiments and his textual recollections exemplifies the Lacanian precept that “it is not only man who speaks, but in man and through man that it [the signifier] speaks.”²⁰ In his fanciful and fantastic aesthetic whims, Des Esseintes attempts to masterfully subvert the nature of signification in which the subject is not the sovereign user of materials, but has “become the material” itself, victim to it.²¹ He turns to alternate realms of evocation like the olfactory world of smells or the visual realm of flowers because, through their direct excitation of the senses, he hopes for an immediate connection between signifier and signified. In this Saussurean system of signs, Des Esseintes is interested in perfumes and paintings for what they immediately evoke without seeming to require recourse to language.

As a result of falling prey to texts, Des Esseintes begins a practice of “literary dieting” and decides to forego his books, perhaps “for a little while” or “forever” (81). While he does so “as a last resort” (80), we must recall here that Des Esseintes also visited the village dentist in a similar fashion, having to “resort” to the man out of perceived necessity (47). We must of course examine closely such instances of seemingly involuntary behavior, where a subject insists that he has no choice or recourse; as Freud reminds us, a subject’s given explanation of feeling compelled or forced to act a certain way is often the rationalized cover for an unconscious wish.²² Des Esseintes decides that he “must” give up literature, and though he laments the loss in his conscious thoughts, we might readily imagine that he is unconsciously only too happy to oblige. Like Emma Bovary or Dorian Gray, Des Esseintes feels himself a victim of books, having fallen prey to their influence in his weakened state. He falls into a hypochondriacal relationship with texts, blaming them as a source of contagion and reading his somatic failures as linked to their invasive influence. He thus unconsciously seeks alternative realms of signification, hoping for a different system of signifiers that will enable him to escape not only mundane reality but the vexing system of linguistic signification which he blames for his condition. He also, as we have seen, maintains an unconscious fascination with puritan

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 274.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²² Freud discusses this idea perhaps most directly in his case study of Dora, which I analyze in my fifth chapter of this work. For more, see Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, tr. and ed., vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

austerity and the condition of lack. His literary dieting thus speaks to the appeal he finds in self-abnegation and asceticism.

Inundated by books and ideas, Des Esseintes turns to paralinguistic means. Despite his idealization of asceticism, he adorns himself in a kaleidoscope of aesthetic delights, attempting to become a jewel-encrusted achievement “against nature,” a triumph of manipulation and control over the biological. Nature is the signifier Des Esseintes attempts to duck, only to fall under its sway as he swoons, “fainting and almost dying” in the oppressively stifling air of his own perfumed cloud. We can thus read nature as a signifier in two ways. First, as Bernheimer notes, there is the natural world which Des Esseintes attempts to subvert through his consistent turn to artificial and contrived means: silk flowers over natural ones; chemical distillations over their originating counterpart; “imaginary pleasures” and adventures over actual experience (21). Second, however, there is the fact of language and its effects, whose nature Des Esseintes eschews. He does not like the dizzying experience of falling captive to textuality and language, and thus, recalling Plato, rejects the seduction of literature from his utopian haven. Des Esseintes’ hypochondria involves a textual phobia and a deep unease regarding the realm of signification precisely because he cannot exert referential mastery over it.

Part III. Poisoned: The Return of the Repressed

Dorian Gray, similarly consumed with a project of self-cultivation, finds the experiments essayed by Huysman’s hero fascinating and irresistible. Reading of Des Esseintes’ synesthetic trials with scents in perfume bottles, jewels of different hues, and books wrapped in luxurious fabrics, Dorian then replicates these experiments, both consciously and unconsciously mimicking the protagonist as he too devotes himself to “perfumes and the secrets of their manufacture,” to “music” and “curious concerts,” and to “jewels,” appearing at a costume ball “in a dress covered with five hundred and sixty pearls” (111-13). These sensual and sartorial delights are not mere whimsy, however, for the narrator intones ominously to us that “Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book” (123). The declaration is a curious one for the blame it fixes unequivocally on the novel and for its uncharacteristically settled tone.

Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, blame and responsibility are not themes that Wilde touches. The playful ambivalence in the preface to the novel—which begins with the aphorism “The artist is the creator of beautiful things” and ends with “All art is quite useless”—sets the tone for the text, which is paradoxical, provocative, and purposefully ambivalent throughout. Indeed, the narrator never points the textual finger of blame at Lord Henry, whose sophistic voice of suggestion infiltrates Dorian’s ear early on, and whose message that Dorian will age and lose his beauty is what prompts Dorian to make his fateful wish. Nor does Wilde condemn Dorian during his exploits and crimes, but rather depicts him in a range of emotional lights, from contrite and repentant to manipulative and cold. As Michael Patrick Gillespie points out, for example, “Dorian articulates a range of responses during the hours immediately following the death of Basil

Hallward, with different—and, in some cases, conflicting—ethical precepts informing each expression.”²³ In other words, Wilde, who certainly had no interest in writing a moral tale, eschews determinate or straightforward presentations of character or influence. As Gillespie puts it, “Wilde deftly undermines support for any concept of narrowly defined intentionality or even for the sense that any particular point of view can have an implicit dominance or an inherent legitimacy.”²⁴

In the radically ambiguous terrain of the novel, *Against the Grain* is thus accorded a strange and unique place of culpability. It is the sole element in the text *not* treated multivalently, but is rather fixed unilaterally as a source of blame: it has poisoned Dorian Gray. There is no humor or wit surrounding this characterization of the book to suggest that Wilde was being ironic. Rather, the tone of such passages is decidedly firm:

It was a poisonous book. The heavy odor of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows. (104)

This characterization of the novel as toxic drug, inducing its victim into a “malady,” is especially curious given Wilde’s own self-interest in defending works of literature, and works of art generally, as blameless. Indeed, the preface to the novel, which Wilde wrote following the publication of *Dorian Gray* in novella form in *Lippincott’s* magazine, is aimed at insisting that literature does not pose a threat to its readers, and that art should not be received as a source of moral corruption. Wilde was under heavy criticism in early reviews of the novella form that he had written an amoral, sinister, and indecent work; he added the preface to *Dorian Gray* so that critics might be given pause before attacking the effect of the novel as corruptive, insisting, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (3). He also made textual changes throughout, adding to it so that in novel form it might be better received.²⁵ Why, then, would Wilde characterize a novel as having precisely the effect that he took pains to eschew? Why describe Huysmans’ novel in such accusatory, toxic terms when determined to show that literature is not poisonous?

Before addressing this question, let us first consider the “victim” of *Against the Grain* to better understand how he falls under its spell. The issue of what will taint or befoul Dorian is established early in the novel’s drama, and the threat of contamination hangs over the text from its outset. We are told of Dorian’s “passionate purity” when he is first introduced into the novel, and that he has “kept himself unspotted from the

²³ Michael Patrick Gillespie, “Picturing Dorian Gray: Resistant Readings in Wilde’s Novel,” as excerpted from *Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Chaos* and included in the Norton critical edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* used throughout this chapter and referred to above. Here, p. 389.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

²⁵ Wilde added five chapters to the Lippincott’s version in revising it into a novel. These chapters, broadly described, might be characterized as offering more background on characters and offering depth to the dramatic action. Sibyl Vane’s mother is introduced, for example, as is the Duchess. Such characters complicate the moral terrain of the novel, making it a more subtle and ambiguous work.

world,” a description with Biblical resonance (17).²⁶ Dorian’s beauty is especially remarkable for its untainted aspect and its unsullied innocence; he plays the male equivalent of the fair, virginal damsel. A Snow White of sorts, Dorian is set up as a naïve doe, unaware of his beauty, equated with music and with sylvan charm. All is ready for him to be unsuspectingly poisoned by the proverbial apple, and Basil Hallward thus pleads to Lord Henry, “Don’t spoil him. Don’t try to influence him” (16). As many have commented, however, Lord Henry has no interest in corrupting Dorian, but rather attempts to warn him regarding the nature of influence. “The aim of life is self-development,” he tells Dorian; he further warns him that “to influence a person is to give him one’s soul” (19). Henry’s warning is to not fall under the sway of any one influence too literally, and to look internally to “realize one’s own nature perfectly,” for “that is what each of us is here for” (19).

When Lord Henry makes inquiries into Dorian’s background, we learn that Dorian, like Des Esseintes, embodies a combination of aristocratic wealth and decline. Dorian’s mother, Lady Margaret Devereux, was renowned for her beauty but also for her fickleness; she “made all the men frantic by running away with a penniless young fellow,” and no one knows “what on earth induced her to behave as she did” (32). We must of course make note of her surname. Particularly in a novel with carefully chosen names²⁷ and with French phrases sprinkled liberally throughout, the name Devereux calls to mind *véreux*: literally in French, “worm eaten,” or, figuratively, spoiled, rotten, decayed, corrupt. Because she falls in love with a “mere nobody,” a “subaltern in a foot regiment,” Dorian’s grandfather, Lord Kelso, arranges to have his son-in-law killed to express his disapproval of her choice (32). Dorian is thus born not only from scandal, but from a Devereux; we learn that he has a “strange likeness to his mother” (101). Esther Rashkin argues that it is as though Lord Kelso has said to him, “You are not a Kelso but a *Devereux*; you are the rotten, vile, corrupt issue of a rotten, debased woman.”²⁸ Described as a “child born in pain,” Dorian is the product of “a hideous, treacherous crime” and represents, at least to the curmudgeonly Lord Kelso, the debasement of the family line (34). Though he is young, handsome, and moneyed, Dorian is thus also the outcome of scandal and infamy. He is literally *de véreux*, or “of corruption,” and his past stands in contrast to and mars his seemingly untainted and unspoiled exterior.

This shadow of *véreux* haunts the novel as a crucial but barely detectable motif. Indeed, it is striking how many astute analyses of the text miss the fact of Dorian’s origins, insisting on reading him as nothing more than a purely innocent, cherubic, and unsullied beauty who, for any number of reasons, takes a turn to dark, hedonistic

²⁶ The phrase “unspotted from the world” is a direct quote from the New Testament, James 1.27. The “spot” is of course also the emblem of guilt in *Macbeth*. We will be reminded again of Shakespeare’s play when Dorian murders Basil and is horrified by the blood on his hands.

²⁷ There is a purposeful, nearly allegorical quality to the names Wilde chose for his characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, such as Sibyl Vane, whose name is evocative for both its suggestion of vanity as well as the poetic allusion to a sibyl; Lord Henry’s surname (Wotton) is an echo of “wanton,” which characterizes his demeanor; Dorian’s name evokes “Doric,” relating to Hellenic notions of beauty.

²⁸ Esther Rashkin, “Art as Symptom: A Portrait of Child Abuse in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (May, 1976): 68-80, here p. 74.

exploits.²⁹ This underlying motif of *véreux* is significant because it affects how Dorian reacts to what is corrupt, and because it creates in Dorian a particular susceptibility to the novel that allegedly poisons him. The trope of *véreux* is also significant because the novel as a whole is haunted by this shadowy motif. It too is “Devéreux,” as we will see, and attempts to repress and delimit its contaminating elements.

Largely at issue in the novel is Dorian’s past and his repressive relationship to it. When a servant mentions Lord Kelso, we see that Dorian “winc[ed] at the mention of his grandfather” because of his “hateful memories of him” (98). We then learn that Dorian spent much of his childhood in the attic of the mansion, sequestered away because Kelso “had always hated” the boy and “desired to keep [him] at a distance” (101). The attic is not merely a play area, but a room that Lord Kelso had “specially built” in order to keep Dorian out of sight and isolated (101). The fact that Dorian appears so unsullied and “unspotted from the world” takes a sinister turn when we realize that, until Lord Kelso’s death, Dorian perhaps had seen not much of it. While “every moment of his lonely childhood came back to him” when Dorian returns to the attic, he concludes nostalgically that the “stainless purity of his boyish life” was spent there (101). Dorian refuses to acknowledge the truth of his childhood, repressing its distressing memories because he wants to see himself as Basil and Lord Henry do, and as the novel’s critics do: innocent and “stainless,” as a “marvelous untroubled youth,” with none of the *véreux* that his face betrays in his resemblance to his mother (101/126).

It is thus not surprising that Dorian chooses to hide the portrait in the attic, for the attic, to his mind, is the designated place for what is abject and ruinous. He, the scandalous grandchild, was hidden away. Lord Kelso wished to acknowledge neither his grandchild nor the crime he committed, keeping the matter “hushed up” and facing the consequence only of eating “his chop alone at the club for some time afterwards” (32). Kelso locks the evidence of his crime into the attic, and accepts his fate as the object of gossip and rumor. Dorian, not wanting to confront the ruinous truth in the portrait, nor the ugly facts of his childhood, pursues exactly the same fate. He, too, keeps his affairs hushed up, and is left isolated by those who leave “the room of a club when [he] enter[s] it” (126). Basil Hallward, attempting to bring this repressed truth to light, points out to Dorian that that “so many gentlemen in London will neither go to your house or invite you to theirs” (126). For his attempts to bring this repressed content to light, Basil also suffers the fate of the attic—not only literally, in that Dorian kills him there, but figuratively, in that Dorian will not acknowledge what Basil attempts to show him.

The attic thus serves as the figurative unconscious of the novel. Whatever is abject or *véreux* gets stuffed into the attic, first by Lord Kelso, and then later, unconsciously mimicking him, by Dorian. Dorian keeps not only his portrait there but Basil Hallward’s body as well, and he secures them in the attic with a key whose sole copy he keeps in his pocket. Dorian is naturally the one who holds the “key” to his

²⁹ Such otherwise keen critical readings include Ellie Ragland-Sullivan’s, Joyce Carol Oates’, Michael Patrick Gillespie’s, and John Paul Riquelme, as previously cited above, as well as the following: Judith Weissman, “‘The Castrating Gesture’ in Wilde and Poststructuralists,” *Southern Review* 24 (1988): 520-34; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990); Jeff Nunokawa, “Homosexual Desire and the Effacement of the Self in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” *American Imago* 49 (Fall 1992): 311-21. Esther Rashkin is unique for having made this observation regarding Dorian’s origins, and while I am indebted to her text, she reads the motif narrowly.

unconscious, the only one capable of accessing it. His command to Alan Campbell is thus an especially telling one: “What you have got to do is to destroy the thing that is upstairs—destroy it so that not a vestige of it will be left” (141). He does not bid Campbell to destroy the *corpse*, or to get rid of the *body*, but rather wants to be free of “the thing that is upstairs” which is, in addition to the corpse, the sum of all that he is repressing (141).

The novel recounts a return of the repressed, a surfacing of the *véreux* which Dorian seeks so desperately to contain. The repressed surfaces for Dorian through signifiers he cannot control which remind him of his actions. Sorting through his morning mail on the same day that he has the portrait placed in the attic, Dorian spots the announcement of the inquest into Sibyl Vane’s death. He reacts violently, “tearing the paper in two,” and crossing the room to fling “the pieces away” (103). After first convincing himself in a fit of paranoia that his valet Victor has read it (“the man knew more than enough English for that”), he then reattempts to deny his culpability: “What did it matter? There was nothing to fear. Dorian Gray had not killed her” (103). Attempting to forget the newspaper announcement, Dorian then turns to the little yellow book sitting benignly on a side table, hoping to find solace in it. We therefore must note that Dorian happens on the book after a series of unsuccessful attempts to repress latent knowledge. He tries to convince himself of an idyllic childhood, just as he tries to believe that he had no hand in Sibyl Vane’s death. He attempts to cover the portrait with a “purple satin coverlet” that his “grandfather had found” that had been used “as a pall for the dead” (98). But his grandfather’s quilt is also a ‘souvenir’ in the etymological meanings of the word: in French, “remembrance,” and in Latin (*subvenire*), “occurring to the mind.” Dorian’s choice of the quilt as the appropriate object to hide the portrait (“Yes, that would serve to wrap the dreadful thing in”) is a moment of parapraxis, a Freudian slip; the choice of object underscores that he is motivated not only by the desire to hide his portrait, but also a desire to bury his memories (98). That he uses his grandfather’s “souvenir” anticipates that he will not be successful in his repressive efforts, but will be haunted by the cloak of memory.

When Dorian turns to the book for solace, he therefore does so at a very particular moment in the novel’s arc, having returned to the attic space of his childhood, and now in the process of using that space in the same nefarious way as his grandfather. He engages in a series of repressive maneuvers, hiding the portrait, tearing the news of Sibyl’s inquest, but signifiers continue to appear which remind Dorian of his past. What Dorian therefore finds in *Against the Grain* is the return of what he has been repressing, the *véreux* of his origins. He reads the text not as “novel,” or as containing something new, but as eminently familiar; he finds in its pages that “things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him” (104). In reading, Dorian feels the tug of the familiar, of what he has always already known. The experience of reading thus offers not an escape from his reality but a reminder of it.

Indeed, the entire account of Dorian reading the novel occurs as a dream sequence. He finds himself in “a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming,” and the whole day passes with him in his chair, until he can no longer read by the “copper-green sky” of dusk (104). The experience of reading is a blur; he does not quite know how the time has passed, and is surprised by the hour, “unconscious” while reading “of the falling day and creeping shadows” (104). Dorian sees in the novel a dream of himself; he is “dimly”

aware that “the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life,” but he cannot place the connections with precision. We recall here that Des Esseintes stands in a paradoxical relationship to his past, the emblem of aristocracy but also the embodiment of decline. We also recall that Des Esseintes suffers a similarly troubled childhood with his estranged parents, and that he too spent his boyhood lonely and isolated. What Dorian encounters in *Against the Grain* is the *unheimlich*, the uncanny return of the familiar which strikes him as strange. He sees himself in the novel, and feels that its hero is “a kind of prefiguring type” (105). While Basil’s painted portrait of Dorian is often treated as a figurative “mirror” in the text, reflecting back to Dorian his conscience and interior self, *Against the Grain* also serves as a mirror, showing in shadowy form the contours of Dorian’s own life and origins.

One of Wilde’s closing aphorisms in his preface to the novel is, “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (4). Once we understand that *Dorian Gray* recounts a process of the return of the repressed, we see that *Against the Grain* speaks to the specific way in which Dorian reads it; it poisons him because he is susceptible to it. The novel is thus poisonous only insofar as Dorian, as a spectator, sees his own corrupt visage mirrored in it. Because he has repressed his origins and his actions, Dorian does not recognize why the book appeals to him as vaguely familiar or *unheimlich*. We now can understand with clarity the narrator’s declaration that it is not that “Dorian could not free himself” from the book, but rather, “it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself of it” (105). *Against the Grain* offers Dorian the flower of Narcissus. Gazing at it, he does not recognize why he is entranced, or that he is really seeing himself in slightly distorted form.

Dorian, enthralled, has copies made of the book, “no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition” (105). He then has them “bound in different colors, so that they might suit his various moods” (105). The aesthetic nod to mood and color, and the equation between one’s “changing fancies” and differently colored objects, seems a direct excerpt from *Against the Grain*, both on Dorian’s part as well as Wilde’s (105). We are told that Dorian cannot resist reading the book, that he fetishizes it as an object, that he “could not free himself from” it “for years,” and that it thus offers a heady addiction, for Dorian cannot “free himself” of its influence (105). But the text itself is also enamored with the novel and succumbs to it. We might say that once the novel is introduced, it has a contagious effect on both the hero and text.

The eleventh chapter of *Dorian Gray* is, in its entirety, a miniature replica of *Against the Grain*, reproducing its content, its tone, its themes, its style, its diction, and its objects. The plot line disappears from the chapter; Dorian interacts with no one, and there is not a single line of conversation in its space—an usual move for Wilde who, as a playwright, is a deft master of dialogue. The chapter takes flight into Huysmans’ world and departs from itself, cataloguing Dorian’s aesthetic experiments and delights. While the surrounding chapters of *Dorian Gray* are fueled by provocative exchanges between characters, with philosophic declarations and witty retorts, here Dorian becomes the languorous aristocrat in his mansion.

Wilde obviously has *Against the Grain* in mind in composing the eleventh chapter, and he turns Dorian into a version of Des Esseintes. Dorian, for example, reflects “that there was no mood of the mind that had not its counterpart in the sensuous life” and devotes himself to the study of perfumes, “wondering what there was in frankincense that

made on mystical, and in ambergris that stirred one's passions" (111). The mystical, ornamental and orientalizing motifs from *Against the Grain* are also reproduced in the litanies of objects here, from the "ecclesiastical vestments" in brocade which Dorian collects to the "dainty Delhi muslins" from India (116). But the cadence and rhythm of the prose morphs entirely in the chapter as well, even in moments when Dorian is not obviously replicating Des Esseintes:

As he looked back upon man moving through History, he was haunted by a feeling of loss. So much had been surrendered! and to such little purpose! There had been mad willful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear, and whose result was a degradation infinitely more terrible than the fancied degradation from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape, Nature, in her wonderful irony, driving out the anchorite to feed with the wild animals of the desert and giving to the hermit the beasts of the field as his companions. (108)

This protracted last sentence, with its elongated and meandering quality, has none of Wilde's characteristic precision or sharp clarity. Its tone and cadence mimic *Against the Grain* exactly, so that one might in fact mistake it as a sentence from the novel.

While one could say that Wilde is here parodying Huysmans, or imitating his style appreciatively, it is equally plausible that he is not consciously or masterfully controlling his prose in these moments. Indeed, the idea of willful parody or conscious imitation that is fully controlled becomes tenuous when we realize that Wilde's own voice wavers in the chapter, surfacing occasionally only to be overridden. For example, in a clear instance of Wilde's typical narrative style, Dorian thinks to himself that "the more he knew, the more he desired to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them" (106). The illumination of such paradoxes is classic of Wilde and epitomizes his prose. But this voice gets drowned out, appearing in the chapter only sporadically and to be subsumed by the decadence surrounding it. If the chapter were intended to be a tribute to Huysmans as parody or imitation, it would make far more sense for it to be consistent in tone, rather than to waver from paradoxical quips to Huysmans' languorous, vertiginous style without warning. In sum, while Wilde is obviously writing with *Against the Grain* in mind, he does so in a way that is not controlled and in a manner over which he does not have mastery. Dorian's experience of reading the yellow book thus mirrors his psychic state of repression, but it also unconsciously enacts Wilde's experience of reading it. That is, while Dorian falls under the book's sway, so too does Wilde. This is best evinced by the puzzling and dissonant relationship of the eleventh chapter to the chapters surrounding it.

The introduction of *Against the Grain* into the novel in a certain sense inseminates the text, producing the strange textual offspring of the eleventh chapter. This textual "body" is the result of Wilde's attempt to join his novel with Huysmans' and form a union between the two. The Kelso/Devereux union is unwittingly reproduced rhetorically, for Wilde's patrician, elegant and controlled style merges with Huysmans' unruly, unpredictable, bewitching prose. The result, like Dorian, is "Devereux" in two respects. First, the chapter takes after *Against the Grain*, bearing its imprint just as Dorian bears a resemblance to his mother. Second, it is *véreux*, or corrupt, tainted, because the

text feels infiltrated; the chapter loses the thread of the novel and gets overridden by its source of influence. Interestingly, this situation is perhaps best articulated by Lord Henry when he describes to Dorian the danger of influence; he intones that “all influence is immoral” since the influenced one “becomes an echo of someone else” (19). In Lord Henry’s formulation, influence is not a benign matter of subtle suggestion, but an aggressive and invasive infiltration—which we see indeed comes to light in the eleventh chapter.

The Picture of Dorian Gray speaks to hypochondria at the level of textual contamination. It declares a text poisonous, and indeed gets poisoned by that text. It also reproduces Des Esseintes’ textual hypochondria, for just as he blames texts for his condition, deeming them toxic after once adoring them, so Dorian fetishizes his prized book only to then repudiate it. The narrator’s repeated declaration in *Dorian Gray* that the book is poisonous thus describes the effect of Huysmans’ novel on its own pages, as well as repeating unconsciously Des Esseintes’ estimation of literature as a contaminant.

Charles Bernheimer notes aptly of *Against the Grain* that in it, “textuality becomes intertextuality” since it revels in its references. As Bernheimer puts it, textuality “finds its source not in nature, but in the dictionary, the catalogue, the archive, the library.”³⁰ Huysmans’ novel in this way refers us, sending us into other texts to seek out its references, its argot, and its obscure allusions. This breach from text to intertextuality continues in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not only because the same rhetorical effect takes place when we come upon the strange world of glittering objects, but because Wilde’s novel itself becomes intertextual. It cannot contain the little yellow book, but can only hail it as a contagion to mark its effect.

³⁰ Charles Bernheimer, here p. 323.

Chapter Two: Filial Hypochondria

Paternity, Justice, and the Body in Kafka's Sons

Death of the Father would deprive literature of many
of its pleasures. If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories?
—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

In his unflinchingly candid letter to his father, Kafka remembers feeling so daunted by paternal authority that his very physical being became affected: “Since there was nothing at all I was certain of, since I needed to be provided at every instant with a new confirmation of my existence, since nothing was in my very own, undoubted, sole possession, determined unequivocally by me—in sober truth a disinherited son—*naturally I became unsure even [of] the thing nearest to me, my own body*” (152, emphasis added).¹ Kafka proceeds to describe his sense of autonomy as so threatened that his command over his body weakens, giving way “to every sort of hypochondria” (152). The experience Kafka discusses with his characteristic level of keen insight indeed speaks to hypochondria, not only because of his somatic sense that “even the thing nearest” to him is foreign, but also because of his own reading of his body as directly linked to his father’s treatment of him. The hypochondriac engages in a process of interpreting his own body and its legitimacy and failures within a social context, making it a site of signification; any symptom or bodily plaint reinforces the hypochondriac’s understanding of the world around him. The filial body in Kafka becomes the site where the battle with the father is waged—and inevitably lost. The struggle with paternal authority is hinted at through language in Kafka’s works, and perhaps through a heated exchange. But the real battle occurs in the somatic, in the fate of the filial body.

That Kafka’s work might suggest a theory of filial servitude, articulating the fatalistic experience of permanently being bound to the father, is evidenced by his request to his editor that three of his shorter works, *The Metamorphosis*, “The Judgment,” and “The Stoker,” be bound together in a single volume entitled *The Sons*.² Kafka’s wish, like

¹ Franz Kafka, *The Sons* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989). Further reference to the three short stories and to Kafka’s letter to his father will be provided by page number in the text.

² Kafka expresses this request in two letters to Kurt Wolff: in the first, dated April 4, 1913, Kafka suggests that the three stories “will make up quite a decent book whose title might be *The Sons*; in the second, dated April 11, 1913, Kafka reiterates the request, noting that the three “belong together, both inwardly and outwardly. There is an obvious connection among the three and, even more important, a secret one, for which reason I would be reluctant to forego the chance of having them published together, in a book which might be called *The Sons*.” The “obvious connection” is the thematic overlap between the three—each tells

so many of his requests regarding his work, was cast aside.³ That the three short stories have thus historically been printed and received separately has produced an extraordinary breadth of literary criticism on each. Indeed, Stanley Corngold has bemused that “more critical literature is published on Kafka each year than on any other writer except Shakespeare.”⁴ However, less scholarly attention has been paid to these three works as a cohesive statement on filiality; consequently, little has been said about the filial state in Kafka as a fixed one, occurring outside of the logic of linear *telos* in which generations progress expectedly. In contradistinction to a traditional oedipal narrative in which the son literally or figuratively slays the father, in Kafka we witness the son frozen in time, petrified by the father and unable to wrest control from him, to the point where even his body—the one entity that would seem his own—is at the father’s mercy.⁵ As Mark Anderson notes in his introduction to Kafka’s realized volume, “The sons remain sons” in Kafka, “incapable of being changed” and temporally rooted in a state of semi-adulthood (x).⁶

Time is frozen in *The Sons*, and so the conventional discourse of paternal authority with its temporal assumptions (e.g., the psychoanalytic premise that sons wish to replace their fathers) demands adjustment. Simply put, the sons in Kafka are not prototypical; the physical body of the son becomes a radical source of vulnerability to reflect this atypical filial state. The condition of being a son—particularly as seen in this collection of stories—is associated with a diseased state of stagnation, making the discourse of hypochondria particularly relevant to Kafka’s work.⁷ The physical body becomes a battleground that is inevitably seized by the father; nothing is safe or exempt from his reach.

The filial experience as Kafka limns it is thus an anxious one in which constant vigilance must be maintained over the paternal threat. To be a son in Kafka’s world is to

the story of a son in relation to the family unit. The “secret” connection may refer to the fact that these three works were inspired by Kafka’s developing relationship with Felice Bauer. See Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 96.

³ To clarify: Kafka gave the letter for his father to his mother and asked that she deliver it to him; she never did. When Kurt Wolff, Kafka’s editor, received the written request regarding the three short stories, he cast aside the young writer’s instructions. Finally, we also allude here to Kafka’s famous last request to Max Brod that his works be burned, a request he knew Brod would never follow. Kafka in these instances recalls the “boy who cried wolf” in his ambiguous and sometimes perverse relation to the requests he makes of others. The theme of intentions as expressed in letters is one to which we will return in this chapter.

⁴ Stanley Corngold, *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 24. Cited in this chapter hereafter in the text as *NF*.

⁵ One could interject here that obsessional neurosis and hysteria involve similar feelings of loss of control over one’s body and also interrupt traditional oedipal narrative. As we will see, however, hypochondria is especially pertinent to Kafka, not merely because he alludes to it by name, but because of the direct attention it draws to somatic experience and because of the way in which the body becomes an obsessive site of preoccupation.

⁶ While it is perhaps not customary to cite an introduction as a scholarly source, I will do so often throughout this chapter; Mark Anderson’s introduction to *The Sons* is especially compelling, and admirably persuasive given its concise form.

⁷ Because I wished to devote this chapter exclusively to filial hypochondria as expressed in *The Sons*, I must note in passing the other Kafka texts that would be fruitful to consider in terms of hypochondria more broadly defined. These include *The Country Doctor* (which was dedicated to Hermann Kafka), “In the Penal Colony,” and “The Hunger Artist,” to name a few.

be by necessity a hypochondriac, living in a terrified state that one's body will be invaded. The son has no say over his own being, and any attempt at autonomy is thwarted viciously. This is not to say merely that the father overpowers the son in a predictably castrating way, or that the son's experience is simply one of castration anxiety. Rather, the father is *always already victorious* in Kafka; the battle for power and narrative control has already been won. The son, already defeated by his bullish father, can only bear witness to his fate: of becoming an insect or being deported or having to jump off a bridge, as the case may be. It is a fate to which—without protest, without resentment—he is utterly resigned.

This pervasive sense of futility is surely one of the most enigmatic and baffling aspects of Kafka's texts. No critical interpretation can manage to put its finger on how to treat Georg's act of plunging to his death at the end of "The Judgment" when his father orders it, whether the leap from the bridge represents sheer nihilism or a sexually charged, triumphant release.⁸ This chapter can make no claim to decipher the Kafka puzzle—indeed, no respectful interpretation would.⁹ Part of why hypochondria proves to be a useful discourse for Kafka's work, however, is precisely because it does not seek to "decode" the body, but rather recognizes and draws attention to the body as a loaded site of signification. Just as the hypochondriac reads his body endlessly and obsessively, so Kafka treats the filial body in this way. The somatic state of the son becomes an expression of resentment and hostility towards the father which the character himself will not articulate in language. While we therefore cannot claim to fully unscramble the enigmas in Kafka's writing, exploring the filial experience of phobic anxiety and the way in which the corporeal body is lost to the son surely enriches how we read Kafka, if illuminating dark recesses in the text only to show their depth.

⁸ As many critics have noted, the streaming line of "traffic" (*Verkehr*) into which Georg jumps has sexual connotations; *Verkehr* means "traffic," "dealings," "contact," or "sexual intercourse." Kafka also reported to Brod that the last line of the story brought to mind orgasm.

⁹ Perhaps the best example of Kafka's impenetrability comes from the famous anecdote about Albert Einstein who, after being encouraged to read Kafka by his friend Thomas Mann, pronounced, "I couldn't read it, for the human mind isn't complicated enough."

“The Judgment” and the Epistolary Melancholic

Hypochondria: Gr. *hupokhondria*, pl. of *hupokhondrion*,
abdomen (held to be the seat of melancholia)
—*American Heritage Dictionary*¹⁰

If one of the strange temporal aspects of *The Sons* is that generational time is frozen, another is that events feel scripted or predestined, the sons operating in a strange mode of autopilot as through programmed to carry out their beguiling fates. This “scripted” quality of events indeed bears a relation to authorship and writing: the controlling and persecutory father is often depicted as figuratively “sketching out” his son’s life, and is thus linked to scenes of writing. As we see in “The Judgment,” the pen becomes a dangerous instrument in the hands of the father, capable of infantilizing the son and destroying his will just as he shows signs of autonomy. The epistolary scene is no minor affair in Kafka’s work and, as we have already glimpsed from his letter to his father, correspondence plays a significant role in Kafka’s biography. Indeed, the narrative importance of the epistolary trope in “The Judgment” cannot be appreciated in full until we turn to its place in Kafka’s own life.

“The Judgment,” a text itself steeped in the epistemology of the letter, is dedicated to Felice Bauer, Kafka’s fiancée and famous correspondent, who in many ways is connected to the text. Kafka’s relations with Felice commence in the fall of 1912 as he begins corresponding with her, and he writes “The Judgment” in one night, in an exhaustive but exhilarating stretch, just two days after his first letter to her. The timing of events is not immaterial. Stanley Corngold meticulously observes that upon first meeting Felice, Kafka forms “an unshakable judgment” [*unerschütterliches Urteil*] of her.¹¹ Having just turned twenty-nine, with a promising romance unfolding, Kafka writes the texts that will compose *The Sons* as he begins facing adulthood in earnest.¹² He writes *The Sons*, in other words, as he himself ceases to be one, on the cusp of independence, much like his protagonist Georg Bendemann. Kafka points out some of the parallels between text and life in his diary, noting that “Georg has the same number of letters as Franz” and “Bende has exactly the same number of letters as Kafka,” with “the vowel ‘e’ occur[ing] in the same places as does the vowel ‘a’ in Kafka.”¹³ He also writes that “Freida has as many letters as [Felice] and the same initial,” and that “Brandenfeld has the same initial as [Bauer], and in the word ‘Feld’ a certain connection in meaning as

¹⁰ As quoted by Anne Anlin Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), here p. 65.

¹¹ Corngold, as quoting Kafka’s diary, in *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form*, p. 37. Cited in this chapter hereafter by page number and as *NF*.

¹² Incredibly, Kafka composes all three works (“The Judgment,” “The Metamorphosis,” and “The Stoker”) during this period, completing the set within just three months.

¹³ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1910-1913*, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), here p. 279. Cited in this chapter hereafter by page number and as *D*.

well,” an allusion perhaps to the shared bucolic denotations: *Feld* meaning field, and *Bauer* meaning farmer (*D*, 279).¹⁴ He later confesses in his letter to his father that his attempts at marrying Felice “turned out to be the most grandiose and hopeful attempts at escape” from the paternal relation, an escape which for both Kafka and Georg proves impossible (155).

From the beginning, Kafka’s relationship with Felice figures around his relationship to his father, just as Georg’s correspondence to his friend (and the question of Georg’s fiancée) signify a power struggle with Herr Bendemann. Both sets of letters, in other words, signify a tangled relation between paternity, marriage and writing. And though these are letters—addressed to one who is afar, sharing news, exchanging anecdotes—they implicate the author as revealingly as diary entries.

As Charles Bernheimer admirably demonstrates in *Flaubert and Kafka*, Kafka’s letters to Felice are more self-involved than chivalrously romantic, engaging in an anxious and preoccupied narcissism very much relating to the process of writing. As Bernheimer notes, “Felice’s letters sustain Kafka’s illusion that he can authorize his own existence as determined by writing,” and his frequent exaltations that she respond immediately—the very day that she receives a letter—bespeak a need for this affirmation. Kafka’s letters seek a form of sustenance from Felice, for he “imagines his own words returning to him recharged” from her. Kafka’s vampiric desire, Bernheimer argues elegantly, is “for Felice to pump back letters to him in a life-sustaining circulation of word blood.”¹⁵ Along similar lines, Deleuze and Guattari note that Kafka’s letters to Felice “are perhaps the motor force that, by the blood they collect, start the whole machine” of the writing process through a “vampirish utilization.”¹⁶ That her letters respond to his and engage with his is their chief appeal; Kafka views her letters only as testament to his own identity in writing.

Through the exchange between Kafka and Felice, we come to see that letters are not simple and straightforward in what they report and transmit between parties. Kafka himself acknowledges that letters can take on a life of their own and evade authorial intention. He later notes, in a letter to Milena, that letters are

actually an interchange with ghosts, and not only with the ghost of the recipient but also with one’s own ghost, which develops under one’s hand in the letter one is writing and even more so in a series of letters, where one letter corroborates the other and can refer to it as a witness.¹⁷

According to Kafka’s schema, four parties emerge in the epistolary scene: writer, recipient, and the ghost of each. Describing letters as seeming to write themselves as these epistolary ghosts develop “under one’s hand,” Kafka attributes a sense of agency to letters. “How did anyone ever get the idea that people can communicate with one another

¹⁴ The two nouns also relate to chess: *Feld* refers to the squares in chess, and *Bauer* means “pawn.”

¹⁵ Charles Bernheimer, *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psycho-poetic Structure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 158.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 35. Cited in this chapter hereafter in the text as *DG*.

¹⁷ Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. James and Tania Stern (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), here p. 229. Cited in this chapter hereafter by page number and as *LM*.

by letter!” Kafka declares (*LM*, 229). Reality, far from being substantiated by letters, becomes slippery between them in two respects according to Kafka’s analogy.

First, one imagines the “other” to whom he is writing and unconsciously conjures her image selectively. The recipient is never at-hand or face-to-face, never present to respond or react to how she is being invoked, so the writer cannot be made aware of his choices in imagining her. The relationship to the addressee is fundamentally an asymmetric one because the addressee is present only as chosen by the writer. Kafka, as we see in his correspondence, is only interested in Felice in particular ways, and his insistence on letters as their primary form of communication keeps any disruption of this image of her at bay. Similarly, in “The Judgment,” Georg paints a peculiar picture of his friend who has relocated to Russia—a depiction which, as we will see, enables Georg to take certain liberties as a writer in how he presents himself, because the friend is not present to dispute this characterization.

Second, letters prompt a ghost of oneself to emerge, for the identity articulated in the course of writing can so readily be an invented one, a persona. The writer is aware of his own absence to the recipient, and he mindfully writes as one from afar. Georg, we remember, grows self-consciously invested in how his departed friend in Russia must remember him in their hometown, and begins manipulating and fabricating stories to conform with his friend’s wishes as he imagines them. While Georg appeases himself that his lies are selflessly aimed at indulging a friend’s delicate sense of nostalgia, we must examine the persona he creates in the process, under the guise of aiding a friend. Georg is able to remain in his letters a solitary bachelor still employed in his father’s business rather than an engaged man now running that business with a wedding rapidly approaching. A fiction thus emerges in the course of Georg’s letters and, as Kafka notes, the letters stand as a collective “witness” to the writer’s penned version of reality. Aware of the web of deceit he has slowly woven through his letters, Georg faces the question of how to reconcile his masquerade with reality, and it is this dilemma which opens the text as Georg sits dreamily at his writing table. How can Georg share news of his engagement given his history of bachelor exchanges?

We might conclude from the history of correspondence between Georg and his Russian friend—or between Kafka and Felice—that letters present a nascent form of fiction, consisting of imagined lives as opposed to corporeal ones, of embellished detail and reflective intensity as opposed to the distractions, banalities and the tempo of reality. In the ethereal world of letters, possibilities abound and the typical constraints of daily life do not apply.¹⁸ We see this unfettered freedom nowhere better than in Kafka’s own correspondence; if letters present an interchange with ghosts, they also offer a medium devoid of paternal anxiety and pressure. Kafka, who tells Felice that “talking is completely repugnant” to him because “speech is continuously influenced by a thousand external factors and a thousand external constraints,” finds the distance of writing *necessary*.¹⁹ He confesses that “writing is the appropriate form of expression for me” and “will remain so even when we are together.”²⁰ Kafka’s need for writing and

¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot reflects on the many aspects of letters with respect to Kafka in *L’Amitié* (Gallimard, 1971).

¹⁹ Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, trans. James Stern and Elizabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), here p. 307.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

letters—indeed, his absolute dependence on them—anticipates the fact that he will remain a bachelor despite his two engagements to Felice. Letters in Kafka are thus haunted not only by ghosts but by an *aporia*; they implicitly bespeak the impossibility of relations as much as they attempt to form the basis of relations.

We might say that Kafka is only able to experience relationality through the epistolary form; the intimacy he achieves in writing his addressees (including his father) goes unmatched by a similar vulnerability or candidness in conversation, for his letters often make reference to the impossibility of such intimacy in reality. If letters provide a platform for Kafka to explain himself, to reenact a scene from his perspective and present it *just so*, they are aimed at a form of narrative control over past events. In letters, Kafka is able to present his interpretive slant on events, like a director artfully crafting a cinematic sequence to subtly favor a perspective. Any intrusion or interruption into the epistolary realm feels like a terrible violation—a fact that is underscored in “The Judgment” when Georg’s father claims to have been writing the Russian friend all along, thus shattering the delicate illusion Georg has created through his letters over time.

We have said thus far that letters in Kafka signal an asymmetric relation, are haunted by absence, signal an impossibility of actual relations, and indicate an attempt at narrative control over past events. In all four of these ways, letters call to mind the Freudian discourse of melancholy, suggesting the trope of the epistolary melancholic. Before turning to “The Judgment” and examining its own relation to this figure, let us first turn to Freud’s text.

We recall from Freud’s early essay, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), that the melancholic experiences an obsessive preoccupation with loss over the normative experience of mourning. Rather than exhibit a “gradual withdrawal of the libido” from the departed love object as in the regular course of mourning, the melancholic instead resuscitates the lost object so that the “love-relation need not be given up.”²¹ It may seem odd to invoke grieving with regard to “The Judgment,” except that Freud himself comments that melancholia may not correspond with death or an easily identifiable source; he notes that feelings of loss can arise over “some abstraction [...] such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (*M*, 254). Recalling Kafka’s remark that letters are actually an interchange between ghosts, we might say that letters to Kafka fundamentally feel haunted, as though under a lugubrious strain; he remarks in his diary that Georg “would be at peace with everything if it were not for a fleeting, sad thoughtfulness” (*D*, 278). The question of what precisely would prompt a sense of mourning within these texts is one to which we will return, just as we will return to the question of how melancholia relates to hypochondria. For now, let us provisionally keep in mind Freud’s comment that there are cases in which “one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss [...] has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” (*M*, 254).

Broadly speaking, there are obvious parallels between Freudian melancholy and letters in Kafka. Just as Freud’s melancholic psychically recreates the departed love object because of an inability to accept loss, so the epistolary melancholic invokes the addressee despite the distance between them—a distance which, recalling Kafka’s letter to his father, need not be geographical in nature. In both cases, the melancholic keeps the

²¹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), vol. 14, here pp. 252, 258. Cited hereafter in this chapter by page number and as *M*.

haunted company of the departed one he has conjured; as Kafka suggests, the writer knows he has created a false phantom in place of the actual addressee, just as the melancholic necessarily invokes the departed love object selectively, creating a similar ghost. Just as the epistolary melancholic finds cannibalistic sustenance from letters as discussed above in Kafka's correspondence, so Freud's melancholic feeds on the lost object: "The ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic stage, is by devouring it" (*M*, 250). The original German here suggests an animalistic quality to the nature of this feeding, "*auf dem Wege des Fressens*," that would correspond to the cannibalistic draining Bernheimer suggests is prevalent in Kafka's letters to Felice.²²

The value of turning to psychoanalysis with the epistolary trope and tracing parallels to melancholy is that the thematic overlap illuminates the extent to which the writer's exchange with the missing party is narcissistically oriented. While melancholia as Freud describes it may begin in response to external loss, its identifying feature is the way in which the ego becomes *internally invested* in this loss. In other words, what at first would seem a self/other relation (e.g., writer to correspondent, or mourner to the departed) is more accurately a self/self relation (writer to self, or melancholic to self). When Kafka writes Felice, or Georg his old friend, the ego becomes attuned to itself in a heightened and revealing way.

Letters in Kafka are indeed thusly preoccupied, constantly self-aware and self-oriented, filled with self-reproach, taking part in self-nourishment, all while under the guise of being addressed to the Other.²³ The epistolary melancholic is intently focused on his own persona as shaped between letters, and on the internal psychology of the recipient as he imagines it. The world created from his letters forms a lonely sort of company in which no companion is actually present but the one imagined. The figural "witness" created by the letters themselves provides a form of companionship, just as Freud's melancholic spends hours communing with the specter of the one long departed.

Nowhere is the epistolary melancholic more evident than in "The Judgment," a story whose title in German (*Das Urteil*) suggests through its semantic register that scenes of writing bear crucial significance. While the common English translation of *Das Urteil* recognizes its legal connotations ("judgment" or "verdict"), the noun can also mean "decree," "pronouncement," or "opinion," thus suggesting rhetorical connotations apart from the legal realm. As Corngold notes, the text is one that is "explicitly conscious of such acts as reading and writing," as Georg's motives in writing to his friend are continually submitted to interpretation within the story and called into question (*NF*, 28). Many critical interpretations of the text focus on the performative dimension of the title

²² In German, the noun *Fressens* has a crude, voracious quality to it not quite conveyed by Strachey's choice, "devouring." The verb *fressen* relates to the feeding of animals (*zu fressen geben*) and, with people, carries gluttonous connotations of stuffing oneself. To eat *auf dem Wege des Fressens*, in the manner of grub, is thus a messy, primal process of consumption.

²³ Freud discusses extensively in his essay the "self-torments of melancholics" and their frequent and endless indulgence in self-reproach. This is especially interesting to consider in Kafka's letter to his father, which is filled with self-rebuke. As Freud notes of the melancholic, "he abases himself before everyone and commiserates [with] his own relatives for being connected with someone so unworthy" (167), and Kafka indeed expresses sympathy for his suffering parents for having to bear him as an unworthy son.

and the father's famous declaration that Georg must suffer death by drowning.²⁴ But there is another "sentence" in question in the text, aside from the grammatical sentence the father utters and the ensuing punitive sentence to which Georg is condemned; that is the sentence Georg contemplates writing to his Russian friend, sharing the news of his engagement. This sentence, and the question of whether to include it in the letter, also bears with it judgment—for at issue here is how Georg judges his friend compared to himself.

We would not be the first to suggest that the narrative exegesis revolves around this pen friend in St. Petersburg and Georg's dilemma in writing him. Kate Flores, in her influential reading of the text, posits that the expatriate, in his bachelor solitude and monastic remove from home, represents Kafka's identity as a writer. As Flores points out, the friend "seems to be a figure of major importance to the hero (despite the latter's seemingly casual and even patronizing attitude)" to him, and the "eccentric fellow" who fled from home" in a "self-imposed exile" would seem to play the opposite to Georg,

who stayed at home, sensible, well-adjusted Georg, the successful businessman, who spends his evenings 'with friends or, as at the present time, with his fiancée,' who, as he mentions twice, comes of a well-to-do family.²⁵

The friend, according to Flores, is a romantic bohemian, a "misanthropic idealist" who serves as "the antithesis of Georg" in his cocoon of financial, social, and personal success (*KF*, 10). Flores proceeds to argue that Georg's dilemma regarding the expatriate mirrors Kafka's own internal debate regarding writing: Kafka's "inner self, his writing self, is a friend who for years has been in exile where, and only where, he can pursue his business" of writing, while Kafka's "outer self, Georg, now wishes to marry" in the hopes of being the ideal son (*KF*, 16).

But this division or clean split as Flores describes it, though compelling, is not quite tenable. As we have seen, Kafka never envisioned marriage (or, indeed, life) without writing, while Flores' interpretation would oppose the two. As Kafka forewarned Felice, writing was his only mode of operating; his dilemma was to find someone who would be sympathetic to the fact, and it therefore makes sense that he would base his relationship with Felice *in writing*. Mark Anderson notes that "Kafka paints a grim portrait" in his letters to her "of the monastic solitude his writing requires, an everlasting 'night' during which Felice would bring him his meals in a dark, subterranean writing chamber" (xvi). Even in a letter addressed to Felice's father, Kafka declares—as suitor to potential father-in-law—that "everything that is not literature bores me and I hate it," and that "a marriage could not change" this (*D*, 300). The nameless friend in Russia, though indeed an object of irrational preoccupation for Georg, bears none of the permanence or weight that Kafka attributes to writing, for it is clear that Kafka sees no outside to writing. Further, any interpretation that attempts to allegorize the friend as Flores does,

²⁴ Clayton Koelb's influential reading, for example, centers on the semantic function of the father's pronouncement in relation to J.L. Austin's parameters regarding performativity. See Clayton Koelb, "Kafka's Rhetorical Moment," *PMLA*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (Jan., 1983): 37-46.

²⁵ Kate Flores, "The Judgment," in Angel Flores and Homer Swander, eds., *Franz Kafka Today* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), here p. 11. Cited in the text hereafter as *KF*.

equating him with a corresponding motif, must first address itself to the strangely ambivalent and contradictory esteem with which the friend is held.

In fact, the very existence of the friend is itself in question. The father asks whether “you really have this friend in St. Petersburg,” to which Georg hastily responds, with “embarrassment,” to “never mind” (9). The friend, we see, embodies a power struggle between father and son as they each tug at different interpretations of him in order to secure a personal point. As Kafka himself notes in his diary while studying proofs of the story, the father “uses the common bond of the friend to set himself up as Georg’s antagonist” (*D*, 278). The father at first declares dismissively, “You have no friend in St. Petersburg. You’ve always been one for pulling people’s legs” but then later contends, “Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart” (10/12).

The father exhibits a contradictory logic regarding the friend exemplary of what Freud terms “kettle logic.” As Freud delineates in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the term references an old German joke in which a man borrows a kettle from his neighbor and offers the following defense upon being accused of returning the kettle with a hole in it: “first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed the kettle from his neighbor at all.”²⁶ Freud relates this defense strategy to the elusive logic of dreams and unconscious thought, in which “there is accordingly no such thing as an ‘either-or,’ only a simultaneous juxtaposition” of terms, even when the terms are completely contradictory.²⁷ While such contradictory assertions cannot exist simultaneously in reality, one can employ a logic of “both/and” in dreams and the unconscious; one can have his undamaged kettle and have burned a hole in it too, so to speak.

In exhibiting this contradictory kettle logic regarding the friend, first denying his existence (“You have no friend in St. Petersburg”) and then accepting him in full (“He would have been a son after my own heart”), the father treats the friend indeed as though from within a dream. If the father is shiftily ambiguous in his allusions to the friend, the text underscores this ambiguity by remaining aloof about his status. The text establishes his correspondence with Georg, but then suggests that Georg’s letters have gone unread; it places the friend as of the utmost importance to the story, and then calls into question whether he actually exists; it posits a friendship between him and Georg, but then suggests that the friend’s allegiance is with the father. Because the text never intervenes to favor one interpretive possibility over the other, it leaves open the possibility that the friend is an invention of the Bendemanns’ in the schema of their ambivalent relationship. The friend, we might say, acquires the status of a dream in the text because of the kettle logic surrounding him; we are left with the uneasy impression as readers that nothing can be verified about the friend, that his status is indefinite.

What becomes clear is that the pen friend’s importance in the text—and with it, his very existence—hinges on the relationship between father and son. The text encourages the possibility that Georg and his father have fabricated, embellished upon, or massaged the existence of the friend in order to recruit him for their personal needs. The

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1998), here p. 153. Freud first alludes to the term in his 1905 *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1954), p. 72.

²⁷ Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, pp. 254-255.

phantom friend carries multiple signficatory possibilities, none of which is ever clarified. Because the text remains radically ambivalent on the question of the friend, never intervening to ridicule the premise that he is imaginary, nor suggesting that he is indeed aligned with one of the Bendemanns over the other, this hermeneutic ambivalence must be maintained in any critical interpretation of him. In other words, to posit that the Russian friend “represents” Kafka’s ambitions as a writer is to simplify him to the extreme. The allegorical premise that the friend symbolizes writing (or, more precisely, the life of the writer) fails to take into account his multiple valences. As Corngold aptly notes, “the story modulates the meaning of the friend throughout” (*NF*, 36).

While critics like Flores have discussed the exiled friend in terms of Kafka’s “wish fulfillment” in that he flees home, remains a bachelor, lives an ascetic and solitary life, and thus escapes the heteronormative traps of marriage, family and career that plague the sons in Kafka, few have explored the ambivalent strain of their relationship fully. That is, the emotional economy of their relationship is not as straightforward as such interpretations posit. While it is true that the bachelor in exile plays the bohemian counterpart to the enterprising groom devoted to his family, it is also true that Georg censors and belittles himself in his letters in a way not readily explained by his ruse of protective friendship. The letters have a diminishing effect on Georg, stripping him of success, fiancée, and friends. This is all done under the guise of humility, but Georg cannot explain why his friend would be wounded by his financial or marital success. Such egoic fragility is particularly difficult to believe when the friend has contentedly in the past “tried to persuade Georg to emigrate to Russia” because he is doing so well there (5).

Perceiving his friend as *requiring* these extreme measures of modesty is perhaps Georg’s true repressed wish; it is a wish accomplished in the “slow and dreamy” world of letters, to a friend who has acquired a dream-like status, because under the falsehood of this premise, Georg demeans himself (3). And that Georg should unconsciously *wish* to belittle himself is entirely in keeping with the melancholic. As Freud notes,

the self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies [...] a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate, which relate to an object, and which have been turned round the subject’s own self. (*M*, 260)

Georg’s irrational line of reasoning regarding his friend’s emotional needs is itself a form of neurotic self-torture in which Georg imagines every possible wound he might be responsible for inflicting upon the poor friend. First and foremost a hypochondriac, Georg is adept at anticipating wounds, and the story indeed opens with Georg subjecting himself to this exhaustive mental exercise. But more importantly, Georg belittles himself before the friend, systematically stripping himself of his myriad accomplishments and achievements over the past three years. If letters indeed serve as a “witness” as Kafka notes, then Georg’s correspondence testifies to the stagnant and unaccomplished life of a bachelor who has only “unimportant items of gossip” to share (5).

Earlier, we wondered whom (or what) Georg as an epistolary melancholic might mourn, why his letters might bear the characteristics of grieving, and what the relationship would be between melancholia and hypochondria. Whether the Russian friend in “The Judgment” exists or is invented, it is clear that Georg establishes in their

correspondence an enraptured fiction in which his father has been preserved in peak form. What Georg mourns, in other words, is the eminent loss of his father who, we remember, has become an invalid in the dark room at the back of the apartment and is wasting away. Georg is able within his letters to preserve his father and retain the effects of paternal authority. Georg becomes in the process a mere shadow of himself, while Herr Bendemann in Georg's letters is in full form: he runs his business, he is the boss to his son, and he retains his paternal grip.

This masochistic act of preserving the father is one that is in keeping with the melancholic's process of retaining the lost love object. As Freud notes, the melancholic often baffles us with his behavior because "the relationship to the object is no simple one" (266). As much as the incorporative fantasy of melancholia shields the subject from reality and enables a continued engagement with the lost object, we must keep in mind that the retained relationship is not a purely beneficial one, but rather one "complicated by the conflict due to ambivalence" (266). Freud alludes to the example of "a betrothed girl who has been jilted" and then resuscitates her lost lover, continuing to dialogue with her imagined version of him (253). Through her phantasmic retention of him, she continues not only the pleasurable aspects of their relationship but the hurtful and confusing aspects as well, including his very rejection of her.

Just as we might wonder why a spurned woman would subject herself to continued engagement with the man who rejects her, to the point of recreating the lost lover within her own ego, so we might ask why the epistolary melancholic would invoke the paternal threat rather than cheerfully be done with the father. Indeed, Max Brod laments the fact that his friend "was not able to break away" from his father, or "seek refuge in that distance which so many children feel obliged to put between themselves and their parents."²⁸ Though frustrated that he must witness Kafka "suffer so from this distance and coldness," Brod resigns himself to the fact that intervening proves "useless," for any attempts at doing so results in "torrents of arguments" from Kafka that "shatter and repel" Brod (*B*, 129-130). Exasperated, Brod sounds in such passages like a friend trying to persuade a woman to leave her abusive husband, only to have the suggestion met with wrath. Freud notes of such resistance that "it would be fruitless from a scientific and a therapeutic point of view to contradict the patient" in the case of melancholia (*M*, 254); the analyst—or friend—will not find success in attempting to show the melancholic his irrational choice in retaining the hurtful relationship.

The notion that Georg's letters to his exiled friend bespeak a melancholic attempt to retain the father may seem tenuous until we examine more closely Georg's transformation in the letters and before the father, and the parallels between the two. The posture Georg assumes when writing his friend, though disguised as protective, is actually apprehensive and phobic in the vein of hypochondria (the exact relationship between this apprehensive state and hypochondria is one we will discuss more precisely below). First, we notice that Georg's phobic state bears somatic manifestations. Georg's internalized act of self-censoring is construed as an externalized, bodily posture: he "*shrank* from letting his friend know about his business success" and "*confined himself*" to stories of banal events in the town instead (5, emphasis added). As he fearfully shrinks

²⁸ Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. by G. Humphreys Roberts (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), here p. 128. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *B*.

from confiding in his friend, Georg contorts into a fetal position of safety, agoraphobically clinging to the corner into which he has backed himself. He infantilizes himself two ways: rhetorically, in that he censors his achievements, and viscerally, in his apprehensive and cowering state. In the second half of the story, when Georg finds himself before his father, he undergoes a similar transformation. All of Georg's confidence regarding his choice to finally share the news of his engagement, as his fiancée has urged him to do, vanishes. We see the same wincing, agoraphobic posture from Georg as he "shrank" upon being confronted by the father, recoiling "into a corner" to be "as far away from his father as possible" (13).

We might say that Kafka's sons, habituated to cowering and cringing, know no other way of operating. This conditioned mode of fear speaks directly to hypochondria: Georg remembers that "a long time ago he had firmly made up his mind to watch everything with the greatest attention *so that he would not be surprised by an indirect attack*" (13, emphasis added). The discourse of invasion permeates any discussion of hypochondria, for the rhetoric of militant vigilance speaks to a preoccupied fear of contagion or threat. The father in Kafka figures as the ultimate source of potential ambush. Georg, recoiling in his corner, recalls Kafka's letter to his father in which he laments that nothing felt safe or certain, "since nothing was in [his] very own, undoubted sole possession" (152). Georg similarly feels that nothing is safely his own as his father attacks and undermines him. Even Georg's private body of secret letters has been invaded by the persecutory father.²⁹

The father's ability to invade and lay claim to the son's affairs manifests itself especially brutally with regard to the family business. Outside of his letters, in the internal realm of his private thoughts, Georg makes mental note of his own success, remembering that under his supervision "the business had prospered most unexpectedly, the staff had to be doubled, the volume was five times as great" and "further progress lay just ahead" (5). Such numbers and facts would seem irrefutable, particularly when contrasted with the paltry sums the friend has shared with him during his occasional boasts of his life in St. Petersburg, as Georg muses in a self-congratulatory moment. One would think that the balance sheet and the bottom-line are incontrovertible proof of Georg's success.

But just as Georg then erases the numerical figures in his letters, wiping the slate of his accomplishments clean when writing his friend, his father similarly dashes Georg's achievements, accusing him of merely "closing deals that he [the father] had prepared" in his tenure and then shamefully taking the credit (13-4). Georg's letters thus anticipate and enact his father's reaction to his success, dismissing it entirely as well as finding fault with it. If Herr Bendemann, resurrected at the text's close, wrests from Georg his business success, his choice in marriage, his old friend in Russia, and his general motives with regard to all three, Georg has already enacted these maneuvers in his letters. In his correspondence, Georg has long since wrested from himself all signs of happiness and independence; the death to which his father sentences him has already been foreshadowed by the figurative death Georg submits himself to in the epistolary realm.

²⁹ This epistolary intrusion mirrors one that took place in Kafka's own life: in November of 1912, as Mark Anderson points out, his mother "found a letter from Felice in one of his coat pockets and secretly enlisted her support in controlling Franz's eating and sleeping habits. Kafka discovered the theft and [was] furious at this invasion of privacy" (xi).

Through his letters, then, Georg is able to recreate the paternal relation of old, before his father became infirm. This is not to say that Georg treats the friend in Russia as the father; rather, it is that Georg creates a world in the space of his correspondence where he—we might say, in ghostly form, since he becomes a specter of himself—still answers to the father, and where all of the responsibilities he faces in his own life—of marriage, work, and family—do not press upon him. As Kafka puts it, “Sitting alone at his window, Georg rummages voluptuously in [his] consciousness” and “believes he has his father within him” (*D*, 278). This notion of placing the father “within him” would precisely describe the process of incorporation in melancholia, by which the love object is recreated by the ego. In his letters to Russia, Georg remains the faithful son who would not possibly outdo his father financially or marry a woman of whom his father did not approve; Georg’s fiancée, sensing her exclusion from this realm, shrewdly remarks of the Russian, “If you have friends like that, Georg, you shouldn’t have ever gotten engaged at all” (6). Georg creates a paternal shrine in his letters in which he can remain a loyal son wholly dominated by the father rather than having to confront replacing the father.

That Georg has already anticipated mourning his father, making the letters inherently melancholic, is evident throughout the text. Georg tends to his ailing father, and in a protracted scene attempts to “cover him up,” the phrase repeated often:

“Am I well covered now?” asked the father, as if he couldn’t see whether his feet were properly tucked in or not.

“So you like it in bed, don’t you?” said Georg, and tucked the blanket more closely around him.

“Am I well covered up?” the father asked once more, seeming to be peculiarly intent upon the answer.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be well covered up.”

“No!” cried the father, so that the answer collided violently with the question.

[...] You wanted to cover me up, I know, my little puppy, but I’m far from being covered up yet.” (12)

The act of tucking in and covering the father signals mortality in different resonances: placing him in a coffin, burying him, covering over his memory, moving on from him. That this covering is already under way is suggested when Herr Bendemann asks his son if he is lying about the pen-friend, to which an embarrassed Georg tellingly replies, “Never mind my friends. A thousand friends could never replace my father for me” (9).

The seemingly illogical reply about replacing the father when asked to verify the friend’s existence underscores the extent to which the father dominates Georg well before he rises up from his bedclothes. With his response, Georg tacitly acknowledges that the friend’s existence in St. Petersburg hinges upon the father’s looming mortality at home; Georg can finally share the news of his engagement after months of stalling because he has begun mentally to bury his father and to assume the paternal place. It is in this sense that the friend’s “life” hinges upon the father’s “death”; Georg can only make the correspondent a true friend, bringing him into his circle of confidence, by sharing the very piece of news that would oust the father. Georg’s embarrassment about his friend is understandable when we see that his final act of forthrightness in sharing his news is intimately linked with “covering up” the father.

But how would this covering up of the father relate to melancholia and, further, how would Georg's melancholic correspondence relate to hypochondria? Georg's letters to Russia function preemptively as a coping mechanism, anticipating the father's death and resurrecting him before the death has actually taken place. Georg, in other words, is melancholic before any loss has occurred. His melancholia thus functions in relation to hypochondria, for he is caught up in melancholia in a phobic anticipation of loss. Just as the hypochondriac's preoccupation with illness constitutes a form of illness, Georg's fixation on his father's death (and his own pending new life) constitutes a form of melancholia. The hypochondriac cannot imagine a life without illness, just as Georg cannot imagine a life without his father.

It is worth noting here that melancholia and hypochondria share existing terrain. Anne Anlin Cheng reminds us that the etymological root of "hypochondria" in Greek denotes it as the "seat" of melancholia. Her own work on melancholia involves a chapter devoted to hypochondria, which is one reason why this project refers so often to her work. Indeed, while her book makes no reference to hypochondria in its title, *The Melancholy of Race*, her work contains a great deal of insight relating to hypochondria in the realms of psychoanalysis and literature. It could thus be that hypochondria and melancholia subtend one another in a complex relationship to absence—for the illness that is not overtly present in the former, or for the love object that has been lost in the latter.

The hypochondriac son and the epistolary melancholic both function *a priori*, overwhelmed with anticipation. Yet their anticipation runs in contrary directions: the hypochondriac fears the father's approach; the melancholic dreads his departure. As a boy, Kafka's "back became bent" with the burden of paternal anxiety, and he "scarcely dared to move" in his fear of his father's interventions. We see this change—which is indeed a "metamorphosis"—come over Georg in a transformative wave.³⁰ On one hand, it is the father who rises up—impossibly, dramatically—and ambushes Georg, declaring, "Your mother has given me her strength, I have established a fine connection with your friend, and I have your customers in my pocket!" (14). But this latent, ominous power is foreshadowed early; Georg leaves his sunny bedroom to pass through his father's, and there is "startled by how dark" the room is, and by the fact that his father "is still a giant of a man" (8).

More astonishing than the father's spectacular uprising, then, is the numbing wave of idiocy that suddenly washes over Georg, rendering him speechless. He can only blankly observe, "He has pockets even in his undershirt!" upon hearing his father's victorious declaration that Georg's customers are in his pocket; worse, he cannot even share this lowly comment aloud, "for in his distraction he kept on forgetting everything" (14). Georg loses his very command over speech: in his "attempt to make fun of his father" with a sarcastic remark, the "words turned deadly earnest" in his mouth (15). Like Melville's Billy Budd, Georg is rendered maddeningly speechless and cannot defend himself against the paternal onslaught. The confident, enterprising "young merchant" of the text's opening pages is nowhere to be found at its close.

³⁰ This transformative wave takes more literal, somatic form in *The Metamorphosis* when Gregor Samsa mutates without warning into a bug.

The hypochondriac son's fear that the father will override his body thus comes to fruition in "The Judgment," for Georg cedes control to his father's invasive force. From the minute he enters his father's room, the strange effect begins to come over him, and we see his relationship to rhetoric falter:

'It's unbearably dark in here,' he said aloud.
'Yes, it is dark,' answered his father.
'And you've shut the window, too?'
'I prefer it like that.'
'Well, it's quite warm outside,' said Georg, as if continuing his previous remark, and sat down. (8)

Georg's abrupt remark is illogical, as the text implicitly acknowledges. Their awkward dialogue, so theatrically staged with its *mise en scène*, already anticipates Georg's attempt to "cover up" the father, for the father here lures Georg into thinking that he is retreating from life, shutting himself from it in his darkened and claustrophobic room. The "indirect attack" that hypochondriacal Georg once braced himself for, "a long time ago," now manifests itself as a trap as Georg realizes that his father has been "lying in wait" for him (13/15). The father reveals that he has long been planning this confrontation, declaring, "For years I've been waiting for you to come with this question! Do you think I've concerned myself with anything else?" and he proceeds to indicate the old newspaper he has been pretending to read, a mere stage prop with "a name entirely unknown to Georg," like the fake law books K. encounters in *The Trial* (15). The father's trap indeed produces the types of somatic effects a literal hypochondriac would fear: aphasia, or loss of speech; petrification, for Georg stands "as if transfixed" before his father, unable to stop himself from watching him; and loss of somatic control, for Georg falls victim to a series of passive verbs as he "felt himself driven from the room" when his father sentences him and "driven toward the water" (15/16).

The hypochondriac son is rightfully terrified of the father, convinced that even his body is not his own and can at any moment be invaded. But he is also so conditioned to this state that he is equally terrified of losing the father, for he would not know how to function autonomously. Like the hypochondriac who cannot imagine a life without illness or bodily plaint, the son cannot envision a life liberated from the father. He thus recreates the father, and melancholically oriented letters provide the surest way to continue engaging with him. In letters, he can continue living as if the father were still there hovering above him, and his authorial control permits him to retain the father but at a safe distance. As Mark Anderson observes, Kafka himself "admits the inherently epistolary origin of his literary texts" in his letter to his father, in which he confesses, "My writing was all about you. [...] It was an intentionally long and drawn-out leave taking from you" (xix). As Anderson goes on to note, Kafka's letter tells "the story of a writer whose very literary identity and vision depended on his condition as a son" (xx).

In other words, if Herr Bendemann exhibits a form of kettle logic regarding the Russian pen friend, Georg similarly displays contradictory logic towards the father: he deeply fears him, to the point of hypochondria, yet cannot do without him, to the point of melancholically retaining him. Melancholia thus functions as an extension of hypochondria; Georg has become so conditioned to answering to paternal authority that

he melancholically insists on retaining the invested object. Georg creates a “cover” in his letters, a ruse that permits him to retain the father, all because he cannot “cover him up” and be done with him.

That the paternal relation must remain intact—as Max Brod so frustratingly learned—becomes particularly clear when we turn to Kafka’s letter to his father. In the letter, which would at first glance seem to be a rebuke of the father, Kafka stumbles when he turns to the subject of marriage. While most of Kafka’s letter to his father is startlingly lucid given its uneasy subject matter, consisting of cleanly executed sentences, the section on marriage grows turbid, its prose faltering when Kafka attempts to articulate his own position on the question of marriage. Kafka acknowledges his failed engagements but, astonishingly, his analysis of these relationships makes almost no mention of the subject of women. Kafka hardly acknowledges Felice, but focuses instead entirely on the father. He notes:

Here, in the attempt to marry, two seemingly antagonistic elements in my relationship with you unite more intensely than anywhere else. [...] I would be your equal; all old and every new shame and tyranny would be mere history. It would be like a fairy tale, but precisely there lies the questionable element. It is too much; so much cannot be achieved. It is as if a person were a prisoner, and he had not only the intention to escape, which would perhaps be attainable, but also, and indeed simultaneously, the intention to rebuild the prison as a pleasure dome for himself. (162)

The passage is startling because the “fairy tale” of marriage comes not from the union of man and woman, but rather from the union of father and son. “Here, in the attempt to marry,” says Kafka, is “my *relationship with you*.” The utopian dream which Kafka cannot envision for himself is when “tyranny” becomes “history” as a result of marriage because the son has become the father’s equal. But, as Kafka says, “precisely there lies the questionable element,” for the idea of achieving equality with the father overwhelms him as excessive: “it is too much; so much cannot be achieved.” The ensuing prisoner analogy is more clearly understood in his ensuing analysis: to “become independent, I must do something that will have, if possible, no connection with you”; but marrying, though it “provides the most honorable independence,” also stands “in the closest relation to you” (162). This is Kafka’s impossible conundrum: independence from the father means proximity to the father. As Deleuze and Guattari aptly put it, “the question of the father isn’t how to become free in relation to him (an Oedipal question), but how to find a path there where he didn’t find any” (10). The son’s wish is essentially for new, untouched territory.

Putting the father to bed for Georg is thus similar to the marriage bed for Kafka; neither son can rid himself of the father. That is, the dilemma Georg faces regarding his father’s death is parallel to the one Kafka articulates regarding marriage: the wish to escape the father means becoming the father, either by marrying and begetting a family, or by taking the dead father’s place (as Georg has begun to do in taking over the company and the apartment). Interestingly here, Kafka suggested to Max Brod that “his

illness was psychically caused, a release from the obligation of marriage.”³¹ Indeed, Georg—who, we remember, is engaged to one “F.B.”—faces the marriage conundrum as well, almost exactly as Kafka describes.

Georg reflects that “he had not yet explicitly discussed with his fiancée what arrangements should be made for his father in the future, for they had both silently taken it for granted that he would remain alone in the old apartment” (11). Marriage thus gets construed as abandoning the father, a thought which Georg cannot bear: “now he made a quick, firm decision to take” his father “into his own future home” (11). Georg cannot leave the father, unless it is at the father’s bidding. Kafka’s act of dedicating the early text to Felice is perhaps his unconscious attempt to tell her that she will never win him from his father; to cease being a son is something that Kafka cannot face.

Deleuze and Guattari characterize this state as representing an exaggerated or perverse “Oedipalization.” They argue that “Kafka moves from a classic Oedipus of the neurotic sort, where the beloved father is hated, accused, and declared to be guilty, to a much more perverse Oedipus who falls for the hypothesis of the father’s innocence” (*DG*, 9). Accordingly, they argue, Kafka’s letter to his father creates a sense “of a distress shared by father and son alike,” though I would equate this perverse schema not with Oedipus but with the melancholic’s self torture (*DG*, 9). The melancholic, we remember, plagues himself with “self-torments” and “commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy” (*M*, 260/254).

Notably, Deleuze and Guattari cite Kafka’s own feeling of having “plunged into discontent” after having written the letter to his father, and embraced this depression “with all the means that [his] time and tradition gave [him]” (*DG*, 11). Kafka here anticipates the figure of the bachelor hypochondriac as we discuss in the next chapter, isolating himself in reclusive solitude so that he can wallow in the shadow of the father and remain at the sidelines of his own life, in the bubble he has built for himself.³² As Kafka himself notes, the “first beginnings of my unhappiness [...] *swarmed down on me like flies* and could have been as easily driven off” (11). Unhappiness here is construed externally, descending on the body in an onslaught the way illness descends. Yet, in the same breath, Kafka notes that it was always within his power to banish the state and be free of it. The hypochondriac holds the key to his prison, and locks himself inside. Unable to be free of the persecutory father, the son changes his prison to a “pleasure dome” in which he can malingering, and in which the possibility of intersubjectivity is foreclosed.

³¹ Kafka, as quoted by Frederick J. Hoffman in “Escape from the Father” in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Problem* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), here p. 218.

³² Heinz Politzer offers a beautiful reading of Kafka as bachelor in *Parable and Paradox*, and considers bachelorhood functioning in the manner of an illness. See “Juvenilia: The Artist as a Bachelor” in *Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). Cited hereafter in this chapter as *P*.

Somatically Delivered: *The Metamorphosis*

The psychosomatic undercurrent running through *The Sons* is literalized in *The Metamorphosis* as the symptoms we see Kafka's other protagonists experience—aphasia, immobilization before the father, terror, self-rebuke, agoraphobia, loss of appetite, feelings of worthlessness—find somatic encapsulation in the lowly dung beetle into which Gregor morphs. Here, the filial hypochondriac's pervasive fear of invasion is actualized in the hideous insect form that Gregor assumes. The long-held concern Kafka articulates in his letter to his father, that even his body is not his own, is precisely the scenario given over to in *The Metamorphosis*, except that the resulting situation is not such a terrible one. This text, in other words, raises the question of how the hypochondriac would react should his fear of bodily invasion materialize. The condition of hypochondria is such that actually having one's body invaded fulfills an existing, ambivalently held idea. If Gregor Samsa seems unfazed by his bodily transformation, it is because his body never felt his to begin with—and so losing control over it is met at once with surrender and curiosity.

The genius of the story, arguably Kafka's most famous, is that we do not actually witness a transformative process. The text's opening line thrusts us without warning into the aftermath of Gregor's metamorphosis with its unforgettably firm finality: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (53). If first-time readers are astonished by this premise,³³ any disbelief or skepticism is quickly suspended by Gregor's own seeming indifference to his state as he stalwartly attempts to negotiate his morning routine without pause. Part of the sheer joy of the text is precisely its unwavering cool certitude of literality: Gregor Samsa is now a bug, not "like" a bug or allegorically a bug or caught in the hallucination of being a bug.

And yet, what is striking in the critical scholarship concerning the text is a seeming inability to accept the corporeal finality of Gregor's form. Rather than fully acknowledge Gregor's metamorphosis, many critical readings exhibit a tendency to resist its opening line and shy away from discussions of Gregor's body. Walter Sokel, for example, argues that "Gregor Samsa has been transformed *into a metaphor* that states his essential self."³⁴ Martin Greenberg similarly contends that Gregor's struggle is against "*the metaphor fastened on him.*"³⁵ Such critical readings treat Gregor's transformation figuratively, the insect body functioning as a signifier that evocatively alludes to greater "truths" about Gregor's life, and they do so in a way that partakes in a somatic disavowal,

³³ Fiction writer Anne Rice describes in her foreword to one edition of Kafka's works her experience of discovering Kafka, and how shocking she found the opening of *The Metamorphosis*. As she says, she was sure "that before the end, the story would veer back toward the commonplace" and resume "the rules of realism." She nicely captures the authorial "courage" involved in Kafka's narrative craft, and his "sheer nerve." For more, see *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories* (New York: Schocken Books), 1995 edition.

³⁴ Walter Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth Century Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), here p. 47, emphasis added.

³⁵ Martin Greenberg, *The Terror of Art: Kafka and Modern Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), here p. 73, emphasis added.

distancing themselves from any lasting engagement with the metamorphosed body in its physical form.³⁶ This tendency, however, originates in the text itself, in Gregor's own relation to his body. As we will see, the critical scholarship surrounding *The Metamorphosis* is paradigmatic of Gregor's habituated tendency to dismiss his own body, a somatic attitude that stems from having adopted fully the paternal regime as Kafka so often depicts it of work, diligence, and full control over a body that is militaristically compliant with its owner.

Both Sokel and Greenberg offer compelling readings of the text, the major tenets of which are persuasive. But an interesting feature of the two readings, characteristic of so many responses to *The Metamorphosis*, is the strange dance we observe between literality and metaphor in addressing Gregor's transformation. Sokel and Greenberg, for example, insist throughout their essays on metaphor, even as they simultaneously posit that crucial to any understanding of the text is precisely the literality of Gregor's metamorphosis. Take, for example, this passage from Greenberg's essay:

‘The dream reveals the reality’ of [Gregor’s] abasement and self-abasement by a terrible metaphor [...]. The poetic of the Kafka story, based on the dream, requires the literal assertion of metaphor; Gregor must literally be vermin. This gives Kafka’s representation of the subjective reality its convincing vividness. Anything less than metaphor, such as a simile comparing Gregor to vermin, would diminish the reality of what he is trying to present. Gregor’s thinking ‘What has happened to me? ...It was no dream’ is no contradiction of his metamorphosis’ being a dream [...]. Of course it is no dream—to the dreamer. (71)

Greenberg's fundamental point, that Gregor's transformation reveals and speaks to a pre-existing set of conditions about an unhappy and alienated life, is not objectionable. But we are given pause by the rhetorical strain of this passage in its oscillation between dream and reality, literality and metaphor, fact and mimesis. According to Greenberg, “the poetic, [...] based on the dream, requires the literal assertion of metaphor,” a formulation that cannot settle on a single register of representation; Gregor is not dreaming (“Of course not,” says Greenberg)—yet he is (“his metamorphosis’ being a dream”). Accordingly, Gregor is literally an insect—but only according to Kafka's metaphor.

To be clear, the hermeneutic impulse in these readings is not to be chastised; Gregor's transformation must of course be addressed for its signifiatory possibilities, and it is not our suggestion that the literality of Gregor's arthropodic form bar the interpretive play invited by the text. But we must also note the reluctance evidenced here in addressing literality *too literally*, a reluctance which seems rooted very much in a shunning of the body. As soon as Greenberg, for example, turns to discussing Gregor's circumstances, his prose relaxes considerably. Sokel similarly is most lucid in his fine analysis of the Samsa family and Gregor's retributive wish to make them pay for their treatment of him. It is as though critical interpretations cannot engage with the

³⁶ That these two critics are considered central to Kafka scholarship is underscored by their inclusion in Harold Bloom's edited anthology, *Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988).

embarrassing “truth” about Gregor’s body, and must hold his metamorphosed body at a safe distance achieved only through convoluted descriptions of metaphoricity.

Perhaps the most startling example of this response to *The Metamorphosis* is offered by Stanley Corngold who, after devoting a chapter to exactly the subject of literality and metaphoricity, aptly entitled “Metamorphosis of the Metaphor,” then promptly follows suit with another chapter, “Metaphor and Chiasm.” Corngold’s meticulous analysis of the discursive function of metaphoricity bears witness to a multiplicative effect: he articulates a series of questions in the former chapter (largely relating to Sokel’s contention that Kafka “transforms” metaphor), then again articulates the same problematic in the latter chapter (wondering how we are to understand Kafka’s “famous literalizations of metaphor”)—only to pause at the midpoint of this chapter and ask, “How then have I answered the questions about metaphor posed at the outset?” (*NF*, 90/98). How indeed? It is as though Corngold produces page after page, only to end up at his initial question, or as though his first chapter leads into the chiasm to which the ensuing chapter makes reference.³⁷

Corngold argues that literalization does *not* occur in Kafka because, semantically speaking, “in shifting incessantly the relation of Gregor’s mind and body, Kafka shatters the suppositious unity of ideal tenor and bodily vehicle within the metaphor” (*NF*, 56). But if Kafka shatters metaphor, he surely does so by giving us so compellingly Gregor’s transformed state. Corngold concludes that Kafka employs not literalization but “aberrant literalization,” though this strikes us as simply meaning that Kafka executes the literality of Gregor’s transformation very well—that is, in an extraordinarily subtle, complicated, and thus tenable way. For all of this discussion about metamorphosis and metaphor, what is striking is the complete lack in Corngold’s discussion of what Gregor has metamorphosed into; there is no engagement with the actual body at hand. Corngold instead reads “the monster of *The Metamorphosis*” to be like “writing itself”; he insists that “the metamorphosis [...] cannot be understood as a real vermin” (*NF*, 57).

The premise of “literality” in Kafka is thus dealt with only rhetorically and figurally, which is to say in precisely non-literal ways. One is hard-pressed, for example, to find the word “insect” or “beetle” in the work of these critics. These three critical analyses—Corngold’s, Sokel’s, and Greenberg’s—pivot between a highly exteriorized relationship to the text (in which its rhetoricity is a point of departure from it) and a highly interiorized relationship to the text (in which Gregor’s inner psychic life is the primary focus). We might conclude that the critical scholarship behaves phobically towards *The Metamorphosis*, unable to engage with the body in the text. This is best evinced by the ironic fact that any discussion of the literality of Gregor’s transformation partakes only in figurative discursivity and rhetorical speculation, needing to keep the body at bay. Or we might say that critical readings cannot help but bypass the body as Gregor does, taking their cue from his own fleeting and mild acknowledgment of his insect form.

One exception in the critical scholarship to this somatic indifference is in Deleuze and Guattari’s work on Kafka. Deleuze and Guattari engage refreshingly with the

³⁷ I do not wish to be misunderstood here as dismissing Corngold’s work, which methodically combs through crucial rhetorical distinctions in the text with his characteristic insight.

animalistic corpus in *The Metamorphosis* as they describe with *jouissance* Gregor's states of "beetle, Junebug, dungbeetle" and "cockroach" (DG, 14). They propose that

there is nothing metaphoric about the becoming-animal. No symbolism, no allegory. Nor is it the result of a flaw or a malediction, the effect of some sort of guilt. As Melville says of the becoming-whale of Captain Ahab, it is a 'panorama, not a Gospel.' (DG, 35-6).

Their allusion to Melville here raises the distinction between visual spectacle ("panorama") and rhetoric ("Gospel"), and between literal and figurative readings. They remind us that one must take seriously the phenomenon of the animal of Gregor's body rather than preach rhapsodically about metaphoricity. Accordingly, they analyze the text by delving into its features rather than extracting out from them—a movement towards the body of Gregor's form rather than phobically away from it.

Focusing on the actualized insect of Gregor's body enables us to see the way subjectivity is subsumed. Gregor is engulfed by his animal state, not only physically but ideologically as well. Deleuze and Guattari equate the newly oriented "becoming-animal" of Gregor with an egg that has two poles: "a properly animal pole and a properly familial one" (DG, 36). The dramatic action in the text following Gregor's metamorphosis is between these poles, and every event—from the boss' arrival to the boarders' departure—dramatizes the play between them.

Critics like Greenberg have argued that Gregor's state is the physical materialization of an existing set of conditions. According to such readings, Gregor's transformation brings his inner turmoil of a libidinally divested life to material fruition, allowing him (and the reader) to see his unhappy existence for what it is. As Greenberg puts it, "What Gregor awakens to on the morning of his metamorphosis is the truth of his life" (70). Such readings equate Gregor's circumstances with his new physical form, as though the insect body is the perfect corporeal translation of his existing psychic state. Accordingly, the wretchedness of his insect state parallels his exhausting daily grind. And, indeed, as Gregor struggles to get out of bed but is overcome with exhaustion, exclaiming, "Oh God [...] what an exhausting job I've picked out for myself!" the despair of being a beetle and being a traveling salesman seem to be one and the same (54).

But Gregor's transformation does not simply make physical an existing psychic crisis. His new condition reorients him fundamentally, presenting him with a battle between his new animal being and his existing familial unit. Gregor is astonished by the visceral urges that tug at him unexpectedly—sometimes to his horror—as he learns of his animal impulses. Food, for example, elicits a different response from him: the strong cheese "that Gregor would have pronounced inedible two days ago" now brings "tears of satisfaction" to his eyes, while fresh food is now so repulsive to him that he must put physical space between fresh food and the putrid "things he wanted to eat" (74/75).³⁸

³⁸ The experience of feeling ravenous is itself a new one for Gregor who, typically of Kafka's protagonists, does not have a strong appetite. The weakly, frail son in Kafka's texts is often contrasted with the physically robust father, who eats heartily. We are told, for example, of the "great number" of breakfast

Captive at home, rather than toiling away from it, he sees his family from a new perspective as well. He learns, for example, of his father's hidden savings—money that might “really have paid off some more of his father's debts,” and “thus brought much nearer the day on which he could quit his job” (79). Gregor's new perspective thus not only involves learning about his animal body but seeing his family anew as well.

Other critics have treated Gregor's transformation as the extension of an unconscious wish, the manifestation of Gregor's repressed desire for respite in his taxing, responsibility-laden life of alienated work. The insect body would thus take the form of a welcome illness that enables Gregor to finally find reprieve from his onerous duties. Paul L. Landsberg, for example, argues that “the metamorphosis of a civilized man into first a coleopteron [beetle]” and “finally into a simple bit of matter” reveals “man's instinct for death, the desire for a return to the inorganic of which Freud has shown the power in the human subconscious.”³⁹

If Gregor indeed exhibits Freud's death drive, he becomes the parasite that his family has been, making them take care of him as he has previously had to take care of them.⁴⁰ Indeed, reflecting on his “irritating work,” including the “trouble of constant traveling, of worrying about train connections, the bad food and irregular meals,” Gregor thinks, “The devil take it all!” (54). In a sense, this is precisely what happens in the text, as though this wish has anachronistically been granted to Gregor. His body, work, and concerns have devilishly, mysteriously been stripped from him, though it will take the course of the morning for him to realize it.

Surely Gregor's transformation affords him rest in the manner of a well-timed illness. He is freed from his arduous schedule (involving, on this particular day, a train at five o'clock in the morning), and we are told that it is his first such break from work, for “during his five years' employment he had not been ill once” (55). Gregor's seeming obliviousness to his new bodily condition would thus comically testify to the extent to which he has become enslaved by his job. He is so ridiculously industrious that he earnestly vows to catch the next train on the morning of his metamorphosis even though he “wasn't feeling particularly fresh and energetic” in his new state (55). Gregor similarly rebukes himself for his lingering drowsiness, which he deems “quite inexcusable after such a long sleep” (55). The fact that he is indubitably an insect seems as lost here on Gregor as on the critics ruminating on metaphoricality discussed above. Indeed, as we have suggested, critics perhaps take their cue from Gregor in terms of only acknowledging the transformed body fleetingly.

Gregor's state does not merely simplify a complicated situation, allowing him respite the way an unconsciously willed illness might; his metamorphosis radically alters

dishes on the table, “for breakfast was the most the most important meal of the day for Gregor's father, who stretched it out for hours” (66).

³⁹ Paul L. Landsberg, “The Metamorphosis,” in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Problem* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), pp. 122-133, here p. 126.

⁴⁰ The idea that Gregor's transformation is the somatic expression of an unconscious desire would represent in psychoanalysis an especially interesting case of hysteria, which is defined as the somatization of repressed feelings (and in which the somatic symptoms are implicitly given to be ‘false’). The classic case of hysteria is Freud's presentation of Dora, which we discuss in the introductory chapter.

his world, presenting the familiar to him in new ways.⁴¹ In other words, it is not simply Gregor's body which has transformed but with it, necessarily, his needs, impulses, and options. Deleuze and Guattari present this change in terms of the elements that correspond with animal and family poles. They argue that there are the visceral and concrete "index-objects" in the text, "the food, the sound, the photo, and the apple," versus the abstract "index configurations" in it: "the familial triangle and the bureaucratic triangle" (47). The index-objects measure Gregor's animal, gut responses, inviting pleasure (in the case of the photograph he has lovingly framed) or pain (in the case of the apple with which his father pelts him). Every element and experience in Gregor's world now presents a litmus test for his animal and human impulses. As the sound of his sister playing the violin draws him out of his room, for example, the text philosophically muses, "Was he an animal, since music so moved him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved" (100).

Gregor is thus in a state of intrigued surrender regarding his body, and we observe this state as the text opens on the dawn of his metamorphosis; he is both curious about his new body, yet also resigned to it. His hypochondriacal ambivalence means that he always suspected a bodily revolt might occur, so he is not unduly shocked that it now has; he is, in this respect, like a pessimist who gets a flat tire and then knowingly shakes his head, having expected as much. Gregor surveys his situation neither in shock nor in dismay. As much as the narrative lingers on the details of Gregor's new state, from his multiple little legs to the hard shell of his back, we do not see him perplexed by it; Gregor's fleeting question, "What has happened to me?" gives way as he gazes out the window and then studies the picture of the woman in the fur stole he has lovingly framed on his wall (53). Glumly, Gregor accepts his fate as readily as Georg submits to his punitive sentence. He is another son resignedly acquiescing to claims on his body precisely because his body has never belonged to him.

We should remember at this point the conditions of Gregor's employment that particularly affect his sense of ownership over himself. A facile reading of this alienated existence would be a Marxist one, for the themes of labor, wages, alienation and industrialization pervade the story. Gregor, and later his father, experience no connection to their labor, and they are unquestionably slaves to the necessity of work. Gregor in particular, as a salesman, must hawk what others have made, and thus has no hand in the labor product; he is on someone else's time, selling someone else's wares, for a firm belonging to someone else. The family lives in the city, in an apartment neither spacious nor generously proportioned, and financial necessities and practicalities weigh on them to the point that Gregor's sister cannot pursue her musical passion. Surely, this is the alienated existence of the modern family as Marx fears it. Gregor's act of framing his beloved picture is the only process of libidinally invested labor—the only labor of love, so to speak—we see him undertake. His mother recounts to his boss that Gregor's "only amusement" has been the "two or three evenings" he spent "cutting out [the] little picture frame" (61).

But we should also note that the conditions of Gregor's employment begin with the fact of his parents' debts. Gregor has been employed to work off these debts which

⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari refer to this as a process of deterritorialization, in which one is in entirely new circumstances, so much so that familiar protocols or modes of operating do not apply.

“should take another five or six years” in addition to the five he has already given (54). The chief clerk has hired Gregor as a great favor to the family, a fact which he reminds them of often while exploiting Gregor, expecting him to work harder and more diligently than the rest of his employees; Gregor thinks angrily of his colleagues who “live like harem women,” and who leisurely “are only sitting down to breakfast” when he returns from work at dawn to write up his orders (54). But Gregor cannot complain or point out such injustices, and must “hold back because of [his] parents” (54). Gregor is thus both *in debt* and *indebted to* his boss, financially and relationally in a hole, on unequal ground. Kafka, ever attentive to the physical staging of scenes, draws our attention to the fact that the boss has a habit of sitting on his desk and looking down at Gregor when speaking to him.

Jacques Derrida raises the philosophical question in his work on forgiveness of whether debts can ever truly be repaid at all, or whether one is forever in a position of indebtedness and fixed in an asymmetrical relation. The fact that Gregor is working on everyone else’s terms—to pay a debt not his own, through a job he does not want, for which he and his family are indebted—necessarily affects his physical being. His body has become the instrument of a transactional settling of accounts that makes him no different from a slave. We might say that in paying the debt, Gregor is asked to “pay” in multiple registers: he must pay physical, emotional, and mental tolls. An emissary sent from his family to make peace and make payment, Gregor is not recognized in the economy of the text as an independently acting self. As collateral on his parents’ finances, Gregor has become an instrument of labor with no claim over his own body, for it is already accounted for in a calculated system between his parents and his boss that leaves no room for his own desires or whims—aside, of course, from his sole endeavor of framing his little picture.

The extent to which Gregor has lost claim over his body makes itself clear when he imagines the possibility of calling in sick to his office to explain his missed train. Were he to do so, “the boss himself would be sure to come with the health insurance doctor” and, upon finding Gregor, “would reproach his parents for their son’s *laziness*” (55, emphasis added). Gregor equates his insect state with indolence as though the condition of being transformed into a beetle obviously indicates sloth and negligence. He is expected to ignore his body by both his father and his boss; “We men of business—unfortunately or perhaps fortunately—very often simply have to ignore any slight indisposition, since business must be attended to,” his boss tells him from the other side of his bedroom door. Kafka shows us here the unreasonableness by which paternal authority can operate, an authority which has become so ingrained in Gregor that he questions the validity of his own transformation. He reflects that the doctor “of course regarded all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers,” and so Gregor worries that his condition would not qualify as an acceptable excuse from work. “And would he be so wrong in this case?” Gregor wonders, for he “really felt quite well” (55).

Gregor’s body is thus so lost to him that the fact of his transformation does not immediately register. We already have seen how he must hold his tongue and “hold back because of [his] parents” with his boss in a repressive vein, unable to voice the unjust conditions of his employment (54). But his repressive reflex also affects his perception of his body. Despite his many legs wriggling in the air, the “slight itching up on his belly,” which he cannot reach, the disconcerting presence of “many small white spots, the nature

of which he could not understand,” and his excruciating difficulty in maneuvering off the bed, Gregor is troubled most by the pressing predicament of his train and how to appease his boss for the fact that he is late (54). The somatic demands made on Gregor as the indebted payer of a debt cause him to function like a machine; the physical body has been long forgotten in his daily routine, and he remembers vaguely that “often enough in bed he had felt small aches and pains,” and he now “looked forward eagerly to seeing this morning’s delusions gradually evaporate” (56-7). This is precisely the impatient paternal voice as internalized by industrious Gregor that sees the body only as an afterthought. We recall here Kafka’s letter to his father, in which he alludes to his father’s lack of sick days from work compared to his own many days spent on the couch.

It is not, then, that Gregor loses his body through his metamorphosis; it would be more accurate to say that he regains a body through it. While it is perhaps common to read Gregor’s initial metamorphosis as the climax of the text as Greenberg does, and the remainder of the story as a compelling but predictable denouement, we would posit instead that Gregor’s metamorphosis marks the beginning of Gregor’s return to his body, a body which he has for some time ignored. All of the somatic ailments and impulses he has suppressed for work now return multiplied in strength, in a form that finally cannot be repressed. The fact that his condition is real begins to sink in and is met with a wry smile: Gregor wonders if he should call his father and the maid to help him out of bed since he lacks the appropriate appendages and, “in spite of his predicament, he could not suppress a smile at the very idea of it” (59). While previously the thought of being seen as an insect made him certain that he would be judged as lazy, here Gregor is prompted to smile at the thought of his father having to finally acknowledge the son’s body. The son is momentarily victorious precisely because an alien, animal body has been given to him, one that cannot be appropriated by the father/boss. In becoming wholly other, Gregor momentarily escapes the grip of paternal authority and the plans it has laid for him.

We have made multiple allusions in passing in this chapter to the portrait on Gregor’s wall which he has framed lovingly — and, indeed, the text makes frequent reference to it as well, a fact which may seem odd because of the portrait’s content. Why would Gregor, exhausted, overworked Gregor, be so drawn to the magazine clipping as to construct a frame for it? We remember also that the portrait is the one object he essays to save as his mother and sister clear his room: “he was struck by the picture of the lady” and, to keep it from being taken, he “crawled up to it and pressed himself to the glass” (86-7). As Mark Anderson notes, the “image is obviously central to the novella as a whole” and “if we could understand the significance of this representation we would be closer to an understanding of Gregor’s metamorphosis.”⁴² What is the portrait’s imagistic and signficatory allure, and why does it attract Gregor?

As we hope to have already suggested, Gregor’s animal body brings somatic deliverance, which the picture suggests visually. The text repeatedly draws our attention

⁴² Mark M. Anderson, “Kafka and Sacher-Masoch,” in Harold Bloom’s edited anthology, *Franz Kafka’s The Metamorphosis* (Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), here pp. 119-120. Anderson makes an important contribution to the Kafka field in pointing out the thematic and imagistic parallels between *The Metamorphosis* and Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus im Pelz* (*Venus in Furs*). He demonstrates persuasively in his essay that Kafka likely transported the image of the woman directly from the popular novel, and that Kafka’s work must be reconsidered for the ways it draws upon and brings together existing literary materials.

to the fact that the striking aspect of the portrait is its quantity of fur: the lady is “muffled in so much fur”; we see a lady “with a fur hat on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!” (86/53). The appeal of the portrait for Gregor is the extent to which the elegant lady is engulfed by fur, which does not merely cover her but seems to devour her, having consumed already, the text excitedly exclaims, the “whole of her forearm” (53). This withdrawal of the arm into the fur suggests a movement from human to animal. Her “upright” rectitude is slowly being swallowed by the fur, suggesting that she is captured in the picture in her own process of metamorphosis (53). She “hold[s] out to the spectator” her fur muff as an invitation, perhaps, to join her. Gregor’s fascination with the picture, which he clips, frames, and hangs directly across from his bed for optimal viewing, speaks to the appeal of the animal for one who has long ignored the body.

We must also note that the woman in the portrait stands in a paradoxical relationship to animalism, for she is at once covered in fur, yet she simultaneously signifies elegance; she is “upright,” not beastly or crouching (53). Jacques Derrida has noted in commenting on a different fur in Kafka (namely, the abundance of hair on the warden in “Before the Law,” who also wears a fur coat) that the physical stance of being upright, with noses far removed from the ground and the genitals, historically marks the beginning of civilized man.⁴³ Thus, the lady in the picture is elegant, cultured, and civilized—for she is “sitting upright” and appears in an illustrated magazine—yet she simultaneously signifies a process of becoming-animal. And this paradoxical state of the cultured animal is precisely what Gregor seeks out and gravitates towards: Gregor the dung-beetle who is so moved by the violin.

As much as Gregor is imprisoned by his state, he also enjoys some aspects of his condition. He particularly enjoys taking advantage of the option his new body affords of “hanging suspended from the ceiling” (82). Installed thusly, “one could breathe more freely; one’s body swung and rocked lightly” in a “blissful absorption” (83). This state of suspension is the body ideal in Kafka, the sublime attainment of a meditative, reflective zone in which time passes slowly and one is loosened and liberated from the tense, inhibited posture of being a son. We can readily imagine this suspended, absorbed position of rocking, breathing, and reflecting as deeply appealing to Kafka for the purposes of writing. For Gregor, it and the violin offer meditative modes in which his human “pole” is stirred. This state of reflective animal suspension may also appeal to Gregor because it mirrors the woman in the fur stole, who is herself suspended—in the frame, in time—hanging on the wall in her own meditative and animal way.

If Gregor finds victory in his new body, partaking in food, rest, meditation and animal impulse, his victory, like all victories in Kafka, is fleeting. That is, while Gregor can sleep, gaze out the window, hang from the ceiling, stare at his beloved picture, and observe the familial drama from his detached remove, he is also passively subject to his family’s declarations and troubles, as the sons in Kafka always are. What awakens his reverie, following his sister’s attempt to clear his room, is in fact what disturbs Eden: an apple, hurled at him by his father accusingly. As Walter Benjamin aptly notes here, “the sin of which they [the fathers in Kafka] accuse their sons seems to be a kind of original

⁴³ Derrida’s reading, which here bridges Kafka and Freud, is alluded to far too briefly here. For more, see Jacques Derrida, “Before the Law” in *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992).

sin.”⁴⁴ The red apple thrown at Gregor recalls the Biblical apple, though in an inverse way: he does not reach for it but it reaches for him from this father’s arcing throw; he does not bite it, but it in a sense bites him as it buries into his back. From the moment the apple lands, Gregor’s spell is broken. The body that was delivered to him is taken away, for the paternally inflicted wound prevents him from enjoying himself: “there was now no question of crawling up the wall” or hanging from the ceiling (91).

Just as Georg in “The Judgment” is oppressed by his father’s return to form in the story’s closing pages, Gregor too is subverted by the paternal resurrection. He is shocked to see that “the man who used to lie wearily sunk in bed” is now “standing there straight as a stick, dressed in a smart blue uniform,” and his paternal “black eyes darted fresh and penetrating glances” (89). His father launches the filial assault in this resurrected state, effectively doing away with Gregor as neatly as Herr Bendemann does with Georg. Gregor’s ensuing death as he starves himself is a similarly martyred sacrifice to the family. It is ascetic and clean, for he reaches “a state of empty and peaceful meditation” that seems as cathartic as Georg’s release into the flow of traffic.

Reading *The Metamorphosis* in relation to hypochondria causes us to focus on the somatic elements of the text. Accordingly, we see that Gregor’s new body is not merely the manifestation of an existing psychic crisis, nor does it represent an unconscious wish for illness or death. A careful reading of the body in its various stages in the texts reveals that the event of physical metamorphosis delivers to Gregor a body which he can inhabit as his own, free from the paternal agenda; there are no expectations of the insect to work off debts, be obsequious to a bullying boss, catch trains before dawn, or sacrifice his free time. Unlike the hypochondriacal body of the son, the metamorphosized body of the beetle is liberated from familial obligations and pressures. It partakes in visceral pleasures and joys, if only for a brief spell.

Exiled from the Fatherland: “The Stoker”

Again in “The Stoker” we witness an obedient, mild-mannered son who diligently and earnestly seeks to fulfill his parents’ wishes and who fears parental rebuke. Karl Rossmann thinks of his family fondly, even though he is aboard a ship crossing the Atlantic because they have deported him. He has been “thrown out by his parents, just as you throw a cat out of the house when it annoys you” (41). Karl, a boy of sixteen, is sent away without contacts, companions, or hope of employment, because of an “offense” entirely out of his control: he was raped by a servant, or “seduced,” as the text, and no doubt the family, refers to it. Like the other sons in Kafka, Karl does not think of his family bitterly, nor does he embrace his journey as one who has finally liberated from an oppressive and unjust environment. He rather seems ambivalently passive about his circumstances and the events that have led him to the ship, neither exhilarated as it docks in New York nor apprehensive about the practical necessities before him of securing a

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), here p. 114.

home and a job. He is rather, as with so many of Kafka's protagonists, like one caught in a dream, watching detachedly as events around him unfold.

We might say that "The Stoker" as a text opens comparably to *The Metamorphosis*, with the filial hypochondriac bearing witness to a foreign and foreboding new environment. The first sentence of the story thrusts us into Karl's plight as briskly as the opening line of *The Metamorphosis*, not pausing to comment on the strange nature of the protagonist's circumstances:

As Karl Rossmann, a boy of sixteen who had been packed off to America by his poor parents because a servant girl had seduced him and got herself a child by him, stood on the liner slowly entering the harbor of New York, a sudden burst of sunshine seemed to illumine the Statue of Liberty, so that he saw it in a new light, although he had sighted it before. (19)

The text foregrounds the Statue of Liberty over Karl, highlighting it not only rhetorically in the structure of the sentence, but visually as "a sudden burst of sunshine" operates like a spotlight to illuminate it. The background of the story, that Karl has been "packed off," is offset and made incidental by commas in an explanatory phrase that also suggests empathy is in order for Karl's "poor parents." More importantly, however, the text shuttles us past this history to the ocean liner upon which Karl now stands, drawing our attention to the "new light" bathing the scene and rendering strange an object he has previously encountered.

Before turning to the Statue of Liberty and Karl's newfound circumstances, let us pause to consider his relationship to his body within the framework of hypochondria. We might say that Karl's body has been invaded in a manner similar to Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis, for Karl falls victim to a miserable set of circumstances that involve his body physically (the servant's sexual assault) and over which he has no control. He is then made aware of how he has inconvenienced his family, causing his "poor parents" a great deal of trouble, and he must accept punishment dutifully. Just as Gregor starves himself in a conscientious effort to alleviate his family's suffering, so Karl accepts his deportation without complaint; Kafka's sons cooperatively agree to remove the offending body from the familial scene even when it is their own.

While it may seem untenable to suggest a parallel between sexual molestation and hypochondria, there is evidence in the text to support the idea that Karl suffers precisely the sort of bodily invasion of which Kafka expresses hypochondriacal fear. Karl is besieged and physically assaulted in a way he cannot—or will not—articulate. Just as the hypochondriac cannot explain in a readily understandable way what ails him, so Karl cannot articulate to his parents—nor, indeed, to himself—what has happened to his body. Recalling the scene of assault, including how the maid "disgustingly" touched him and the "tears running down his cheeks," Karl cannot process the encounter; a teenager, he merely shrugs it off and tries to dismiss it, concluding, "That was all that had happened, and yet his uncle had managed to make a big issue out of it" (43).

The molestation is depicted physically as an assault over which Karl is powerless: the servant "flung her arms around his neck, almost choking him," stripped his clothes "while his eyes saw nothing at all and he felt uncomfortable," and then "thrust her body several times against him" while on top of him (43). While the maid is referred to often

as a girl, whose power over Karl may seem diminished because of her inferior status as a servant, we discover later that she is a thirty-five year-old woman and is thus more than twice his age. We further learn that she often taunted Karl, chasing him around the kitchen and “laughing like a witch” (43). Indeed, part of the trauma of the encounter is the history of torment behind it. We see that the woman would sometimes barricade Karl in the kitchen, bolting the door with him shut inside “until he had to beg her to be let out” (43). In addition to feeling an adolescent’s confusion about the encounter, Karl also feels emasculated as he flees to the protection of his own bed immediately after the assault. He has not only been taken advantage of by a servant but has been overpowered by a woman. As Heinz Politzer points out, their German names (*Brummer* and *Rossmann*) suggest that the “horsefly molests the horse,” sending Karl on a quest through the novel to assert his masculinity following this unnatural victory.⁴⁵

Karl thus stands in a dispossessed relationship to his body, which seems to be the property of everyone but its rightful owner. His body has physically been claimed by the servant, who long made a coy game of his masculinity with her witch’s cackle, and then took advantage of his shy vulnerability and molested him. He is physically uprooted by his parents in their decision to expel him from the home. He is then claimed once more by his uncle, who emerges in the chapter’s concluding pages and steals him away from the ship (of which, as we discuss below, Karl has grown quite fond). And in *Amerika*, Karl will again be expelled from the uncle. Karl thus acquires the status of a parcel, being claimed, shipped off, reclaimed, and never finding a home. Indeed, the remainder of the novel will track Karl’s journeys throughout the country in the manner of a travel novel, as he goes from New York to Oklahoma, with America figuring as a bleak repository of lost souls and tramps. As Mark Anderson puts it, “Karl remains *unterwegs*, always on the outside, constrained to keep moving in a permanently renewed condition of exile that is reinforced” continuously.⁴⁶

The familial confrontations we have discussed so far in this chapter have occurred as a direct confrontation with paternal authority: the father in “The Judgment” rises up from infirmity to put down his “little puppy,” and a militant father in *The Metamorphosis* dons his uniform with its gold buttons to make physical attacks on Gregor. By contrast, the son’s banishment in “The Stoker” is effected indirectly, through a deportation. Unlike the other texts, we do not witness a scene of battle in which Herr Rossmann exerts his paternal power over the son (though we can readily imagine the head of the home banishing Karl for the shame he has brought upon the family). Yet Karl’s presence on the ship and the events of the text bear a direct relationship to paternity, justice, and the body, the three terms which form the nexus of filial hypochondria.

We must first note that Karl is expelled from the Rossmann home upon becoming a father. The scandal that prompts Karl’s banishment is not the seduction/assault, but the fact that the servant becomes pregnant as a result. Karl is therefore exiled from the fatherland at the very moment of fatherhood. If the sons in Kafka are to remain juvenile bachelors frozen in adolescence, then Karl cannot be allowed to take up his role of father—though we are told that the servant gives birth to, of course, a son, for there are

⁴⁵ Heinz Politzer, *Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), here p. 126. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *P*.

⁴⁶ Mark M. Anderson, *Kafka’s Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), here p. 106.

no daughters in Kafka.⁴⁷ Karl Rossmann in this respect recalls Georg Bendemann (as Politzer points out, the *mann* in their surnames connects them), for both sons are disallowed textually from a futuricity that would involve replacing the father.

Second, the father reappears in avuncular form at the text's close to take Karl from his beloved stoker, to whom he has become so attached (and to whom we must return). Uncle Jacob surfaces in the ship's cabin and lays claim to Karl, pulling him back into the fold of the family unit. To be clear, his uncle does not align himself with the Rossmanns and makes a point of indicating his outrage at Karl's "shamefully unprovided-for" state and the reprehensibility of the family's actions (42). However, the uncle appears just as Karl has started to fend for himself, befriend the stoker and demanding justice for him to the ship's captain. The story's departing image of Karl being rowed away from the ship, his view of the stoker obscured, suggests that the familial unit can lay claim to the son at any moment, just as he has begun to enjoy himself. Karl "burst[s] into violent sobs" as he is taken away from the stoker, and he thinks miserably to himself that "it was now as if there were really no stoker at all" (50).

Karl's libidinal attachment to the stoker, which also involves paternal authority as we will see, is baffling throughout the text, both in terms of the suddenness by which it forms and in terms of the depth the relationship quickly achieves. Indeed, the circumstances by which they become acquainted are puzzling in terms of the quest that leads Karl below deck precisely at the moment that he should be disembarking from the ship. As the ship docks in New York, with Karl gazing absent-mindedly at the Statue of Liberty, he realizes "with dismay that he had forgotten his umbrella down below" (19). Yet this oversight seems strange, for we are told that Karl has spent his journey keeping a careful watch on his belongings: for a full "five nights" he "had kept a suspicious eye" on his roommate, "a little Slovak" who was surely "merely waiting for Karl to be overcome by sleep" so that "he could maneuver" his belongings away (25). Why would careful Karl then leave his precious trunk on deck and go below to fetch an inconsequential umbrella? He indeed reflects to himself that his behavior is baffling, for

he simply could not understand why he should have watched it so vigilantly during the voyage that he had practically lost sleep over it, only to let that same trunk be filched from him so easily now. (25, emphasis added)

Karl's motives are more easily understood when we consider the Freudian possibility that he has unconsciously wished to remain on the ship, and that the omission of his umbrella thus grants him the excuse to fulfill this repressed wish. We are told from the outset that Karl "was not thinking at all of getting off the ship" as it docks, and as a result "was gradually pushed to the railing by the swelling throng" of porters and passengers "shoving past" (19). An observant acquaintance remarks to Karl while going past, "Not very eager to go ashore, are you?" (19). While Karl laughs off his friend's comment dismissively, it is precisely at the moment of watching his friend disembark, "as his eye followed his acquaintance," that Karl remembers his missing umbrella (19); watching his friend leave the ship, in other words, causes him to find a way of staying aboard. The fact that Karl's behavior is baffling to him, that he "simply could not

⁴⁷ To clarify, women appear in the familial scheme in Kafka as mothers or sisters; the daughter is never an object of attention.

understand it,” underscores the extent to which the forgotten umbrella expresses a repressed wish.

Karl’s reluctance to leave the ship relates explicitly to the filial hypochondriac’s agoraphobia. “So high!” Karl reflects to himself, gazing at the Statue of Liberty while his fellow passengers push past him (19). Yet what Karl focuses on as he gazes at the statue is “her arm *with its sword*” which “rose up as if newly stretched aloft” (19, emphasis added). Despite the fact that “a sudden burst of sunshine” illuminates the statue, Karl does not see it clearly; the language of light and illumination ironically calls our attention to the fact that Karl misperceives the Statue of Liberty, unconsciously substituting her torch for a threatening and upraised sword (19). This misperception, in other words, is especially revealing because of the attention to light in the scene. Karl himself recognizes that he is observing the Statue of Liberty “in a new light,” for he had “sighted it long before” (19). And while we can consider the slip as an error on Kafka’s part, for Kafka had never been to America, Politzer notes that such an error “could not possibly have escaped the attention of his friends and his publisher,” and it is thus “safe to assume that he willingly and consciously gives us a glimpse into the method” with which he chose to depict Karl’s perceptions (*P*, 122).

That Karl’s *méconnaissance* occurs with the Statue of Liberty is not incidental to the narrative, for his misperception is related directly to his newfound freedom. While the narrator notes of the statue that “around her figure blew the free winds of heaven,” we see that this sense of liberty proves menacing to Karl. The invasive threat of the upheld sword is then visually reechoed by the cane his friend is “casually swinging” (19). We might suggest that the raised sword and swinging cane recall for Karl the maid who had taken ‘liberties’ with him and behaved transgressively, for the two objects Karl visually focuses on are not only evocative of punishment, but are overtly phallic.

As we have previously seen, the crouching, cowering hypochondriac fears not only bodily invasion but open spaces and heights. The forgotten umbrella thus affords Karl the opportunity to return to the familiar territory of the ship, which typifies the dark, winding terrain of Kafka’s texts, for it is not often that we encounter outdoor space in Kafka’s works. Karl must negotiate “down an endless series of little stairways, through corridors with countless turnings” (19-20). The hyperbolic emphasis on innumerability (“endless series,” “countless turnings”) is emblematic of the dark, cramped passageways Kafka’s protagonists must always negotiate in facing their fates. We are thus not surprised that Karl feels “genuine relief” upon finding the stoker, not only because he has gotten lost in the ship’s maze of passages but because he has no desire to leave the ship—a fact which reasserts itself when Karl immediately expresses interest in joining the stoker in his employment aboard the ship (20).

Despite the fact that the stoker is hardly socially adept (“it’s hard work talking to this man,” reflects Karl), he offers Karl an immediate sense of comfort and companionship, in part because he is a fellow German in a foreign place, in part because he responds affably (if dimly) to Karl, not judging his predicament or acting in a paternal, dictatorial way. Despite being a “huge man” as is typical of the fathers in Kafka, the stoker behaves juvenily. He is obviously intellectually inferior to Karl, and the two thus complement each other: one the physical laborer of brute strength, the other the young, frail hypochondriac who neurotically frets and fusses but also is quick-witted (20).

Yet there is another reason Karl feels immediately at ease with the stoker, and that is due to their shared relationship to justice. In fact, it is upon hearing of the stoker's sense of injustice that Karl feels most comfortable:

‘You shouldn't put up with it!’ said Karl excitedly. He had almost lost the feeling that he was on the uncertain boards of a ship, beside the coast of an unknown continent, *so much at home did he feel here in the stoker's bunk.* (24, emphasis added)

Karl sheds his apprehension upon hearing the stoker's tirade about being mistreated because the stoker's indignant feeling of being wronged functions precisely to return Karl to an eminently familiar realm. As Max Brod notes, Karl represents the “situation in which someone has fallen into the most shameful disgrace, in which every outward circumstance tells against him” though he himself has a “clear conscience.”⁴⁸ Karl and the stoker observe but do not absorb the guilt that has been directed at them, and Karl recognizes in the stoker someone who has similarly been wrongfully accused. The stoker's plight in fact makes Karl feel “so much at home” because the stoker's situation aboard the ship reflects precisely Karl's situation at the Rossmann home.

Karl in this sense anticipates K. from *The Trial*, and Karl indeed goes to trial on the stoker's behalf, taking him on as a defendant to the ship's highest authorities.⁴⁹ Because Karl was not offered a trial regarding the seduction/molestation, he adopts the stoker's situation as his, bringing the matter to the captain and speaking on the stoker's behalf. “You've been treated unjustly, more than anyone else on this ship; I am positive of that,” he tells the stoker (48). His feeling of certainty regarding the stoker's innocence—for which, after all, he has no proof—bespeaks his need to acknowledge and affirm his own sense of injustice. In declaring that the stoker's plight outweighs that of present company, since the stoker has been treated unfairly “more than anyone else on this ship,” Karl indicates that he has merged his situation with the stoker's. The scene of justice is thus a recompensatory one, acting in place of the trial which never took place for Karl.

Yet the stoker does not benefit from Karl's bold attempt to seek justice, and Karl ultimately must defect to the opposing side when his uncle reveals himself to be an esteemed guest of the ship's officers and a wealthy senator. Thus, the scene which is meant for the stoker ultimately focuses on Karl, and a trial indeed materializes, replete with evidence, as his uncle cites the letter written to him by the servant. As Politzer argues, “Not only did Karl's assistance seal the fate of his client, but he himself is now the one who has profited from it” as the senator proudly announces himself as Karl's uncle. In other words, in attempting to confront established authority, Karl becomes claimed as a member of that very authority; in trying to represent the underdog, he is allied with the oppressive forces he sought to counter. Justice can operate only in this

⁴⁸ Max Brod, as quoted by Politzer, *Parable and Paradox*, p. 127.

⁴⁹ There is also textual resonance between *The Trial* and “The Stoker” in that both as texts share a relationship between fragment and novel: just as “The Stoker” is an independent short work which is then retained in *Amerika*, so *The Trial* shares a relationship with “Before the Law.” The settings of these works also are similar, with particularly vivid descriptions of endless passageways, winding stairways, shortened ceilings, and cramped spaces.

perverse way in Kafka, with the stoker reduced to mumbling “a nonsensical approval of his own condemnation” and Karl bursting into tears (*P*, 133).

As a result of the avuncular claim, Karl must cede his only chosen family, for his alliance with the stoker has come to represent one more deeply rooted than that of friendship. It is difficult to name the relationship between them, with its homoerotic undercurrent, its relation to justice, and its ambiguous power dynamic. As Anderson notes, it could be that the stoker figures as a “kind of anti-father, at once victim and protector” to Karl (xiv). In one moment, the stoker takes Karl “by the hand” to lead him to the officers’ cabin (26); in another, Karl caresses the stoker’s fingers, drawing them “back and forth” between his own (48). The uncle notes that the stoker “seems to have bewitched” Karl, and his diction recalls the maid who laughed “like a witch” (48/43). Yet if Karl indeed becomes bewitched a second time, falling under the stoker’s spell and indeed ending up in his bed, the relation is one he can control. We note that upon first encountering the stoker, Karl notices “an empty room with a deserted writing table,” thus recalling the maid who would often write letters in the kitchen (20). The scene also perhaps foreshadows the uncle, who receives a letter from the maid. But here, upon meeting the stoker, the writing table is “deserted” and the room Karl spots is blissfully empty. For once, there are no letters sending or calling Karl from one place to another—only the blank stoker with his oafish, odd demeanor.

In the ensuing chapters of *Amerika*, Karl wanders purposelessly and is repeatedly expelled from any secure environment. His brief encounter with the stoker presents a rare moment in Kafka of a voluntary affiliation and chosen alliance for one of the sons. Karl is not bound to the stoker out of any familial relationship, nor do they owe one another anything in the manner of a formal agreement. The stoker does not weigh upon him, in other words, as the family and fiancée do to Kafka, nor does the stoker threaten him. In his presence, Karl expresses physical affection (rare for the sons), and moves and speaks freely, lucidly, without hesitation. Karl recognizes that “he felt stronger and more clear-headed” defending the stoker “than he had perhaps ever been at home” (37). This seems a version of Karl which the stoker uniquely incites and, in fact, stokes.

While the sons in Kafka so often appear frail, hypochondriacal, and pathologically obsessed with paternal judgment, here we witness Karl overcome his frailty and speak capably and compellingly. When Karl articulates his fear that he “won’t be able to help” the stoker after he leaves, he in fact expresses regret not only at the thought of leaving the stoker, but, as engulfed back into the family unit, leaving this capable, adept version of himself as well. Karl will ultimately fail in the manner of the other sons, banished to a foreign place he cannot hope to survive. As Benjamin rightfully reminds us, however, this sense of failure is crucial to any understanding of Kafka. As Benjamin puts it, “To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure. The circumstances of this failure are manifold. One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him *en route* as in a dream.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 145.

Chapter Three:

The Bachelor Hypochondriac

“Bartleby, the Scrivener,” *Billy Budd*, and “The Beast in the Jungle”

He has only as much ground as his two feet take up, only as much of a hold as his two hands encompass.

—Franz Kafka

A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order to not fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love.

—Sigmund Freud

Gilles Deleuze notes in “Bartleby, ou la formule” that there exists in the works of Herman Melville the recurring figure of the “saintly hypochondriac,” a character prototype upon which, regrettably, Deleuze does not elaborate. He remarks only that such characters seem “nearly stupid” for they are “creatures of innocence and purity, stricken with a constitutive weakness but also with a strange sort of beauty, petrified by nature, who prefer... no will at all.”¹ Deleuze’s mention of preference is meant to invoke the figure of Bartleby who, shuffling along, famously declares that he “would prefer not to,” a grammatical formula to which Deleuze devotes most of his essay. But Deleuze’s description of the saintly hypochondriac, however brief, is fascinating in the character type it suggests: a sympathetic, ailing hero paralyzed by his own physical frailty. Deleuze’s designation here, even in its brevity, hits upon precisely the questions posed by the hypochondriac: to what extent is his situation “constitutive” or determined “by nature,” and to what extent is it a choice or preference? Is the hypochondriac responsible for his own behavior and choices? Or does the hypochondriac precisely feel that he has no choice in how he acts?

These questions concerning the hypochondriac are also ones that plague literary analyses of three short stories: Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), his unfinished novella *Billy Budd* (1891), and Henry James’ “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903). In all three works, a male protagonist puzzles those around him with his baffling behavior, his aloof remove from society, and his maddening obliviousness to the consequences of his actions. Bartleby, Billy Budd and John Marcher, solitary wanderers, appear to be at odds with societal norms, unable to fit in or to behave expectedly. But—as with the hypochondriac—the failure to conform somehow seems like a physical

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1993), here p. 102. All translations of Deleuze’s essay are my own.

disposition that is beyond one's control. These three protagonists thus constantly bring to mind the hypochondriac, for they struggle in their daily functioning and we struggle to understand why. Indeed, much of the literary criticism concerning these particular works attempts to decipher or "diagnose" the problem faced by these protagonists, just as the characters around them become invested in what ails them. These characters thus incite a diagnostic quest which, though not clinical nature, evokes the interpretive challenges and questions raised by hypochondria.

I argue in this chapter that these three literary characters figure not as saintly hypochondriacs but as "bachelor hypochondriacs," a term I use to signify a crucial revision of Deleuze's original phrase. The language Deleuze employs to describe his "saintly" hypochondriacs who are "creatures of innocence and purity" suggests not only that they are beyond reproach but that have a cherubic, sinless quality as though "petrified by nature" in a child-like state. Deleuze's language thus situates his hypochondriac in a position of infantile innocence, devoid of sexuality; he treats solitude as an untarnished state rather than one requiring further inquiry or critical attention, for Deleuze's designation of the type as "saintly" would place him beyond reproof. Indeed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's compelling readings of two of these three works, *Billy Budd* and "The Beast in the Jungle" in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, underscores the need to examine the relationship of all three characters to sexuality.² The status of all three characters as solitary bachelors—permanently so—cannot be dismissed as incidental to the narratives.

In his essay "On Narcissism," Freud describes the withdrawal of the libido that is apparent in hypochondria. He notes that "the hypochondriac withdraws both interest and libido—the latter specially markedly—from the objects of the external world."³ We see this withdrawal of the libido evident in our three protagonists, who eschew relationality and retreat into an aloof remove from society. *Bartleby*, for example, enacts this libidinal withdrawal as he repeatedly retreats behind his partition in the office, choosing to stand motionless behind the walls of his work area. *Billy Budd* and *John Marcher* similarly lack any genuine engagement with the world; part of why all three are baffling to characters and scholars alike is that we have little sense of what drives or motivates them, of where their passions lie. They have drawn their libidinal focus inward, to an internal object we cannot see. Their unhappy fates are anticipated by Freud, who declares in the same essay that "we are bound to fall ill" if "we are unable to love" (85).

All three bachelors—*Bartleby*, *Billy Budd*, and *John Marcher*—seem constitutively challenged; they are unable to function productively in society, but in a way that seems inherent to their natures and beyond their control. And, again, it is this disposition or constitution that invokes the paradigm of hypochondria. They are "hopeless," as the colloquialism goes, so caught up in their own worlds that they are beyond assistance, though this does not prevent the characters around them from

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes passing allusion to the bachelor as hypochondriac in the context of Victorian literature. She contrasts the urban bachelor with the Gothic hero in her discussion of Thackeray and notes, "Where the Gothic hero had been suicidally inclined, the bachelor hero is a hypochondriac." See *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 189.

³ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," *SE*, vol. 14, p. 83.

attempting to aid them.⁴ They attract admirers who are not only sympathetic to their situations but who grow infatuated with them and consumed with the wish to help—but all three characters must keep those whom they attract at a distance, for the bachelor hypochondriac is “someone who falls asleep in the snow in winter to freeze to death like a child, someone who does nothing but take walks.”⁵ Aloof and solitary, the bachelor hypochondriac does not know how to approach intersubjectivity and remains narcissistically oriented.

Fundamentally ill at ease with themselves and unable to inhabit the world responsibly, they move through it uncertainly and thus prompt and incite uncertainty around them. It is as though they cannot be trusted and cannot trust themselves which, with a sad smile, they woefully acknowledge. If this suggests a perverse compliance on their part in their hypochondria, it is because the bachelor hypochondriac is somewhat aware of the harm he may cause those around him, especially to those who become libidinally attached to him. But this awareness is vague in nature, and the hypochondriac makes small gestures accordingly that are aimed not at the other but at appeasing his own guilt.⁶ Further, and perhaps most importantly, all three perform a societal defiance through passivity, as though on permanent strike; all three “would prefer not to,” and their withheld activity figures as resistance.

Bartleby: A Law Unto Himself

“Why Bartleby?” This is the question that opens Branka Arsic’s essay in *Between Deleuze and Derrida* and which frames so many of the texts written on “Bartleby, the Scrivener.”⁷ As many have commented, we struggle to *know* Bartleby, to understand him, and to decipher why we wish to do so—and thus as readers are put in the same interpretive position as the narrator, struggling for cognitive mastery over the character as well as over our own curiosity. This is a similar interpretive quest that we face in *Billy Budd* and “The Beast in the Jungle.” Indeed, it is rhetorically fitting to begin any

⁴ Deleuze’s specific designation that the bachelor hypochondriac is “*presque stupid*” is particularly interesting to consider in relation to Avital Ronell’s recent work, *Stupidity*, in which she examines characters who seem beyond reproach because of their cognitive abilities. While Ronell does not take up Bartleby or John Marcher in her project, she reads *Billy Budd* with great insight as we discuss below. See Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

⁵ Deleuze, p. 96.

⁶ John Marcher, for example, takes special care to buy May Bartram a birthday gift each year, always “regularly careful to pay for it more than he thought he could afford” to assure himself that “he had not sunk into real selfishness.” The gesture, of course, is aimed at the giver and not the recipient. Jacques Derrida remarks that this is often the case with gifts. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁷ Branka Arsic, “Active Habits and Passive Events or Bartleby” in Paul Patton and John Protevi, eds., *Between Deleuze and Derrida* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 135 – 157, here p. 135. Though Arsic’s opening discussion of passivity is persuasive, her essay takes a bizarre twist that is less compelling when she shifts to analyzing the role of ginger nuts in the story.

examination of Bartleby in the interrogative, for Bartleby, enigmatically, seems not only to prompt inevitable questions (Why are we drawn to him? What does he signify? *Why* does he prefer not to?) but to take the very form of a question as well, sending those who attempt to read him into an interpretive quagmire. For as much as we ask questions of Bartleby, he in turn reflects our questions back at us, displacing and evading us. As Arsic quotes Foucault, “What is the answer to the question? The problem. How is the problem resolved? By displacing the question.”⁸ Bartleby, in other words, asks us to fundamentally rethink the questions we ask. But how does he do it?

We might begin by first situating Bartleby—both the character and the text—as operating in relation to the law. The legal backdrop of the text, as involving a law office and a group of scribes, is in no way incidental to the story of Bartleby, for his broad refusal to cooperate begins in the simple refusal to copy. In “preferring not to,” in other words, Bartleby asserts a resistance not only to the specific tasks put to him but to a broader sense of societal expectations as well. He is unfailingly polite, but unwavering in his irreconcilable stance with the world around him. As Jacques Derrida notes, the “indeterminacy” of his posture “creates a tension.”⁹ Bartleby, we will demonstrate, is a law unto himself, a singular force that comes to figure as the very principle of the law. Bartleby must therefore remain a solitary figure antithetical to society and unable to be brought successfully into any relation with it.¹⁰

Throughout the text, Melville takes pains to posit a relation between the law and the generalized activity of copying or replicating. This relation, however, does not come through the scribes so much as through the narrator who, as the voice of reason and rectitude in the text, reveals himself to be an ingratiating copycat; what we come to understand is that following the law and obeying it, as the narrator does, necessarily involves forms of copying, for ideology transmits itself through modes of replication.

Early in the story, in its opening lines, the narrator suggests through his rhetoric that the law might be represented through the activity of copying:

The nature of my avocations, for the last thirty years, has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing, that I know of, has ever been written—I mean, the law—copyists, or scribes.¹¹

The narrator here suggests through his syntactic slippage a synonymous relation between the two realms of law and copying, as though “the law” as a phrase could be substituted with “copyists, or scribes” freely (3). The long dash between the terms (“the

⁸ Arsic, “Active Habits,” p. 135.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), here p. 75.

¹⁰ As will become clear further into this discussion, I use the terms “the law” and “the law as such” to designate the abstract or conceptual sense of the law. As Derrida notes in “Before the Law,” speaking of Kafka’s parable, “one does not know what kind of law is at issue—moral, judicial, political, natural, etc. What remains concealed and invisible in each law is thus presumably the law itself, that which makes laws of these laws” (192). It is this sense of the law *behind laws* which I mean to invoke throughout the following discussion.

¹¹ Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scribe,” from *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986): here p. 3. Further citations from the story will be given by page number in the text.

law—copyists, or scribes”) functions rhetorically as an equal sign, a noteworthy fact because the equating of terms occurs during a stutter. Our semantically smooth narrator does not slip up often; this marks the only moment in the text where he corrects himself, interrupting himself awkwardly in order to equate the two terms. The awkward self-interruption, however, is not a logical one. While scribes were employed in the legal field during the nineteenth century in substantial number, there is no historical evidence to suggest this kind of interchangeability of reference, wherein “the law” could synonymously be swapped with “copyists, or scribes.” The interjection of “—I mean, the law—” is thus rhetorically and logically problematic. But, as we will see, the equation between the law and the activity of copying is a crucial one for Melville.

A similar rhetorical stretch occurs in the narrator’s own relationship to copying. In what reads as a comic aside, the narrator confesses his love of repetition:

The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat; for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion.
(4)

The narrator seems to derive sheer glee from pronouncing the three-part name. Unable to contain himself, he repeats it once more in full in the following sentence, adding that he “was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor’s good opinion” (4). On one hand, the repetition serves to mark the narrator as an obsequious name-dropper who, in the story’s opening pages, seems sycophantically intent on establishing his own good name to the reader. But the thrice-repeated name of John Jacob Astor also serves another function, which is to indicate the narrator’s more generalized love of repetition and structure; he savors each mention of the established name and cannot bring himself to truncate it to simply “Astor” as most would.¹² At a moment when the narrator is trying to assert himself as a methodical, precise, and “eminently *safe*” man, he betrays himself, exuding in his delighted repetition the sort of “poetic enthusiasm” he would have us believe he eschews (4, original italics). Indeed, if the narrator’s “method” is revealed, it is the extent to which he “love[s] to repeat.” Further into the story, in fact, the narrator takes to reusing his own lines, engaging in a narrative form of recycling to which he draws the reader’s attention:

(The reader, of nice perceptions, will here perceive that, it being morning, Turkey’s answer is couched in polite and tranquil terms, but Nippers replies in ill-tempered ones. Or, *to repeat a previous sentence*, Nippers’ ugly mood was on duty, and Turkey’s off.) (15-16, emphasis added)

¹² The name “Astor,” like “Rockefeller” or “Guggenheim,” signifies, beyond the individual, an empire. John Jacob Astor, head of the Astor Family, made a fortune in the fur trade and in real estate in the early nineteenth century. At the time of his death, Astor was reported to be the wealthiest person in the United States, with an estate estimated to be worth \$20 million or more. His name “rings like unto bullion” to the narrator because each repetition of it signals money, like the ringing of a cash register, or the sound of “rounded and orbicular” coins.

It is worth noting here that Melville had reason to equate copying with the law. As Elizabeth Hardwick points out, Melville's "brothers were lawyers, with offices at 10 Wall Street" in Manhattan, and a "close friend was employed in a law office and seems to have been worn down by 'incessant writing.'" ¹³ While Hardwick proceeds to describe the narrator as "touched by the comic spirit" in his endearing "little vanities" like repeating Astor's name, she makes whimsical what is more accurately a fatiguingly masochistic nature; there is a pathetic, worn quality to the narrator's dogged dedication. ¹⁴ The narrator describes himself as "elderly" and as having given "thirty years" to his profession, and we have no reason to think that the narrator sees anything amusing about the meager accomplishments to which he clings (3). The very story he tells, in fact, allows him to re-immers himself in his work, so that the act of storytelling itself is an act of repetition or re-telling.

Such is the narrator's love for copying that, even within his office, he unconsciously repeats architecturally the visual space outside of his building. Melville, whose texts are not particularly known for their imagistic qualities, lingers over the visual details of the law office and its spatial configuration, emphasizing vertical lines. We learn that the chambers, located on Wall Street (a name already suggesting verticality), "looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft" at one end, "*penetrating the building from top to bottom,*" and "commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall" on the other that is "pushed up to within ten feet of [the] windowpanes" (4-5, italics mine). The office is delineated as vertiginously vertical, defined by the "great height of the surrounding buildings" which are claustrophobically close to the windows and, we are dryly told, require "no spy-glass" to see (5). The narrator replicates these external shafts within his office with "ground glass folding doors" which divide the "premises into two parts" (11). When Bartleby joins the staff, the narrator then "procure[s] a high green folding screen" so that Bartleby has the "folding doors" on one side and the high screen on the other (12). A consummate copier, the narrator replicates the external space of Wall Street within his internal office, thrusting Bartleby into a *mise en abyme*; Bartleby is up against walls, in a building facing walls, on a street of walls.

The narrator is thus not only a copier par excellence, surrounded by copyists in a copy-cat office, but figures as compliant and cooperative; by all accounts, he has successfully internalized or "copied" the environment around him so that he can no longer separate himself from it. He is, in other words, the perfect servant of the law, obeying it, internalizing it, and completely dominated by it. Through him, we see the perfect citizen as interpellated by the law, for ideological interpellation necessarily involves a process of internally and unconsciously copying the structures of normative ideology within oneself. As I discuss in my introductory chapter, ideology occurs through a process of internalization or psychic introjection by which the external is assimilated into the ego. The narrator is a measured man of reason, a man who serves the law, a man who seems to have no vices, a man who can define himself at the end of his life only by his industry. He has done well for himself in his small way, but he seems to

¹³ Elizabeth Hardwick, "Bartleby in Manhattan" as reprinted in Dan McCall, ed., *Melville's Short Novels* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), here p. 257.

¹⁴ Hardwick, "Bartleby in Manhattan," p. 258.

have no identity outside of the law. He enjoys the “cool tranquility” of its “snug retreat” to the point that we wonder how he will function without it (3). The only *event* in his life as such, the only story he has to tell, is of Bartleby; the narrator, vacated by the law, has no story of his own.

That this is a story about the law—not the legal world, but the law as such—resonates in the narrator’s curious fascination with Bartleby who, throughout, acts as a law unto himself. Bartleby orders the world around him, and in fact becomes the epicenter of the narrator’s world; while the narrator, at the outset of the story, is dominated by his (legal) work, he becomes over the course of his tale utterly obsessed by Bartleby (the law as such). What we come to witness in Melville’s story is the distinction between relating to a particular set of laws—through the narrator’s work—and relating to the law as such—through his attempts to understand Bartleby. Hardwick observes that the narrator, a true lawyer, “cannot surrender this ‘case’” of Bartleby, but she romanticizes the situation when she reads Bartleby as a “demand made upon his [the narrator’s] heart to provide benefit.”¹⁵ The lawyer comes to feel “not only disarmed,” but thoroughly “unmanned”¹⁶ by Bartleby’s sway over him (21).

Bartleby’s mantra in particular is annihilating for its disorienting disavowal, for the fact that, as a declaration, it has no object. Bartleby does not tell us *what* he would prefer not to do, and, as Deleuze points out, his pronouncement “leaves what it rejects undetermined, conferring upon it a radical quality, a sort of limit-function.”¹⁷ This aspect of disavowal recalls the frustration which Freud describes in his analysis of hypochondria. Freud states in his essay “On Narcissism” that we are “bound to fall ill if, out of frustration (*Versagung*), we are unable to love.”¹⁸ Bartleby might epitomize this *Versagung* which, as I argue in my introduction, has from its *sagen* root the quality of a repudiation in speech, a disavowal. Because of his *Versagung* and insistent naysaying, Bartleby is indeed unable to love and is bound for illness.

Melville reminds us here of Kafka’s man before the law who stands in the law’s grip, frozen at its threshold. What we come to understand over the course of the narrative is that the lawyer seeks not only to decipher Bartleby but, perhaps more importantly, to understand his own relation—and submission—to him. While we do not wish to derail our discussion by turning here to Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” (indeed, it would be impossible to do “justice” to it here), it is worth noting that we bear witness to a similar phenomenon concerning the nature of the law in Melville’s text. In Kafka’s enigmatic and much discussed parable, a man from the country stands transfixed at the threshold of the law, awaiting entry, and, perched there upon a stool, ages and withers.¹⁹ Just as we are tempted to conclude that the narrative offers commentary on the maddening bureaucracy of the law, which defers and evades a man indefinitely to his death, we hear the

¹⁵ Hardwick, “Bartleby in Manhattan,” p. 264.

¹⁶ Melville undoubtedly had Shakespeare in mind in this characterization, for the trope of coming “unmanned” has a rich history in the Shakespearean oeuvre. We see the language of coming “unmanned,” for example, whether by woman or battle, in *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

¹⁷ Deleuze, p. 89.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism,” p. 85.

¹⁹ For a more detailed reading of “Before the Law” that meditates beautifully on its many elements, see Jacques Derrida’s analysis bearing the same title as the parable.

gatekeeper's harsh and laughing declaration²⁰: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."²¹

What we come to understand at the parable's close is that the man, far from being physically chained or confined to the threshold, has participated in his own entrapment; he restrains himself before the law because of his own internalized sense of the law. More than being physically or verbally barred from entering, he bars himself from entering. It is certainly true that the doorkeeper does not give him an invitation to enter; the man from the country asks permission to enter repeatedly, and is told that entry is possible but not at the current moment. The man, in other words, is continually deferred. However, what we sense at the parable's close is the extent to which the man makes unconscious, unarticulated promises to himself: that surely one day he will be granted access to the law; that surely he should not simply attempt entry; that certainly he must wait for permission to enter to be granted to him. Neither the law nor the gatekeeper overtly instruct him in this way; he simply infers—and internalizes—his own understanding of the law, a process we similarly observe in *Bartleby's* narrator.

This list of internal assumptions that keep the man confined outside the gate present the law's most menacing power: its ability to recruit our own cooperation so that we unconsciously become its servant. As Derrida comments,

The door is physically open, the doorkeeper does not bar the way by force. It is his [the doorkeeper's] discourse, rather, that operates at the limit, not to prohibit directly, but to interrupt and defer the passage, to withhold the pass. The man has the natural, physical freedom to penetrate spaces, if not the law. We are therefore compelled to admit that he must forbid himself from entering.²²

Derrida's language here is telling: the situation is one he observes grudgingly, that he is "compelled to admit," and it is indeed with reluctance that we must acknowledge the man's situation—which, true to Kafka's parables, is always really our own. The man who comes to the gate, presumably with a demand or complaint, is reduced to one of its own guards. He forgets his initial demand, he ceases to complain, and he grumbles only to himself. In other words, he no longer requires policing, for he polices himself. He demonstrates that the law's power resides not in how it acts on us, but rather in how we enact it.

Along these lines, there are two primary ways in which Kafka's parable illuminates our discussion of the law with regard to *Bartleby*. First, the parable emphasizes the singular nature of the law—a singularity that is in keeping with *Bartleby*, and a singularity that proves to be annihilating. Second, the parable stresses the nature of our own compliance with the law, a voluntary but unconscious cooperation we indeed witness in Melville's story.

²⁰ I must note for the sake of accuracy that the gatekeeper does not actually laugh harshly upon pronouncing these final words. However, I have always pictured him thus, particularly after his exasperated declaration that the old man is "insatiable."

²¹ Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 3.

²² Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," in Derek Attridge ed., *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 203.

The singularity of the law, that it can speak only in response to a particular case or question, creates an asymmetrical relationship that can prove utterly annihilating.²³ We remember that the man from the country naïvely expects that the law will “surely be accessible at all times and to everyone,” and is surprised by what he discovers (Kafka, 4); indeed, the doorkeeper’s closing words expressly refute this idea of universal access with their message of singularity, that “this gate was made *only for you*” (4). As Derrida argues, there is a fundamental “singularity about relationship to the law, a law of singularity which must come into contact with the general or universal essence of the law without every being able to do so” (Derrida, 187). While the man from the country desires open access to a general or universal law, he finds that such a thing does not exist: a unique portal and guard have been established just for him, and he cannot garner any broader sense of the law. He cannot, in other words, know the law as it exists outside of him or as it exists generally.

And this singular, skewed relationship is precisely what the narrator encounters with Bartleby. The narrator makes various attempts to seek out knowledge of Bartleby and, like the man from the country, is repeatedly deferred and left to wait at the threshold. Indeed, the narrator comments on his own attempts to engage with Bartleby, noting that he “felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition—to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own” (17). The narrator here seeks a reaction from Bartleby, some sign that would make him intelligible, just as the country man exasperatedly awaits acknowledgment. The narrator recognizes his own masochism, conceding that his attempts to understand Bartleby are in vain, and that he “might as well have essayed to strike a fire with [his] knuckles against a bit of Windsor soap” (17). The narrator has put upon himself a Sisyphean task, perverse in its utter fruitlessness; following his futile quest with Bartleby is much like watching the man from the country age and wither. Specifically, what he seeks from Bartleby is precisely what the man from the country seeks from the law: to locate it and make it present in a way that is readily understandable.

The narrator of “Bartleby,” we must remember here, is not only relaying the story to us but is also trying to grasp Bartleby in its retelling. We therefore witness through the short story not only a process of narration, but a process of reading as well. Melville’s text, like Kafka’s, offers not just a diegetic storyline but an interpretive reading, and a thwarted one at that. The narrator’s stance anticipates our own, for his is the first attempt to understand Bartleby, to read him, to make him intelligible. The narrator, like the man from the country, is caught in a hermeneutic bind, unable to understand or make sense of the way in which he himself has become ensnared in the puzzle he seeks to solve. And it is precisely this unreadability—of the law, of Bartleby, of hypochondria—that attracts countryman, narrator, and diagnostician. As Derrida succinctly puts it, “the inaccessible incites from its place of hiding,” beckoning to us with an invisible gesture.²⁴

²³ Paul DeMan, though not commenting on Kafka’s parable, offers a particularly elegant and insightful analysis of the singularity of the law in *Allegories of Reading*. He argues that a legal text cannot reveal itself by being read, and “cannot state what it knows” until it is tested with a particular case (270). The law, in other words, can speak only in the singular instance and, even then, “can only act deceptively,” for in the next case it will act differently, unpredictably.

²⁴ Derrida, “Before the Law,” p. 191.

Seen this way, we understand how Bartleby represents the law as such, or the principle of the law. Turning to Derrida again proves useful here, for as he points out,

It seems that the law as such should never give rise to any story. To be invested with its categorical authority, the law must be without history, genesis, or any possible derivation. (191)

Bartleby refuses to issue narrative or to “give rise to any story,” and perhaps his most infuriating quality is this refusal; thus, the narrator’s attempts to “elicit some [response]” from him are never satisfied (17). The narrator tests the limits of this evasiveness one morning, in an exchange that demonstrates the extent to which Bartleby indeed shirks “history, genesis, or any possible derivation”:

‘Bartleby,’ said I, gently calling to him behind his screen.
No reply.
‘Bartleby,’ said I, in a still gentler tone, ‘come here; I am not going to ask you to do anything you would prefer not to do—I simply wish to speak to you.’
Upon this he noiselessly slid into view.
‘Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?’
‘I would prefer not to.’
‘Will you tell me anything about yourself?’
‘I would prefer not to.’
‘But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you.’ (25)

Bartleby’s response here, after a protracted silence, is only, “*At present* I prefer to give no answer,” again sending the narrator into a state of perplexed anxiety (26, emphasis added). His temporal reference to the present recalls the gatekeeper’s similar deferrals in Kafka’s parable that entry to the law cannot be granted *at that current moment*; indeed, as many have commented, Bartleby’s response cannot be reduced to a mere denial or overt refusal, just as the doorkeeper never blocks the entry to the man from the country. As Derrida notes, Bartleby’s modality “says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses nor accepts anything,” reminding one of a “nonlanguage.”²⁵

We see further evidence of Bartleby’s inscrutability as the narrator attempts to learn something—anything—of him. As the narrator turns detective and attempts to tail Bartleby, he uncovers little: “I observed that he never went to dinner; indeed, that he never went anywhere” (16); the narrator even recounts that has “never seen him reading” (24). We of course remember that Bartleby’s previous employment, which comes only through rumor, is at a dead letter office. What perfect employment for Bartleby, who so resolutely could “never give rise to any story” that he originates from a site of dead letters. Bartleby, true to the “categorical authority” of the nature of law, evades and refutes any association with narrative or history; he cannot be placed and defies attempts to transfix him. Bartleby is semantically vacant and vacating, not only unfixable but causing others to become displaced as well. This is true even in the most literal way, for he causes the narrator to move his whole office to a new location simply because he

²⁵ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 75.

cannot rid himself of the scrivener. Bartleby, a force of singularity, cannot be brought into any form of relation: with the narrator, with the other scriveners, even with his own physical being (we remember that he does not seem to eat or sleep). He is his own law, embodying the principle of law, and cannot be brought into society.

If the first point of connection between Bartleby and Kafka's parable is the singularity of the law, the second connection is subservience before the law. Again, the narrator has a hermeneutic blind spot with regard to Bartleby, unable to see his own position in his interpretive quest. His blindness reveals itself most when he treats Bartleby as fragile, flattering himself that he might be able to tend to the scrivener. Just as Kafka's man from the country tells himself he does not wish in any way to disturb the law, so the narrator tiptoes around Bartleby. This anxiety of not vexing Bartleby also takes the form of seeking to help him. In the exchange cited above, we see the narrator attempt to coax Bartleby out, employing a gentle—and "still gentler"—tone, and reassuring him of his "friendly" and benign intentions (25).

This effort to make himself small before Bartleby is especially intriguing because it comes on the heels of his avowal to "tell him his services were no longer required" (25). Unable to free himself of Bartleby, he prostrates himself before the scrivener instead. Further, the conceit he sells himself, through a "delicious self-approval," is that he is "humor[ing]" Bartleby "in his strange willfulness," and thus "befriend[ing]" him (17). Like the man from the country, the narrator tries "to approach the law [Bartleby] and make it present, to enter into a relation with it, indeed, to enter it and become intrinsic to it" (Derrida, 191). Moreover, unable to confront his own (desperate) attempts for what they are, the narrator tells himself that it is Bartleby who requires him, and not the other way around.

The narrator thus participates in his own entrapment, convincing himself that Bartleby is ill and in need of assistance. Like a physician observing his patient, the narrator records and comments upon his observations of Bartleby. He notes, "What I saw [...] persuaded me that the scrivener was *the victim of innate and incurable disorder*" and that "it was his soul," and not his body, "that suffered" (25, emphasis added). Here we have the diagnostic moment in the text, the doctor attempting to offer an objective interpretation of his patient's symptoms. But this diagnosis is self-flattery, a coping mechanism for the reality the narrator cannot bring himself to face: namely, that Bartleby is oblivious to him though he is hyper-mindful of Bartleby. This obliviousness would be annihilating for the narrator to face because what he requires, like Kafka's man from the country, is to be recognized and acknowledged. Both the narrator and the man from the country are accustomed to being ideologically realized; they are used to being hailed by ideology, in Althusser's sense, and so the refusal to be acknowledged is maddening.

Deleuze reads the narrator's behavior here as condescending, interpreting his offers of charity and philanthropy as transparent substitutions for the paternal function. That the narrator would offer to help Bartleby, Deleuze argues, represents prototypical paternal arrogance trying to assert itself, when it is the soft lawyer who could learn a lesson or two from rebellious Bartleby. But while it is true that the narrator is established and materially comfortable, and thus representative of the economically advantaged and fraternizing Wall Street lawyer, we must not lose sight of the ways in which he is vacated and emptied by Bartleby. My point here is not that Bartleby is opportunistic, preying on those around him, but rather that his singularity is an annihilating force comparable only

to the force of law. Further, the bachelor hypochondriac incites this very reaction from those around him; part of his defining feature (as we will again see with Billy Budd and John Marcher) is that those who attempt to offer aid end up requiring aid themselves. While Deleuze thinks it is Bartleby who has been “petrified” by nature, we see that it is the narrator who gets “turned into a pillar of salt” when humiliated in his office by the scrivener he cannot control but continues to employ (Melville, 14).

The narrator is not the only one who, through the guise of help, reveals the extent to which Bartleby has affected him. That is, while the narrator convinces himself that Bartleby needs his aid, it is he and his scriveners who become “infected,” in a sense, by Bartleby. We notice, for example, that the scriveners Nippers and Turkey begin using the verb without realizing it in their own discourse—a fact which reveals itself when Turkey thinks of a possible remedy for Bartleby:

‘With submission, sir,’ said he, ‘yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him [...]’
‘So you have got the word, too,’ said I, slightly excited.
‘With submission, what word, sir,’ asked Turkey [...].
‘I would prefer to be left alone here,’ said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy.
‘That’s the word, Turkey,’ said I—‘that’s it.’
‘Oh, *prefer*? Oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—’
‘Turkey,’ interrupted I, ‘you will please withdraw.’
‘Oh, certainly, sir, if you prefer that I would.’ (27)

The slapstick interchange recalls a kind of “Who’s on First?” banter in which the scriveners indicate that they are wholly unaware of having adopted Bartleby’s beloved verb. While the scene comically shows us the extent to which Bartleby affects those around him, the exchange also reveals an element of contagion surrounding Bartleby; the narrator’s excitement that someone else has “got the word, too” reveals his relief at not being the only one to have been bitten by the ‘prefer’ bug. As Deleuze notes, the “contagious character is immediately evident” here as Bartleby’s words “insinuate their way” into the others’ speech.²⁶

This sense of contamination is further evinced by the narrator’s confessed hypochondria: he shudders at the thought of how the “demented” Bartleby “has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads, of [him]self and [the] clerks” (27-8). It is worth remarking here that Bartleby, the bachelor hypochondriac, in a sense produces a literal hypochondriac in the narrator, who “tremble[s] to think” that his “contact with the scrivener” has “seriously affected [him] in a mental way” (27). This process of copying Bartleby’s discourse is not unlike the process of internalization that we see Kafka’s man from the country undergo in which the law is replicated internally.

We thus see that the narrator not only has to separate himself from the actual, corporeal Bartleby, but from his internalized, introjected version of Bartleby as well. As Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok describe in their reworking of Freud’s term,

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, p. 91.

introjection involves a process of the psyche by which external objects are replicated phantasmatically into the ego's own structures, so that what is external is brought within. As Jacques Derrida notes regarding Abraham and Torok's work, "introjection is a sort of introduction in itself, to the self, to (a) Me."²⁷ While the narrator purports his story to be the curious tale of a singularly strange scrivener, the textual events reveal him to be fixated on his own introjected version of Bartleby so that the scrivener has become an indelible part of him. Preoccupied with his own version of Bartleby, the narrator reveals the extent to which he cannot let go of him—a fact which is best evinced by the fact that he writes the tale many years later. The lawyer remarks, "I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of," a declaration he confesses sounds "strange to say" (38). Astutely, the narrator notices the rhetorical oddity of his own utterance and that it reveals a discord between his rational desire (to be rid of the scrivener) and his unconscious desire (to hold onto Bartleby). Further, we must also note the self-reflexive verb in his sentence, the "*I tore myself*," reflecting that the object of the verb "tore" (and thus the recipient of an act of violence or struggle) is not Bartleby but the narrator.

The bachelor hypochondriac, like the law, attracts people but is never able to enter into a relation with them; instead, people must wait at his threshold and face continual deferrals which, over time, cause devastation. Bartleby does not deny the narrator, and even—in true bachelor form—hints there might be some future between them. "I would prefer *not* to quit you," he tells our narrator, "gently emphasizing the *not*," and we feel for our narrator who is being rhetorically led on (33). Indeed, the exchanges between the two come to resemble conversations in a failing romance, the no-good boyfriend refusing to leave his doormat of a partner. The "pained" lawyer confronts Bartleby in more than one "sudden passion" that he must leave or change his ways (33). My intent here, beyond drawing attention to the obvious homoeroticism at work, is to point out that the bachelor hypochondriac invites sympathetic interest and libidinal attachment precisely because of his detached and distancing state.

Part of why the narrator finds it so difficult to "tear himself" from the scrivener, let alone fire him, is because of Bartleby's particular form of communication, which consists in deferrals and an inability to say no. The bachelor hypochondriac is too self-consumed to recognize those whom he strings along. He seems civil and kind, surely meaning no harm; we are tempted to say of Bartleby that he could not hurt a fly. But we must recognize that he consistently performs and maintains a posture of defiance. He withholds activity, avoids interaction; we remember here that Bartleby at first dutifully performed his work as a scrivener, until called upon to participate in a group meeting. His solitude is so extreme as to be hurtful. As the narrator comments, "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (17). A solitary machine, Bartleby cannot be understood in relation to anything or anyone but himself.

Along these lines, attempts like the one from Deleuze to re-diagnose Bartleby fall into the same trap as the narrator, getting seduced by baffling behavior into thinking that there can (or must) be a reason, an explanation—typically one that places the bachelor hypochondriac in a positive light. Deleuze goes so far as to heroically declare Bartleby "the doctor of a sick America," the only one brave enough to resist the lure of capitalist

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Me—Psychoanalysis: An Introduction to the Translation of *The Shell and the Kernel* by Nicolas Abraham," *Diacritics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 1979): 3-12, here p. 5.

enterprise as the nation gathers itself in the nineteenth century (90). But we must greet this heroic reading of *Bartleby* with suspicion. As Jacques Rancière points out, Deleuze “transforms Bartleby, the voluntary recluse, into a hero of the American open road” in a romantic sleight of hand that would make him more Jack Kerouac than shuffling scrivener.²⁸ We are not meant to see Bartleby in a convertible with the wind in his hair. An honest interpretation of *Bartleby* must resign itself to the limits of intelligibility where the bachelor hypochondriac is concerned. Hypochondria as a discourse reminds us of these diagnostic limits, suggesting that Bartleby’s unintelligibility is his very condition.

Billy Budd: Encountering Ideology

Attempting to read “Bartleby” and *Billy Budd* together is in some way like performing a Hegelian dialectical operation involving opposite figures who together yield a net result in which each is preserved. We cannot imagine Bartleby as the hero of the open road, but if there was anyone who at least looks the part, it is Billy Budd: rosy-cheeked, flushed with youth, and replete with blond tendrils, Billy is (visually) the opposite of Bartleby, working out in the open ocean air instead of confined claustrophobically to a cubicle. Billy is thus a different bachelor hypochondriac than Bartleby, perhaps playing the corporeal and fleshy Dionysus to the clerk’s neat and buttoned-up Apollo. Indeed, in the novella (written nearly forty years after “Bartleby”), Billy’s appearance is no minor affair; much is made of his “masculine beauty,” not only by the narrator but by his shipmates as well (302).²⁹ Billy genially inspires confidence, not through his words but merely through his presence. The sight of him is affirming, so much so that he is selected among his crew to join the H.M.S. *Bellipotent* without interview or introduction; the “first sight” of him is stirring enough to prompt Lieutenant Ratcliffe to “pounc[e]” upon him—and him only—to enter “the King’s service” (293).³⁰

Yet despite his physical charms and effects, Billy manages to accomplish the hypochondriac’s vacancy and puzzling passivity. We want to prod him, to elicit some reaction from him, to question him, and feel as “goaded” as Bartleby’s boss to do so. But while Bartleby baffles us because he will not be derailed from the five-word mantra to which he clings, Billy upsets us with his lack of *modus operandi*; his passivity presents

²⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, translated by Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, here p. 161.

²⁹ Page numbers for *Billy Budd* refer to the same text (*Billy Budd and Other Stories*) as used for “Bartleby, the Scrivener” above. This edition makes use of the most popular of the three versions of Melville’s final and unfinished work; other editions were consulted in the research for this chapter, but this edition was used for ease of reference. Further citations from the story will be provided by page number in the text.

³⁰ As the language of pouncing suggests, there is obvious homoeroticism surrounding Billy and the characters throughout the novella, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick elucidates in her reading of *Billy Budd*. Sedgwick specifically discusses how Billy is visually received and the reactions he incites in an attentive reading which I did not wish to skim over and reduce crudely here. For more, see *The Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 91 – 130.

itself not through a pattern of repetition but through the structure of lack. What I will argue here is that Billy, far from simply being uncouth or awkward, is outside of any ideological reference and is presented as beyond the reach of normativity. I do not seek here to dwell philosophically on the hypothetical question of the extent to which a character *could* be said to exist outside of ideology. Rather, my intent is to demonstrate that Melville strips Bartleby of ideological effects so that we are given perhaps the closest representation to a para-ideological state—and thus can witness the violence of the ideological encounter.

Billy is solitary and without roots, not only a bachelor but an orphan. He does not know where he was born or the identity of his parents. When questioned on the subject, he reveals that he has “heard” it said that, as an infant, he was “found” in a “pretty silk-lined basket” hanging “from the knocker of a good man’s door” (300). He is thus delivered to us mysteriously, through rumor, without origins, without so much as a note (300). If my tone turns comic here, it is because it is difficult to not be amused by the great lengths Melville goes to in wiping clean the slate of Billy; he is so purged of past ties that we would be surprised if he had a navel. As Avital Ronell notes, “he is essentially put forth as a saintly avatar of stupidity.”³¹ And while we do not know Billy’s origins, he is nonetheless marked as different: his appearance “indicate[s] a lineage in direct contradiction to his lot” (300). The odd man out, the sailor seems to have no tether to land or connection to anyone but himself. Indeed, Billy’s “entire family” is “practically invested in himself” (298).

We must note here that, as others have pointed out, the two supporting characters of the novella are also solitary figures: Vere and Claggart are described as reclusive bachelors. Yet they carry with them the shadow of a past; we are told of Vere’s intellectual history in the list of what he reads, from Marvell to Montaigne, and the circle of gossip that follows Claggart, including suspicion regarding his homosexuality, is shared with us.³² Billy, by contrast, is striking for his smooth-skinned, unblemished, infant newness, as though untouched in any real way. While it makes sense that the characters in the story would be companionless—for the ship is, importantly, a floating space of male-male relations—Billy’s emphatically solitary existence, devoid as we will see of companions, knowledge, experience, and beliefs, suggests a different, almost otherworldly *lack*.³³

We might add that if there is anyone to whom the angelic idiot prototype from Deleuze would directly apply, it is Billy. Certainly the “saintly” aspect of Deleuze’s description is easy to support here, as it resurfaces in Ronell’s characterization, for Billy is not far from the bright-eyed, youthful cherub, glowing and good-natured. Further, the “*presque stupid*” portion of Deleuze’s description finds ample evidence with Billy, as great attention is drawn to his mental deficiencies. The narrator tells us he has “not yet been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge” (300-01). He is further described as having the self-consciousness of “a dog” which “we may reasonably impute to a dog of

³¹ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), here p. 101.

³² As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, there is no doubt that “there is *a homosexual* in this text,” and to interpret Claggart otherwise would be to miss some of the finer (though not unobvious) points of the story. See *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 92.

³³ On such links, see Robert Harvey, *Search for a Father: Sartre, Paternity, and the Question of Ethics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

Saint Bernard's breed" (301). We might be tempted to conclude here that Billy serves as a maritime mascot of sorts, a male cheerleader to rouse spirits, instated as the new foretopman so that he can bolster the crew as he is visually perched at a height for all to admire, like eye-candy that affirms masculine brawn.

But Billy is more than mere mascot. Or, rather, his mental deficiencies receive so much narrative attention that we cannot simply conclude that he plays the role of the plastic male Barbie. That the narrator so dryly comments on Billy's lapses, on what Billy lacks, has not experienced, has not gone through, how "unaware," what "little did he observe" and all he "scarce noted" (299)—all of this frank emphasis on *lack* in Billy is to establish him as "a sort of upright barbarian" (301). Indeed, the narrator finds it so difficult to define Billy positively (except, of course, in the physical sense) that he must constantly employ the negative suffix and negative qualifiers: Billy seems "*not* to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be *out of keeping* with these" as though carrying an "*untampered-with* flavor like that of berries" (301, italics mine). Billy can only be defined negatively, in contrast to society or in terms of what he does not have, because he is untouched by the far-reaching hand of normativity. He cannot be compared to any frame of reference, because he is precisely outside of these, "out of keeping with these," and he can be described only through contrast, by what he does not have (301). This originary "upright barbarian" is so ideologically innocent that he only resembles Adam *before* "the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company" (301); the fig-leaved first man is still too sophisticated and cosmopolitan for our Billy, so we have to imagine a pre-Adam.³⁴

Thus, while our other two bachelor hypochondriacs struggle with heteronormativity and cannot bring themselves to identify with it, Billy Budd, it seems, has never quite encountered it. That the novella must begin with Billy being pulled from his former ship to be enlisted into the navy is telling, for it is as though we cannot know Billy prior to the *Bellipotent*. What we do know, and this is also telling, is that his former ship is called *Rights-of-Man*, suggesting that Billy is plucked from an originary social state, a starting point that is prior to the social contract and is "in accordance with natural law" (301).³⁵ In keeping with this, Billy has not known injustice or hardship, and "his simple nature remained unsophisticated by those moral obliquities" we might associate with the life of a sailor (301). Billy is in part so sheltered and unaffected by the hand of ideology because, we are told, he is "illiterate; he could not read" (301).

Separated from books, from hardship, "knowing little more of the land than as a beach" (301), and struggling with his speech due to a "vocal defect" that seems "more or less of a stutter or even worse," Billy seems so untouched as to not be human (302). As Barbara Johnson puts it, "the *force* of what is not known is all the more effective for not being perceived as such," for we cannot readily understand or comprehend the radical

³⁴We cannot help but feel reminded of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* here, for we remember that the character Beloved appears without any lines on her hands or feet, a brilliant detail that Morrison provides to suggest precisely the untouched newness that Billy evokes.

³⁵One is obviously reminded of Rousseau here, and the question of what Billy must sacrifice in the transition from natural law to social contract of the military ship. The *Rights of Man*, it must be pointed out, is not to be understood as a savage jungle in opposition to the *Bellipotent*; it too is an organized social system, but the text makes clear that its social hierarchy and structures are more forgiving and flexible.

cognitive sense of lack evident in Billy.³⁶ Ronell points out here that “the disruption of knowing cannot be understood in terms of absence, default, or deficiency, as if something could be filled, completed, or known.”³⁷ While Melville urges us towards an interiorized reading of his characters with his subtitle, “An Inside Narrative,” we are thus struck by the extent to which Billy remains *outside* of conventional reference, as though a force of pure exteriority or alterity.³⁸ It is perhaps for this reason that the narrator must draw on a naturalized, pastoral vocabulary in describing Billy, calling him a “nightingale,” “a dog,” (300) and so “like the animals” (298), not unlike “the beautiful woman in one of Hawthorne’s minor tales” (302). Billy seems everything but an adult man; his proximity to nature, femininity and youth prove his distance from “custom or convention” (301).

Despite the tendency to naturalize Billy and idealize his beauty, however, the narrative makes it clear early on that Billy’s innocence will serve as a foil for the narrative trajectory. An ominous thread runs throughout the story, and we are forewarned explicitly on the heels of a particularly admiring and doting description of Billy not to get too comfortable, because “the story in which he is the main figure is no romance” (302). Similarly, the short chapters on naval history encyclopedically interspersed into the plot are faithful only to one theme: mutiny.³⁹ Unlike *Moby Dick*, in which Melville exhaustively includes information on every aspect of the expedition, from typical whale anatomy to ship terminology, the narrator here is bent on emphasizing the fact that “a mood of anxiety” existed in the British navy during the 1790s (308). The threat of mutiny is likened in particular to a contagion: the “Nore Mutiny may be regarded as analogous to the distemping irruption of contagious fever in a frame constitutionally sound” (304-5).

Melville thus creates a lurking sense of threat throughout his story; at any moment chaos can erupt as swiftly as a sudden and fatal fever. We might therefore muse that, in this tale of a bachelor hypochondriac, the rhetorical strategy of the text is to proceed by way of hypochondria by perpetually invoking disaster—figured somatically as a contagious fever—as imminent. In a mild, meandering, maritime way, the plot operates like a horror movie; just as we are lulled by languid descriptions of Billy, the narrator snaps our attention back to the idea that “at short notice an engagement [of mutiny] might come on” (308). We must therefore remain alert, though, as with the hypochondriac, any “precautionary vigilance” is “strained against relapse” (308). To put it another way, the

³⁶ Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), here p. 108.

³⁷ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*, p. 101.

³⁸ Kenneth Speirs offers a nice reading of what he terms the “contraction and expansion” in *Billy Budd*, or the alternating waves between micro- and macro-narratives in the novella. For more, see “Love and War: The Course of Healing in Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*,” in *Rio Arts: An Online Journal*, Issue 3.

³⁹ One of the particularly intriguing aspects of the passages devoted to mutiny is the suggestion that history has been swept under the rug: “the Great Mutiny was of such character that national pride along with views of policy would fain shade it off into the historical background” (304). To my knowledge, Sedgwick makes no allusion to this, but there is, I think, an obvious sense of “closeted” knowledge and shame invoked here, particularly as Melville makes analogy to “a well-constituted individual [who] refrains from blazoning aught amiss or calamitous in his family” (304). Mutiny, in other words, must be squelched as a historical event because, like homophobia, it threatens structures of power and masculinity. A propos of this project, we might ask whether homophobia is essentially an ideological hypochondria, an irrational fear of contagion or contamination that sees illness where there is none.

experience of reading *Billy Budd* is in an experience of hypochondria, or a state of anxiety revolving around the omnipresent threat of contagion.

This brings us back to our wholly innocent and untainted protagonist. If Billy is indeed framed outside of ideology and has evaded its normalizing influence, what are we to conclude from this? What would Melville gain from stripping a character of normativity to this extent, and leaving Billy ideologically bereft, particularly in light of his threatening backdrop? As I hope I have already begun to show, Billy is given to us as a blank slate, free of societal imprint, so that the stamp of what follows in the course of the narrative bears a clearer mark—especially because the world he is thrust into is one of mutinous possibilities. Billy takes on the feel of an *enfant sauvage*⁴⁰ or a literary experiment; he is shoved roughly into a male society in which his usual charms do not seem to work in their usual way, and he is ill equipped to survive. For perhaps the first time in his life, Billy is tested aboard the *Bellipotent* (and, indeed, is later put on trial), and his story is not unlike one of a country boy coming to the big city. We recall that Billy is likened to a “rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces,” as though a delicate species of rose (299).

But, to be clear, *Billy Budd* as a work is not nearly so straightforward as to resemble the prototypical novel of character development. What is different here is that we do not encounter a process of learning and education as with the *Bildungsroman* wherein the protagonist grows stronger through his apprenticeship and reflectively incorporates his experiences. Instead, Billy cannot take in or digest what happens to him, and so the ideological moment of encounter, as we will show, is one he cannot process. As we will see, the true mutiny aboard the *Bellipotent* is one that Billy comes to witness from its epicenter; the experience of being accused of inciting mutiny itself provokes a mutinous response from him. Billy thus does not have the tools to respond to the accusation put before him, for his whole environment is new to him. That is, while he has always been a sailor, we must remember that his military enlistment was forced upon him. Billy has “never been instructed” in “naval decorum” (297), and as his “uncomplaining acquiescence” upon being selected to enlist suggests, he has no idea what awaits him (293). Thus, in his parting address to his old ship (“And good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*”), Billy bids farewell not only to his familiar crew but to the ease of his familiar ways—and rights—which he has naively never thought to question (297). Like the goat his name suggests, Billy is brought into a pack of wolves who devour him, and not only visually.

That Billy will not be able to defend himself against the accusation of treachery brought upon him is seen not only in his trusting and passive nature, but in his speech as well. We remember here his stutter and the equivocal language surrounding it:

⁴⁰ François Truffaut’s extraordinary 1970 film *L’Enfant sauvage* is an anachronistic but useful reference for thinking of Billy’s ideological state. The film, in which Truffaut plays the lead part of Dr. Jean Itard, is based on the actual account of a so-called “feral child” being discovered near Toulouse in 1779 and then held captive for medical study, particularly for the purposes of learning about socialization and language acquisition. Interestingly, the only words the child was able to learn were *lait* (milk) and *Oh Dieu* (oh god). Also interesting to consult are the actual medical papers published by Itard of 1801 and 1806 in which Itard cites Rousseau.

Though in the hour of elemental uproar or peril he was everything that a sailor should be, yet under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse. (302)

What is this “strong heart-feeling,” and why the awkward turn of phrase here? While the stutter itself at first seems to be treated lightly by the “more or less” that qualifies it, this casualness is quickly undercut by the “even worse” possibilities we are left to imagine. The fact that this “vocal defect” cannot be described plainly, and that it foreshadows Billy’s inability to defend himself in his fateful encounter with Claggart, would suggest that the stutter is the literal manifestation of Billy’s inability to take in or process the world around him, the physical embodiment of his ideological block (302). Billy cannot respond verbally when challenged, and chokes when confronted; that his sole physical flaw occurs at the mouth, the place of ingestion, must not be glossed over. Remembering that this is an “Inside Narrative,” it seems that the world cannot make its way inside of Billy. He can act out on his own terms, performing his duties aptly and confidently, but he cannot be made to see the world differently, to take it in. He, perhaps like *Bartleby*, is stricken with “an organic hesitancy” in this respect (302).

Thus, while Barbara Johnson notes that “the fate of each of the characters is the direct reverse of what one is led to expect from his ‘nature,’” Billy’s fate is in direct accordance with our expectations.⁴¹ His inevitable end comes as no surprise, for we are told early on that Billy is so trusting as to be “practically a fatalist” (298). His death is thus anticipated, for Billy cannot survive the ideological encounter; when it comes, he cannot even speak.

As I hope I have begun to show, I read the climactic scene during which Claggart confronts Billy, supervised by Vere, as an allegorical model for Althusser’s ideological encounter. The Althusserian model of interpellation presents itself as an authoritative hailing, an accusation, a “Hey you!” moment that performatively identifies and constitutes its subject.⁴² In the moment that Billy is confronted by Claggart, we note that he is being addressed by his superior and in an official capacity, and therefore is addressed in a manner not unlike Althusser’s subject who, we remember, is accosted by a policeman. The encounter also literally presents itself as an accusation in that Billy is informally charged with a crime. He is thus placed in a situation that is both official, in that his superior officers confront him, and unofficial, in that the scene occurs “below the deck” and off the record. Similarly, the Althusserian subject is confronted by an official person (a uniformed officer) in an unofficial setting (the street). Finally, the scene as devised by Vere is a test. Vere, acting as the state apparatus, seeks to gauge how Billy will react to the accusation, to the “Hey you!” put to him.

When we examine the scene closely, it is clear that Claggart’s purpose is accomplished precisely by the *act* of accusing Billy. What Claggart specifically says—his exact words, his phrasing, his tone—is not nearly so important as the context surrounding

⁴¹ Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, 102.

⁴² Judith Butler reads Althusser’s scene of interpellation in this accusatory way, as a scene of guilt. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

it; indeed, what Claggart says to Billy is not even given to us, but is merely alluded to as Claggart “briefly recapitulated the accusation” (349). What does matter here is that it is a recapitulation; Billy is made to understand that Claggart has already shared the accusation with Vere, as the captain tells the master-at-arms to “tell this man to his face *what you told of him to me*” (348, italics mine). To Billy, the encounter is not one of inquiry but one of declaration, not a question but a statement, and it bears all the traces of the identificatory violence from Althusser’s model.

The encounter also parallels—and is described as—a doctor/patient encounter, with resonances that are especially germane to this project:

With the measured step and calm collected air of an asylum physician approaching in the public hall some patient beginning to show indications of a coming paroxysm, Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy and, mesmerically looking him in the eye, briefly recapitulated the accusation. Not at first did Billy take it in. When he did, the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as by white leprosy. He stood like one impaled and gagged. (349)

Authority in the scene is with Claggart, granted to him in multiple ways. First, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, “had Vere been content either to hear the two men’s depositions separately or to grant them an official hearing [...] then neither of the men would be murdered.”⁴³ That is, Vere’s choice to handle the matter by *creating* a direct confrontation between the two men, so that he can play the part of referee between them, “entirely creates the fatality of the paranoid knot of Claggart and Billy Budd.”⁴⁴

Second, and of particular interest to us here, the accusatory moment occurs rhetorically as a diagnosis, made by a “calm” and “collected” physician.⁴⁵ The discursive effect of this is not to make Claggart more convincing to the reader but, rather, to convey that Billy, before being given a chance to speak, already has no recourse or options. After all, how much say does a patient have in his own diagnosis? This patient invoked figuratively by Melville above is, not incidentally, in a public space, placed in a “public hall” and very visibly about to have an attack. The patient is aware of his context, aware that he is being watched—just as Billy is aware of Vere, and Althusser’s subject is publicly on a street corner, on display.⁴⁶ How can a patient—in public, aware of his

⁴³ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106. One point of exception here is that Sedgwick argues that Vere “completes the mutuality” between Claggart and Billy because, in playing the role of the supposedly objective captain, he creates a symmetric confrontation between the two. However, as I proceed to argue, the relation between Claggart and Billy is not one of “paranoid symmetry” as Sedgwick puts it, but rather one in which authority and subordination skew the power dynamic in Claggart’s favor.

⁴⁵ As an aside, thinking about the interpellatory moment—and here, in the context of a scene that will lead to murder—in relation to illness and as a diagnostic moment finds haunting resonance with Althusser’s own life; Althusser long struggled with psychiatric illness and produced his oeuvre while in and out of institutions, finally committing murder himself, strangling his wife in 1980.

⁴⁶ Part of what interests me about the interpellatory moment is that it implicitly alludes to a sense of embarrassment or shame upon being hailed publicly; that Althusser’s example occurs in public, in broad daylight, on a street for all to witness, and initiated by a figure of authority all contribute to this feeling of self-consciousness. Judith Butler, for example, discusses the idea that “the passerby” in Althusser “turns

subordinate status, aware that an authoritative doctor is approaching—protest under these conditions? How can he say, ‘No, I’m fine’ or, ‘Your approach is not for me’? How can he evade the diagnostic moment that is aimed explicitly at him? Even before the diagnosis itself places him as having a paroxysm, he is *always already placed* as the patient.

Similarly, even before the accusation of treachery is issued, Billy by context is already accused, for Billy has been summoned as such; the accusatory moment is an interpellatory hailing before the accusation is voiced. Billy is thus accused before he is accused. This is shown to him through his audience (Vere, who “stood prepared to scrutinize” Billy’s face) and his location (the ship captain’s cabin), just as the patient faces judgment as he stands vulnerably in the public hall (348). Before any trial or judgment can begin, Billy has already been identified; he is beckoned only to receive the accusation.

Of course, Vere’s intention, in histrionically keeping with his intellectual and highbrow demeanor, is to objectively accomplish justice, and he is taken aback—and visibly affected—by Billy’s lack of response: “Speak, man!” he implores Billy (349). Billy stands rooted to the spot, sputtering, again with narrative attention paid to his mouth as he stands “like one impaled and gagged” and in a “convulsed tongue-tie” (349). We also recall that he appears “struck as if by white leprosy,” as though assuming the diagnosis that has been assigned to him (349). He cannot respond or protest under Claggart’s fixing gaze: “The first mesmeristic glance [from Claggart] was one of serpent fascination; the last was the paralyzing lurch of the torpedo fish” (349). Melville, drawing upon his extensive nautical knowledge, here references the electric ray that kills its victims by paralyzing them. Claggart’s words and gaze, like the predatory stinging to which they are compared, function as a weapon, producing a physical effect on Billy. As Judith Butler describes in her work on performativity, “to be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context.”⁴⁷ And we indeed see Billy flounder, disoriented, unable to locate himself in the scene.

Vere is “struck by his [Billy’s] aspect,” and cannot understand his lack of speech and his physical metamorphosis (349). While Vere finally concludes that Billy must have a stutter, and that this “liability” is responsible for his behavior (349), we bear witness in the scene to the narrator’s earlier hint that the stutter might actually be something “even worse” (302). As much as Melville’s writing can ever be said to approach something like magical realism, we glimpse a fantastic change come over Billy when we see his

intent head and entire form straining forward in an agony of ineffectual eagerness to obey the injunction to speak and defend himself, [which] gave an expression to the face like that of a condemned vestal priestess in the moment of being buried alive, and in the first struggle against suffocation. (349)

What is perhaps most grotesque or off-putting in this description is Billy’s desire to do as told; his effort to speak comes not from a feeling of protest or the will to defend himself, but rather from an “*eagerness to obey the injunction to speak*” ordered by Vere. And here

precisely to acquire a certain identity, one purchased, as it were, with the price of guilt” (*Excitable Speech*, 25).

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 4.

we see how Billy perhaps plays an opposite to Bartleby in his dogged dedication to please and in his devoted subservience, recalling the St. Bernard to which he is initially compared. We might also note that he is so subsumed by the urge to obey that, like the man from the country in Kafka's parable, he does not understand that his passivity makes him "practically a fatalist" as our narrator had previously intoned (298).⁴⁸ This passive martyrdom takes a virginal turn, recalling Deleuze's saintly hypochondriac, as Melville invokes the "condemned vestal priestess" who is resigned to her fate of being buried alive but still chokes on the dirt thrown on her. So Billy sputters and spews at the words cast by Claggart to bury him; he chokes on his own passivity in the moment he is asked to defend himself.

Before we discuss the fatal punch to Claggart, we must note that Billy has reason to feel inhibited during the scene beyond his own naïveté. Early in the novella, on "the day following his impressment" into the service, Billy witnesses the public punishment of a novice crewmember (317). The scene is presented as a traumatic spectacle that drives home to Billy his own vulnerability to punishment:

When Billy saw the culprit's naked back under the scourge, gridironed with red welts and worse, when he marked the dire expression in the liberated man's face as with his woolen shirt flung over him by the executioner he rushed forward from the spot to bury himself in the crowd, Billy was horrified. He resolved that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof. (318; emphasis added)

Yet, as we know, Billy then finds himself suddenly "getting into petty trouble" following the incident, much to his own "surprise and concern" (318). The text here is ambiguous as to whether Billy unconsciously seeks trouble out after the incident, or if the "police oversight" of Billy increases because Claggart has his eye on him (318). Certainly, the old Dansker aboard the ship would urge us towards the latter interpretation, for he concludes upon hearing Billy's tale that "'Jemmy Legs' (meaning the master-at-arms) 'is down on you'" (320). Either way, I would argue that the traumatic spectacle of punishment marks an awakening of the superego in Billy. We are told explicitly that it is the very "first formal gangway punishment he had ever witnessed," and we are led to believe more broadly that it is Billy's first encounter with trauma (317).

It seems plausible to conclude that this voyeuristic and traumatic encounter for ideologically innocent Billy represents something akin to the primal scene. For the orphan sailor aboard a floating space of exclusively male relations, seeing the two figures, one dominant, one submissive, in a markedly physical scene he cannot comprehend. As Kaja Silverman notes on the subject, the imagistic domain is typically an empowering one for men, for vision "is culturally coded as a phallic function" that "helps to constitute masculinity."⁴⁹ What defines the primal scene as traumatic is precisely the

⁴⁸ The other Kafka text to allude to here is "The Judgment," in which we also witness a fatalistic passivity to words spoken by a figure of authority: Georg runs out of his apartment and leaps off a bridge after his father sentences him to death by drowning. I discuss this text in depth in my third chapter.

⁴⁹ Kaja Silverman, "Too Early/Too Late: Subjectivity and the Primal Scene in Henry James," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 2/3 (Winter 1988): 158. Silverman offers a beautiful reading of the primal scene and subjectivity in "The Beast in the Jungle" to which we will return.

fact that, as Silverman notes, visual knowledge becomes emasculating rather than exhilarating, “inducing a sense of inadequacy and exclusion.”⁵⁰ The scene is undeniably a formative one for Billy, a visual spectacle that organizes his behavior both consciously and unconsciously, for he has not understood what he has witnessed. After being “horrified,” his resulting avowal to be more “heedful in all things” follows the chastising influence of the admonishing superego (318).

I do wish to leave open here the possibility that the scene of corporeal punishment which Billy witnesses is not entirely distasteful to him, at least unconsciously—though it is unclear whether this would be out of homoeroticism, masochism, or fascination with what he has never before encountered: punishment. My point is that whether Billy is repulsed or fascinated by what he observes—or, indeed, both at once—the spectacle plays a part in his inability to respond verbally to the charges put before him. We can only imagine that, upon being formally accused by Claggart, the trauma of the scene again passes through Billy’s impressionable mind. Billy’s physical response to Claggart can thus be understood not as a posture of aggression or assault, but as a delayed defensive response to the physical trauma he has witnessed. That Billy should ‘strike before being struck’ would not be an unreasonable conclusion for him to draw.

We might also see Claggart’s fatal blow coming in that Claggart, in a certain sense, invites it; Claggart’s accusation stems from his desire to *test* Billy, thus recalling our goaded lawyer who cannot resist attempts to incite Bartleby. As Robert K. Martin puts it, “Claggart’s desire for Billy is not only a desire to hurt Billy, but also a desire to *provoke* Billy.”⁵¹ Claggart’s toying with Billy is not only related to his obvious homoerotic attraction for him, but also to the fact that he recognizes Billy as ideologically untouched and therefore untested. The narrator tells us that “the master-at-arms was perhaps the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd” (328). While others notice the Handsome Sailor and appreciate his charms, Claggart alone has “insight” into Billy’s innocence (328). Claggart, we see, “magnetically felt” that Billy’s good looks “went along with a nature” that “had in its simplicity never willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of the serpent” (327).⁵² Recognizing that Billy has never encountered injustice or difficulty, Claggart cannot resist the urge to meddle with him. Martin takes this line of reasoning a step further in arguing that the punch Claggart receives is one he has unconsciously sought out, and that “when Billy strikes Claggart, he in some way fulfills Claggart’s desire” to be “raped by Billy.”⁵³

Thus, the accusation that Claggart elaborately spins, replete with the booby trap of a bogus bribe, is precisely meant as an ideological experiment. Or, as the narrator conjectures, “Probably the master-at-arms’ clandestine persecution of Billy was started to

⁵⁰ Silverman, “Too Early/Too Late,” p. 158.

⁵¹ Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 112.

⁵² The various serpentine allusions to Claggart crafting schemes offer a facile reading that would align him with the devil attempting to test or thwart Billy/Adam. This is how the text has often been read traditionally, as Melville no doubt intended. For an illuminating and (less predictable) reading of how “goodness” and “wickedness” figure in the novella, see Hannah Arendt’s analysis of *Billy Budd* in *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963).

⁵³ Martin, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger*, p. 112.

try the temper of the man,” as though invented in a moment of boredom, in the way that children devise experiments to amuse themselves (330). The soup-spilling incident in the mess hall that seems to catalyze Claggart’s scheme therefore offers the excuse to target the sailor, and is thus a “welcome one” to Claggart (330). We have already suggested that Billy functions as a literary experiment within Melville’s oeuvre in terms of his startling innocence; as Sedgwick puts it, “a more ingenuous and less paranoid personality structure than Billy’s, we are repeatedly informed, it would be impossible to imagine.”⁵⁴ But the Handsome Sailor also serves as an experiment *within* the text. The cynical and seasoned Claggart cannot resist indoctrinating Billy, systematically setting traps for him and waiting to see how Billy will stumble through these. As Ronell argues, “Billy Budd’s resolute simplicity and his symbolic as well as factual illiteracy are made to confront the testing systems of the ironic doubter, the ever-destructive and tormenting Claggart.”⁵⁵

While Claggart experiments with Billy willfully, Vere tests him unwittingly and in the very attempt to aid him. The imperative Vere delivers in attempting to assist Billy is a contradictory one, a dual injunction which confuses our literal-minded Billy. The sailor, hearing his captain’s order to speak, against the accusation put to him, wants “to obey the injunction to speak and defend himself” but cannot (349). The conjunction here, “and,” is faulty, for Billy cannot “obey” and “defend” in the same act, given his position. For how does a servant obey an order to counter his master? As we have been previously told, Billy is “accustomed to obey orders without debating them,” but the order here is one he cannot merely follow (337). Would obedience here mean accepting the accusation of treachery, even though it is entirely fabricated? Or would obedience mean countering the accusation, and thus arguing with a superior? Is Billy to accept the charges put upon him, and so acquiesce to authority? Certainly, there is reason to think this would be the most obedient course of action since the accusation, already coming from a superior, places Billy in a position of suspicion; words spoken by those in authority carry a performative effect. Or, in the name of obedience, is Billy to deny the charges and heed Vere’s barking order to speak? If he accepts the accusation, he will be supporting a lie. If he defends himself and is honest, he will be countering a superior. Caught in this impossible interstice, Billy cannot locate speech. As Barbara Johnson notes, “the constative or referential content” of language “is eclipsed” for him.⁵⁶

The interpellatory scene consists of two separate ways Vere hails Billy in the moment of accusation. We have already mentioned the first of these in the dual injunction Vere issues: “‘Speak, man!’ said Captain Vere [...]. ‘Speak! Defend yourself!’” (349). After realizing that Billy is afflicted with a stutter, Vere softens his approach:

Going close up to the young sailor, and laying a soothing hand on his shoulder, he said, ‘There is no hurry, my boy. Take your time, take your time.’ (350)

⁵⁴ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 103.

⁵⁵ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*, p. 100.

⁵⁶ Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, p. 101.

Vere's commands take two forms of address: the first, stern and urgent, is aimed at a "man"; the second, paternal and coaxing, is directed to "my boy." Sedgwick aptly names these forms of address "two interpellatory imperatives," thus underscoring the extent to which the accusatory scene is ideologically loaded.⁵⁷ If Claggart attempts to ideologically pin Billy by baiting him with tricks and traps, Vere disorients him by seeming to offer him choice. Will you obey us or defy us? Will you submit to the accusation or defend yourself? Are you a man or a boy? These are the options Vere puts to Billy in the act of offering him assistance, though presented as binaries, they are not options Billy can affirm. Caught between boyhood and manhood, between compliance and defiance, between passivity and activity, Billy cannot respond to a logic of oppositions.

This binary logic, confusing to Billy, also becomes itself confused as the seemingly straightforward and static subject of health butts heads with authority. The issue of Vere's health—and in particular, his sanity—gets called into question by the ship's surgeon upon being summoned to examine Claggart's body. Struck by Vere's irrational handling of Billy and his general state of "agitation," the surgeon wonders whether the captain has become "unhinged" (352). The surgeon realizes, however, that the situation of questioning the captain's authority places him in the same impossible predicament as Billy when called to "obey" the dual injunction. As the surgeon reflects,

No more trying situation is conceivable than that of an officer subordinate under a captain whom he suspects to be not mad, indeed, but yet not quite unaffected in his intellects. To argue his order to him would be insolence. To resist him would be mutiny. (352-53)

The surgeon therefore suppresses his feeling that the "matter should be referred to the admiral" rather than tried by the captain himself, and follows orders (353). The moment marks perhaps the highest example of the relationship between performativity and the body, for through his authority as ship's captain, Vere implicitly issues himself a sound bill of mental health. No one can question Vere, not even a surgeon on the question of health, for any challenge to authority, particularly when issued as the state is being challenged, runs the risk of being characterized as treacherous.⁵⁸ That Billy cannot vindicate himself in language therefore speaks not only to his own weakness but to the authority and performative force of the state.

The blow Claggart takes to the head is therefore not just a spontaneous lashing out, but a long anticipated response with a slow wind-up. The knockout punch is the culmination of the many non-physical jabs Billy has taken since aboard the *Bellipotent*, jabs he has not necessarily recognized as such but which have affected him nonetheless.

⁵⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 99. We are indebted to Sedgwick here for her observation on this double interpellation, though she does not comment further on the accusatory encounter as relating to ideology, nor does she relate the double imperative to her own discussion of what she terms "binarisms" in *Billy Budd*.

⁵⁸ There is no better contemporary example of this than the recent USA PATRIOT Act which, through its acronymic name, threatens that any challenge to it is unpatriotic and therefore suspect. For more on this subject, see Robert Harvey and H el ene Volat's *De l'exception   la r egle: USA PATRIOT Act* (Paris: Lignes, 2006).

The traumatic scene of punishment, his ensuing trouble with authority, the bribe offered to him—these have all disconcerted Billy, for he does not have the skill-set or experience to negotiate them. Each of these moments represents an encounter with ideology because each explicitly involves authority, rules and discipline; further, each encounter functions as a litmus test or a way of reading Billy. We observe how he reacts and responds after viewing the disciplinary beating, after receiving the threat of disciplinary action, and after being offered a bribe that is intended to test his temperament. And despite feeling “more at a loss than [ever] before,” he cannot find relief or assistance (334): his “ineffectual speculations” on his environment offer no help because they are so “alien” to him, for Billy has never before had to wonder or worry about his world (335). Nor does he find much comfort in the old Dansker’s enigmatic proclamations puffed out in pipe smoke (335). Like a person with no immune system suddenly exposed to a host of contagions, Billy’s system is overwhelmed. As Ronell puts it, Billy “is forced to endure tests that can only be failed” (101). Offered no remedy or reprieve, Billy can only find rest in death, disguised convincingly as justice.

The only identificatory label that has ever stuck to Billy is that of the Handsome Sailor. Accordingly, he knows how to be handsome, and knows in the most basic way how to be a sailor. But beyond these simplistic ways of operating, he does not know himself and does not know other modes of survival. Every test put to Billy, whether accidentally or craftily schemed, yields a surprising result for Billy is wholly unanticipatory as a subject: he has never given thought, nor been exposed, to the world around him. He is thus like a hypochondriac raised in a world lacking contagion and then cast out into a virulent one; he is phobic and weak because he has never been exposed to contagion. The boy raised in the bubble, in other words, would never be able to survive outside that bubble.

Billy shows us a pure passivity that is infuriatingly infantile. He is energetically ignorant, so passive that his passivity becomes a force, an energy that launches itself out of his arm in a sudden arc, catching the man trying to trap him in an almost poetic punch. But, of course, Billy neither questions the assault he launches nor its consequences. Unlike Bartleby, whose passivity is defiant (to the point of fasting when he is in prison), Billy submits to the judicial process and wholly accepts how his punch is interpreted. If Bartleby frustrates those around him by using passivity strategically, Billy frustrates by submitting to passivity completely, without any sense of strategy or, we are told, without irony, for he is “by no means of a satirical” nature (298). A blank slate, Billy can be written upon (and about), and the words stick.

“The Beast in the Jungle”

John Marcher is straightforwardly and unambiguously phobic, living in a constant state of apprehension over an unnamed and shrouded monstrosity after which the short story is named. He articulates a wish for illness early in the narrative, musing wistfully to himself that “it would have been nice if he could have been taken with fever, alone, at his hotel, and she [May Bartram] could have come to look after him,” for “*then* they would be in possession of the something or other that their actual show seemed to lack.”⁵⁹ Marcher thinks this to himself in the story’s opening pages, upon reencountering Bartram and wishing that they had some episode or shared adventure in their past to connect them as they flounder for conversation. But this musing, which is really a set of wishes (to be ill; to be tended to; to be in possession of something concrete with May) haunts the short story in its entirety. Recalling Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Against the Grain*, James’ text is one in which nothing seems to happen. Marcher and May spend their time in wait, anticipating “the beast” which Marcher dreads to show itself, and so the wish for a catastrophic event like illness pertains to the text as a whole. Indeed, when Marcher reflects to himself that “it was failure not to be anything,” we can hear in his morose sentiment a wish for illness (323).

Yet my interest in this chapter is not only in considering Marcher as a bachelor hypochondriac, but also in thinking about the text itself in relation to hypochondria. While the diagnosis of a disorder is tempting given Marcher’s own sense that he spends his life “thinking of nothing but dreadful things,” I am more interested in reading the text as emblematic of hypochondria. “The Beast in the Jungle” exemplifies a restless textual anxiety, and the very title of the short story invites us to imagine what the “beast” plaguing John Marcher could be. However, James simultaneously refutes any easy definition or interpretation of the puzzle, thus placing us in the position of the puzzled physician who listens to his patient’s description of symptoms with bewilderment. In other words, the text incites interpretive play but also delimits that play by insisting that the text’s figurative beast remain veiled. The text thus calls to mind the hypochondriac, who simultaneously invites diagnosis but continually displaces the diagnostic process. The hypochondriac’s symptoms, like Marcher’s beast, can never be accounted for, and any diagnostic or hermeneutic process must therefore seek to maintain—not overthrow or undo—the protagonist’s *own investment in his condition and its unknowability*. Marcher feels that it is not only his fate to live under the shadow of some imminent threat, but to never know the content of the threat until it is too late. And so he must wait, inhibited, under the weight of a secret.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* brilliantly reads this oppressive “secret” under which Marcher lives as really being about male homosexual crisis, arguing that Marcher evokes the closet or the closeted life through his anxiety and apprehension. Yet, as we will see, Sedgwick’s compelling analysis is ultimately

⁵⁹ Henry James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” *Tales of Henry James*, eds. Christof Wegelin and Henry B. Wonham (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003), here. p. 306, original emphasis. Cited hereafter in the text.

untenable because she violates the interpretive protocols set up by her own reading. Sedgwick states that we must resist the hermeneutic urge to translate Marcher's condition or decode it. As she puts it, "to crack a code and enjoy the reassuring exhilarations of knowingness is to buy into the specific formula 'We Know What That Means.'"⁶⁰ In other words, Marcher's perception of his looming catastrophe as an enigmatic secret must be hermeneutically respected if the text is to be understood. Seizing the features of his experience as evidence for a particular reading that claims to decipher this secret would be to give into the "reassuring exhilarations" of cognitive mastery, and would place this triumphant mastery at a premium over the text itself. But, as we will see, the concealed nature of his secret is difficult to abide by because it tests our own cognitive limits. My aim, as I engage closely with Sedgwick's analysis here, will not be to "disprove" her reading, but rather to consider how Sedgwick's own reading of the piece might be symptomatic of the story's rhetorical traits.

Sedgwick at first reflects the hermeneutic decorum described above when she argues that "the secret of having a secret functions, in Marcher's life, precisely as *the closet*. It is not a closet in which there is a homosexual man [...]. Yet it is unmistakable that Marcher lives as one who is *in the closet*."⁶¹ Why does this distinction between "the closet" and "the homosexual man" matter, and how are we to read it? Couldn't one say that the closet is nothing more than a metonymic reference to homosexuality? And, further, if there is no homosexual man in the closet, how are we to imagine the closet? What would an empty closet signify? Or, to put it another way, if the knowledge of one's sexual identity is not being repressed, how can a closet be said to exist?

First, to argue that Marcher is a repressed homosexual man would be to miss the fact that he *does not want out of the closet*. In the discourse of sexuality, the closet as a figurative trope signifies a *topos* for repression, unconscious or otherwise. One is "in the closet" when consciously or unconsciously repressing his (or her) sexual identity in an act of self-protection, because facing the prospect of living out that identity is, for any number of reasons, overwhelming or frightening. To live a "closeted" life therefore suggests living a fictional one for appearance's sake, or not living out one's true identity; one lives instead harboring or repressing the knowledge of a secret. To live with a secret is to live under a terrible weight, much as Marcher lives his daily life: apprehensively and tentatively, with a permanent sense of being "haunted" (227). That Sedgwick locates and draws out the analogy between a closeted life and Marcher's existence is genius, for it enables us to understand better the puzzle of Marcher's daily existence, the nature of his solitude, and the experience of his relentless anxiety.

But we also notice that Marcher's experience of the closet differs from the above description in that he *enjoys* the closet in a certain way and the space it presents. Indeed, May Bartram's sympathy and support do not cause Marcher to panic in fear of having been "spotted" or recognized for what he "really is." To the contrary, Marcher exalts in May Bartram's knowledge of what they together call "the real truth" about him (229), to the point that, as Sedgwick describes, "the admission of May Bartram importantly *consolidates and fortifies* the closet."⁶² May's "knowledge" of his secret begins "rather

⁶⁰ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 204.

⁶¹ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 205.

⁶² Sedgwick, p. 206.

strangely” to “taste sweet to him” (221). Having a witness present to “watch with” Marcher in waiting for the eventual “catastrophe” offers welcome support—not by providing company (for, as we will see, Marcher never shakes his solitude) but by verifying and affirming his own version of reality (224).

In other words, Marcher only feels repressed to the extent that his closet or secret goes unrecognized; he understandably wants and needs to believe in the closet, for he has devoted his life to it. He is thus like the hypochondriac, who wants his sense of illness to be recognized and legitimized; Marcher’s fear is that his perception of the looming threat is “all a mistake,” one he has falsely imagined (246). May’s compassionate words thus performatively constitute the closet, establishing it more securely in existence, and this brings relief to Marcher. She becomes “practically, against the rest of the world, his kind wise keeper” and (229), with the authority he attributes to her perceptions, she becomes “the true voice of the law” (250). What would annihilate Marcher more than the beast itself is the absence of any beast; similarly, what would devastate the hypochondriac is the absence of bodily complaints. May Bartram, as not only a co-conspirator in the establishment of the closet but its eventual authoritative voice and ambassador, assures Marcher that this is not the case; she is like the physician who assures the hypochondriac—finally, blessedly—that he is not imagining his symptoms. This opinion performatively endorses the symptoms (in this case, belief in the beast), and Marcher accordingly equates May Bartram with authority and “the true voice of law,” for she has told him what he has long yearned to hear.

Sedgwick’s trope of the closet is therefore indispensable to any attentive reading of the story, not only for its attention to the homosexual inflections in the text but for the interpretive “lens” it offers with which to view Marcher’s sense of secrecy. However, Sedgwick changes course during her analysis, proceeding to read the closet not as a figurative trope as we have been doing so far, but as expressly relating to *nothing other than* repressed homosexuality. My objection here is not to the suggestion of homosexual panic within James’ text; my objection is rather to the distillation of a promised “plurality of meanings” in Sedgwick’s analysis into a *single* meaning.⁶³

As Kaja Silverman points out, Sedgwick’s analysis is ultimately untenable for her treatment of the text’s conclusion; Silverman notes of Sedgwick that “her reading is very elegant and persuasive, but she is obliged to discount the ending in order to secure it.”⁶⁴ As Silverman reminds us, we are asked explicitly in Sedgwick’s reading to consider an alternate ending to the short story in which Mary Bartram does not die, and the spark of heterosexual fulfillment suggested in Marcher’s revelation in the graveyard does not come to pass. This is surely an odd interpretive move, put to us by Sedgwick in three commands:

Imagine “The Beast in the Jungle” without this enforcing symmetry.
Imagine (remember) the story with Mary Bartram alive. Imagine a possible alterity. (200)

These instructions strike me as rhetorically coercive, not only because they grammatically occur in the imperative form, but because they are couched in the

⁶³ Sedgwick, p. 204.

⁶⁴ Kaja Silverman, “Too Early/Too Late,” here p. 163.

language of fidelity. The parenthetical note to “remember” a different story is accompanied by a footnote in Sedgwick’s text recalling that in James’ *Notebooks*, “the woman outlives the man.”⁶⁵ But how can the instruction to “imagine” be equated in the same breath with the plea to “remember”? How can the cognitive process of imagination be equated with that of memory? What Sedgwick asks us to perform in rewriting the story’s conclusion is surely a creative act, one characterized by interpretive betrayal rather than fidelity. For if we are to truly be faithful to the text and to remember it, we cannot privilege an unpublished version over the official one in the name of accomplishing a particular reading.

Sedgwick therefore ultimately performs the cognitive “We Know What That Means” operation with the closet, reading it not in “a series of ‘full’” meanings, as she promises, but in one meaning only.⁶⁶ She perhaps forgets that initially, according to her own reading, the closet began as a figurative analogy: “Marcher lives *as one* who is in the closet” and “the secret functions *as the closet*” (emphasis modified). What we therefore witness in Sedgwick’s interpretation is a rhetorical depletion in which the closet, initially employed to limn the various “unspeakables” of the text, gets reduced to its original context of homosexuality rather than filled with other interpretive possibilities. This occurs as a discursive collapse, for what begins as analogy (“Marcher lives *as one* who is in the closet”) gets translated to literality (Marcher being *in* the closet), the simile pulled out from under us. The previous impossibility of a homosexual man inside this closet (“It is not a closet in which there is a homosexual man”) gets transformed into Marcher’s liberation “as a homosexual man or as a man with a less exclusively defined sexuality that nevertheless admits the possibility of desires for other men.”⁶⁷

My intention here is not to attack these inconsistencies as faults, but rather to draw attention to explicit parallels between Marcher’s experience and Sedgwick’s analysis of it as symptomatic, as though the story “rubs off” on the critic. It is surprising that others reading Sedgwick do not make note of the ending she asks us to imagine⁶⁸; and though Kaja Silverman draws attention to the need to discuss “homosexuality within the story without at the same time refusing its conclusion,” she does not pause to consider the circumstances that might generate Sedgwick’s reading.⁶⁹ In other words, it goes without saying that Sedgwick is an especially attentive and astute reader—so why has no one thought to question the strangeness of her treatment of the graveyard scene?

If we are to think through the ways Sedgwick’s reading might be a symptomatic one, we might first note that her analysis “closets” itself off, bracketing itself from other

⁶⁵ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, here p. 200 and 200n in which the *Notebooks* are discussed.

⁶⁶ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 205

⁶⁷ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 206.

⁶⁸ Critical readings that engage with Sedgwick’s but make no allusion to her treatment of the text’s conclusion include Peter Brook’s analysis in *The Melodramatic Imagination; Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Stanley Cavell in “Postscript (1989): To Whom It May Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990); and David Van Leer, “The Beast of the Closet: Homosociality and the Pathology of Manhood,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Spring 1989), 587-605. This last reference is surprising given Van Leer’s obvious attempt to attack Sedgwick’s reading of James’ text. One would think any serious attempt to critique her text would consider her reading of the conclusion, though, as Van Leer’s remark here suggests, his essay is unfortunately not rigorous or productive in this way.

⁶⁹ Silverman, p. 163.

possibilities and closing its doors to other interpretive currents to the point of needing to subvert the story's conclusion. The trajectory of her interpretation is unable to resist the lure of the beast's cognitive trap; like Marcher, she must follow the interpretive lure to the point of getting backed into a corner, to the point that a bubble or "closet" forms around her. In this light, she perhaps unconsciously partakes in Marcher's anxiety, sharing his phobic state: if his sense of secrecy operates in a closeted way, shutting him off to the possibilities around him, so too does her analysis.

We might also say that in following the lure of the closet, Sedgwick unconsciously takes up the role of May Bartram, playing precisely the part of sexual detective as she describes it: "her [May's] involvement with him [Marcher] occurs originally on the ground of her understanding that he is imprisoned by homosexual panic; and her own interest in his closet is not at all in helping him fortify it but in helping him dissolve it."⁷⁰ If this comparison feels like a stretch because it brings in the critic personally, it is worth noting that Sedgwick herself draws attention to her "own eros and experience" in an atypically personal moment in the analysis: "there is a particular relation to truth and authority that a mapping of male homosexual panic offers to a woman in the emotional vicinity."⁷¹ David Van Leer, I think, misreads and over-reacts to this confession, seizing it as proof that Sedgwick represents, in his unkind formulation, a "fag hag."⁷² However, if the possibility of attending to sexual crisis is what attracts May Bartram to the "project" of John Marcher, so is Sedgwick drawn to the critical engagement with homosexual panic "The Beast in the Jungle."

Further, in much the same way that May Bartram is accorded a position of cognitive mastery in relation to Marcher's secret, defining its content, so too does Sedgwick achieve this voice, rewriting the story's end. That Sedgwick rewrites the story's close under the guise of memory, recalling a previous version of narrative events from James' *Notebooks*, also mimics May Bartram's relation to memory as the keeper of different versions of story.

"The Beast in the Jungle" opens with a sense of *déjà vu*, for May Bartram is delivered to us not as a "new" character but as one Marcher has already previously encountered. As he excitedly places her and "the missing link" in his memory "is supplied" (217), he rattles off the details of their first encounter much to her amusement—for "in his haste to make everything right he had got most things rather wrong" (218). Bartram proceeds to point out the inconsistencies in his story, reminding him that their meeting actually "hadn't been at Rome—it had been at Naples; and it hadn't been eight years before—it had been more nearly ten. She hadn't been either with her uncle and aunt, but with her mother and her brother" (218). This inventory of corrections (the discussion of which continues for two pages) perhaps provides for us a warning about the nature of interpretive puzzles: for in our rush to fill in the blanks, we, like Marcher, get things wrong. The light bulb that goes off in Marcher's mind in his eagerness to solve the puzzle of placing Bartram is a false one.

⁷⁰ Sedgwick, p. 206.

⁷¹ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 209.

⁷² David Van Leer, "The Beast of the Closet: Homosexuality and the Pathology of Manhood." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Spring 1989): 587-605, here p. 602.

We thus notice that in the story's opening, May Bartram installs herself as the guardian of narrative memory, and Sedgwick, we remember, gives herself this role in championing James' *Notebooks*. We see this even more clearly following Bartram's catalogue of corrections when she reminds Marcher—much to his surprise—that he had, during their previous meeting, confessed to her his great secret. That Marcher has somehow managed to forget this confession is shocking, not only to us but to him: “a light broke for him and the blood slowly came to his face, which began to burn with recognition. ‘Do you mean that I told you—?’” (221). Marcher's body betrays his surprise, his flushing face symptomatically testifying to the fact that he has already started to lose control of the secret over to Bartram. While Marcher has previously always been the secret beast's keeper, he flushes as she begins to insinuate herself as its guardian.

In one (simple) version of events, May Bartram earns Marcher's trust and eventually comes to be his sole companion, providing him with the ruse of heteronormativity for society and offering him much-needed friendship. But in another (more complex) version of events, May Bartram plays tug of war with Marcher, subtly battling for ownership of the secret and eventually wresting its reigns from him: towards the end of the story, Marcher comes to sense that May knows the secret beast and is in possession of knowledge of its content: “You know something I don't,” he tells her (244). This too is what the text would whisper if it were to concede to Sedgwick's rewriting—for how could Bartram possibly speak for Marcher's secret? How indeed could Sedgwick define his closet?

May comes to own Marcher's secret, to lay claim over it and speak for it, just as Sedgwick comes to define it. Both Bartram and Sedgwick diagnose Marcher, making claims on his sexuality that affect narrative events in relation to the alleged secret. Bartram indeed “feels desire” for Marcher, as Sedgwick's reading acknowledges and conventional views of the story iterate, and when she realizes that she cannot dissolve Marcher's phobia or bring him to recognize her outside of their shared secret, she uses her position of confidence and trust to reinterpret and manipulate Marcher's fears.⁷³ Instead of remaining the co-conspirator in what Maxwell Geismar terms their “double and shared voyeurism,” as the two wait together and watch, she places herself in a performative position of authority.⁷⁴

We begin to see this transformation as May speaks enigmatically and in code to Marcher, like an oracle. Because she cannot get Marcher to acknowledge or engage with her outside of the topic of the beast, even in a desperate physical attempt in which she “rose from her chair” and “showed herself, all draped and all soft, in her fairness and slimness,” she hangs over his head the only lure in her possession: an interpretation of his fate, a “belief” which she will not state outright but hints at enough so that its hopeful message of heterosexual possibility finally comes to Marcher in the graveyard (245).

What interests me about Bartram's behavior is not its manipulative aspect but its performative force. Our other two bachelor hypochondriacs, Bartleby and Billy, have those around them who attempt to interpret or place them, but Bartram is unique in her

⁷³ Sedgwick, p. 206

⁷⁴ Maxwell Geismar, “Henry James: ‘The Beast in the Jungle’” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (June 1963), pp. 35-42, here p. 35.

position of authority. Most conventional readings bafflingly write off Bartram tragically, as sacrificing herself to the lost cause of Marcher's imagined beast. Sedgwick, who acknowledges that Bartram "has the advantage of him, cognitively," and that she has a "free-floating irony" about her that "becomes stronger and stronger," can conclude only that May Bartram's "care" and "creativity," and "her fostering [of] his homosexual potential" demonstrate "forms of gender-political resilience" (210). In other words, Bartram is an especially keen and doting nurse to the repressed homosexual man. Kaja Silverman, who agrees that Bartram is a "structural excrescence" in Sedgwick's reading and wishes to find a place for her in the "libidinal economy" of the text, is unable to discuss Bartram outside of her death.⁷⁵ Stanley Cavell intriguingly reads Bartram and Marcher as in an antagonistic marriage of sorts in which Marcher's trust is both "well-placed" and "ill-placed," for Bartram cannot control "what will happen or will not happen to him."⁷⁶

What I wish to emphasize as shared between these (obviously very different) readings is the way in which Bartram can be acknowledged only in relation to Marcher and/or in relation to death. My intent is not, by contrast, to attempt to read May Bartram "on her own," or to attempt to imagine her independently of Marcher; to do so would require the kind of revisionist creativity I critique in Sedgwick's reading. Bartram is implicitly a relational character, whether to Marcher, the "beast," or even the stranger in the graveyard, as Silverman argues. What I do hope to draw attention to is her performative influence over Marcher, and the way in which she re-orientates the riddle of his fate and affects the temporal trajectory of the text.

It is when Bartram falls ill, growing frail, and sickly in appearance, that her sway over Marcher begins; diminishing in size, she increases in power because her physical vulnerability draws Marcher's attention egotistically to his own dependence on her. Her frailty renews his panic for, naturally, he thinks of how she has become "more useful to him than ever" in their interpretive quest (238). As she is "less and less able to leave" her home, he must visit her so that she, enthroned and enrobed, becomes an "impenetrable sphinx" holding court (239/241). Thus while May Bartram has always accompanied Marcher, both literally and figuratively attending to him, he must now wait on her, circling her, feigning to repress his egotistical impulse but inevitably succumbing to it as they renew their discussions of that looming threat, but this time confrontationally, Marcher attempting to elicit knowledge from her as she resists his efforts. If this sounds like coy flirtation, Marcher is indeed hot on the interpretive trail as she enigmatically evades him and, worse, threatens to expire before his eyes, without his questions answered.

The exchanges they bat back and forth seem designed by James expressly to reveal to us, infuriatingly, Marcher's heterosexual blind spot:

She was frail and ancient and charming as she continued to look at him [...]. "Do you consider that we went far?"

⁷⁵ Silverman, p. 163. In Silverman's brilliant reading, Bartram posthumously partakes in a primal scene with the widower in the graveyard, the two compromising between them a heterosexual moment of passion (though never, of course, physically present to one another).

⁷⁶ Stanley Cavell, "Postscript (1989): To Whom It May Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990) University of Chicago, pp. 248 – 289, here p. 277.

“Why I thought it was the point that you were just making—that we had looked most things in the face.”

“Including each other?” She still smiled. (243-44)

It would perhaps not be inappropriate to claim that Bartram dies of exasperation: “It’s never too late” she pleads, “her cold sweet eyes on him,” but Marcher remains wholly aloof to the flirtation (246). “Don’t you know—now?” she queries. He repeats the strange term back: “‘Now’—?” (247). The punctuation pile-up surrounding the term marks it graphically as a stumbling block for Marcher. As someone who has been in the modality of waiting and wondering, paralyzed by what Derrida would term the event, or the “to come,” Marcher is too fixated on the horizon to notice May Bartram beside him.

Bartram therefore executes a temporal switch on Marcher. Despite the obvious pain she is in, he presses her: “What then has happened?” (248), to which she responds, “What *was* to” (248). Swiftly, with a monosyllabic past participle, Bartram delivers a discursive blow to Marcher, authoritatively and unequivocally snapping him out of his fixation on the future. She effectively introduces two new words to Marcher which startle and vex him: “now” and “was.” She thereby exposes him to two entirely different modalities, the present and the past, which send him reeling. Marcher’s shock stems not only from the idea that the secret has passed, but that he must accordingly re-orient himself.

Following this, for the “first time” in “their acquaintance,” she then refuses to see him (248), keeping him “at bay” for a “series of days,” hoping no doubt that her message will hit its mark (249). Just to be safe, she reinstructs him upon seeing him: “I’m not sure you understood. You’ve nothing to wait for more. It *has* come” (249). In a last-ditch effort to lure Marcher, Bartram is clearly bent on putting the “beast” behind them: “Did we ever dream, with all our dreams, that we should sit and talk of it thus?” she asks, referring to “this side,” the “*other* side” of the secret (251). “It’s past. It’s behind,” she reiterates (251). “Before, you see, it was always to *come*. That kept it present” (251).

It does not happen easily, but May Bartram is able to finally get Marcher to awaken from his reverie and his horizon-oriented gaze. Bartram is suddenly the one in charge of the riddle, dictating its content and thus performatively recreating Marcher’s universe. She alters Marcher’s gaze so that he no longer apprehensively anticipates the future but finally looks over his shoulder at what has passed between them. Sedgwick notes that there are two secrets in the text: the inner one, which is what Marcher senses about his destiny and shares with May Bartram, and the outer one, which is the (closeted) sense of having a secret. But I would contend that there is a third secret, which is the one Bartram creates of heterosexual romance.

Bartram creates this secret as she realizes that she will die without Marcher ever having understood her feelings for him or having appreciated her. Her fear of dying unloved, located in the experience of illness, determines the content of the secret; she thus appoints herself Marcher’s diagnostician in a moment of phobia, facing her own demise and her own solitude. Interestingly, once Marcher hears her diagnosis, his own phobia is lifted; the beast disappears. In other words, *her* phobia works to lift his phobia. Furthermore, a concrete definition of the beast functions to annihilate the beast. We can only wonder here if issuing an actual diagnosis to a hypochondriac would similarly vanquish completely the hypochondriasis.

Bartram orchestrates the diagnostic scene and crafts it, and the utterances she issues to Marcher while ill function cohesively as a curse. As Judith Butler has remarked in a different context, the discursive effect of the curse is necessarily belated;⁷⁷ the effects of a curse cannot be felt until later in time, and the curse necessarily causes a sense of haunting: the speaker, long since separated from her declaration, is conjured back to the scene when her words come to fruition. That Marcher will remain haunted is anticipated by the widower in the cemetery and the “raw glare of his grief” (260). Marcher’s final act in the text, we must remember, is to throw himself upon May Bartram’s grave. The true “closet” of the text, then, perhaps occurs at its end, figured visually by the casket over which Marcher throws himself; Marcher will become entombed by his grief and by the paralyzing knowledge of all that he suddenly sees. Grief defines Marcher’s beast, but only because May Bartram defined it as heterosexual romance first.

Marcher’s hypochondria is dispelled due to Bartram’s orchestrations; her tireless work in speaking to Marcher—enigmatically, evasively—breaks the figurative bubble of his solitary existence. Bartram changes his posture from a phobic, anticipatory one to a grieving one of regret in which she will be remembered by Marcher rather than lost to him. And, as we know of the bachelor hypochondriac, to affect change is no easy task. She perhaps functions like Claggart, possessed by the desire for a man in sexual crisis and wanting to lay a trap for him. But what we must consider in any reading of May Bartram is that she penetrates the bachelor hypochondriac’s inner sanctum and there, through speech, causes havoc.

Bartleby’s mantra, Billy’s stutter, and Bartram’s curse: all of these demonstrate to us the material effects of the signifier on the subject, for all three of the bachelor hypochondriacs considered here are at the mercy of speech: Bartleby clings to his refrain, Billy stutters helplessly, and Marcher falls prey to Bartram’s diagnostic curse. Let us not forget that “The Beast in the Jungle” opens with a meditation on speech, drawing attention to the discursive act as it will continue to shape Marcher in his and May’s many exchanges; the text’s opening words are, “What determined the speech that startled him [...]” (215). “The Beast in the Jungle” is perhaps the history of exchanges between Marcher and May, a repository of the “speech that startled him,” from confession to curse, and is thus as a text devoted to rhetoricity. We witness through the story the ways in which Marcher is constituted by and utterly in the grip of language. Though the “event” that awaits him is figured as a crouching beast, and envisioned by him alternately as a “thing” or “catastrophe,” it, of course, ends up referring to nothing more than words (224).

⁷⁷ For more, see Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Chapter Four:

Assimilative Hypochondria

Intrasubjective Battle and the Ethnoracially Marked Body in *The Woman Warrior*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Shame*

There is only one antidote to mental suffering, and
that is physical pain.

—Karl Marx

Encounters with racial and ethnic difference are often typified as a clash with “otherness” in which a newcomer, whether colonialist or immigrant, scorns or idealizes the alternate set of cultural practices he discovers while in turn becoming an object of scrutiny to those around him. While the particular features of cultural tension vary in ways that must not be reduced or glossed over between different ethnic narratives, the trope of cultural collision and its negotiation finds resonance across traditions and genres, from postcolonial fiction to African American literature to immigrant writing. And yet, a less-discussed but equally compelling feature of assimilative literature is the way in which subjects are not only pitted against one another but against themselves; ethnic narratives document both inter- and intra-subjective moments of cultural rejection, yearning, and ambivalence. Characters like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, for example, are forced to confront their own differences and particularities from mainstream culture, which may feel hopelessly like inadequacies. The brown eyes Pecola sees staring back at her in the mirror in Toni Morrison’s novel are unsatisfactorily dark, and her gaze thus marks both an inter- and intra-subjective tension; Pecola is not at home with her surrounding culture, nor is she at home in her own body.

In the group of texts discussed in this chapter, I argue that bodily fixations, phobias, and symptoms attest to the fraught nature of the assimilative process. While I cannot seek to do justice to all of the features of the complex texts I treat in the short space of this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate how the discourse of hypochondria draws attention to an ambivalent and obsessive relationship to one’s body in ethnic writing. Keeping in mind our definition of the hypochondriac as a person who endlessly tends to her body’s signification and its legitimacy in a preoccupied way, the three novels discussed here reveal the body to be a contested site of battle. In each, the body strains under the cultural pressure of assimilation, at times buckling under its weight, at other times finding reprieve in illness.

In the first half of this chapter, I focus on cultural assimilation in twentieth century America by turning to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975) and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Kingston’s autobiographically routed novel, which blurs the distinction between fiction

and memoir, speaks candidly to the unease of the assimilative project in the United States. Indeed, the genre-blurring nature of the novel is fitting for the questions Kingston raises about how one fashions a sense of self as the daughter of immigrants, with no clear model to follow; part of what Kingston calls attention to is the sometimes unavoidable need for invention and fiction in negotiating one's cultural inheritance. Preoccupied with the task of locating a genuine sense of cultural belonging, the narrator frets over her own health, noting the symptoms that plague her whenever she returns home, as well as the "mysterious illness" that sends her into a Proustian convalescence as an adolescent. The quest to be "healthy," and the implicit notions of health and normativity framed by culture, speak directly to how the narrator responds to her cultural heritage.

Morrison's novel, which takes place in Lorain, Ohio during the late 1930s, recounts the story of a young black girl who yearns for blue eyes and who ultimately suffers a psychological breakdown under the weight of cultural and familial rejection. Pecola Breedlove's desperate wish for physical change and her fetishistic fixation on eye-color reveal the body to be a stubborn source of resistance in assimilation; Pecola can admire Shirley Temple, but cannot become her. Morrison's novel urges us to consider the dangerous longings prompted by cultural ideals, for Pecola's wish to be otherwise—a wish, after all, that merely follows what ideology inscribes—is what causes her to unravel.

In the second half of this chapter, I turn to a postcolonial and postmodern context in Salman Rushdie's novel, *Shame* (1980). In his self-described allegory relating the secession of Pakistan from India, Rushdie constructs a charged narrative space in which the physical body is intimately tied to questions of nationhood. Sufiyya Zinobia, a mentally retarded girl born to the Hyders, a political couple at the helm of the new nation, suffers a "plague of shame" to atone for the sins of her militaristic and unremorseful family. Erupting with boils and burning so feverishly that she cannot be touched, Sufiyya exhibits symptoms that articulate hyperbolically the shame of corruption and murder that those around her seek to repress. Reading the novel alongside Freud's case study of Dora, I argue that Rushdie's allegorical space exemplifies hysteria; Rushdie creates Sufiyya as a somatic outlet for the repressed trauma of the collective psyche in the text. In turn, both Rushdie's novel and Freud's case study speak to hypochondria because of the interpretive processes and claims regarding the body posited in each text.

The texts addressed in this chapter are all pioneer narratives in a sense, as protagonists attempt to fashion themselves and assert themselves into mainstream culture. In all three of these novels, a young girl—and, specifically in each case, a daughter—pays the price for the family around her, absorbing its unresolved tensions and paying the price somatically: Kingston's narrator worries over her body in her quest to find a "ghost-free" space of health; Pecola Breedlove fantasizes that having blue eyes will change her place in the world, freeing her from the shame of her family; and Sufiyya Zinobia's body stands in and speaks for her family's unarticulated shame. The female body becomes the locus of unease in these texts, the corporeal receptacle for assimilative pressures as well as the narrative embodiment of those tensions. The discourse of hypochondria illuminates the way in which the body becomes an allegorized site in assimilative narratives, with symptoms speaking a powerful discourse.

Part I.

The Woman Warrior: A Crisis of Veracity and Health

I think part of what we have to do is figure out a new kind of autobiography that can tell the truth about dreams and visions and prayers. I find that absolutely necessary for our mental and political health.

—Maxine Hong Kingston

Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston traces competing cultural narratives that place the narrator squarely at the center of a battle between China and America, familial duty and individual choice, and cultural tradition and personal autonomy. The novel thus stages a prototypical tension seen in ethnic writing between what historian David A. Hollinger terms pluralist and cosmopolitan ways of operating.¹ As Hollinger defines these terms in *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, pluralism “respects inherited boundaries and locates individuals within one or another of a series of ethno-racial groups to be protected and preserved,” while cosmopolitanism “is more wary of traditional enclosures and favors voluntary affiliations.”² This tension between tradition and choice, which manifests itself in Kingston’s text primarily as a generational conflict between mother and daughter, is a familiar one in twentieth century ethnic narratives. What separates Kingston’s novel from others, however, is its hermeneutic forwardness and its shrewd attention to the act of storytelling. Kingston exposes and lays bare a set of interpretive questions that plague the narrator in her attempts to make sense of her mother’s stories and family’s history:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?³

The direct address to a Chinese-American audience here is characteristic of Kingston’s narrative style, both for its frank appeal as well as for the collapse between narrator and

¹ I refer to the text purposefully as a novel here, for, as I discuss below, part of my interest in the work stems from its genre-blurring status. While Kingston commonly in interviews equates herself with the narrative voice and recounts in the work episodes from her childhood, it seems reductive and overly facile on the part of critics to treat the work as pure autobiography.

² David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), here p. 3.

³ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), here p. 6. Cited hereafter in this chapter in the text, by page number.

author. This provocatively framed endeavor, to distinguish culturally established tradition from one family's particular set of practices, and thus to decipher "what is Chinese," guides the novel from its opening chapter on the narrator's aunt to its closing story of Ts'ai Yen, an ancient Chinese poetess.

Throughout Kingston's genre-blurring text, whose title at first signals fiction (*The Woman Warrior*) but then gestures toward autobiography (*Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*), Kingston weaves in and out of different narrative modes.⁴ Her tone seems at times confessional and deeply personal, yet at other moments is that of an effortless storyteller as she seamlessly spins stories from existing Chinese myths and history. Kingston interweaves memoir, mythology, familial history, novel, and academic rumination in a text that moves geographically and temporally from a family-run laundry in California to a "barbarian" tribe in China, the nomadic Hsiung-nu, in 175 A.D. She collapses narrative frames, shifting from a character's point of view to authorial interjection without warning. The resulting text is a pastiche that moves beguilingly between settings, characters, genres, and times, placing the reader in precisely the interpretive bind that Kingston describes as fuelling the book: how do we tell fact from fiction, or personal story from cultural tradition? How do we treat narrative embellishments in the context of an orally transmitted culture, where stories passed from immigrants to children form the nexus of cultural knowledge? Just as the narrator cannot decipher whether her mother's stories represent accurate depictions of Chinese myth and life, the reader is not told how Kingston takes liberties when, for example, she relates the myth of the ancient Chinese swordswoman Fa Mu Lan. To paraphrase Kingston's appeal to the reader, what is "Chinese" and what is just Kingston?

It is precisely such questions—as openly articulated in the text, and as raised by critics in response to it—that make Kingston's work both immensely controversial and immensely popular, for the author calls our attention to questions of cultural authenticity and modes of transmission in ways that her admirers embrace and her critics decry.⁵ As Anne Anlin Cheng notes,

detractors and admirers of Kingston alike form their opinions on the grounds of cultural legitimacy: the former criticize her for false representations; the latter praise her fiction for its imagination. The former refuses to see the fictionalization fundamental to any representation, while the latter revolves around the freedom of self-representation without questioning the deeper and more troubling relationships that fantasy and desire come to have with what is being stereotyped. (84)

⁴ Paul Outka points out that Kingston "originally intended it [the book] for publication as a novel, but Knopf thought it would sell better as nonfiction and labeled the first printing as such." Vintage International has chosen—rather intriguingly—to classify the text as "Nonfiction/Literature," a term which Outka notes is "unintentionally deconstructive." See Paul Outka, "Publish or Perish: Food, Hunger, and Self-Construction in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), here p. 447.

⁵ How the book has been received is no minor affair; the MLA has estimated that *The Woman Warrior* is the most widely assigned text in undergraduate literature classes.

Indeed, critics like Frank Chin have famously attacked Kingston for the historical and cultural inaccuracies in her work and for speaking as a false ambassador of Chinese-American culture.⁶ Meanwhile, Kingston has stated that it is not her intent to serve as a representative voice of Chinese or Chinese-American life. In a personal statement that accompanies a volume of essays on *The Woman Warrior*, she notes:

Sinologists have criticized me for not knowing myths and for distorting them; pirates correct my myths, revising them to make them conform to some traditional Chinese version. Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American.

As Cyrus R. K. Patell puts it in the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, Kingston "take[s] a dynamic view of traditional myth, [...] believing it to be not a static relic of the past but an ongoing process in the present."⁷ Scholars like Patell who write on Kingston thus see her not as marring tradition but as interpreting it dynamically, in a way that speaks to Hollinger's description of cultural hybridity.

It would thus seem that *The Woman Warrior's* reception exemplifies the debate between pluralism and cosmopolitanism discussed at the opening of this section: pluralists like the sinologists Kingston alludes to take issue with the corruption of tradition and call for respect towards its boundaries; cosmopolitans admire the liberties Kingston takes in fashioning a sense of self and in making archaic and ossified traditions relevant and contemporary. Yet both of these perspectives imply that culture is intact and cohesive, either to be respected and preserved or to serve as source material for one's particular way of life. These reactions, it seems to me, miss the interpretive bind Kingston takes pains throughout the text to elucidate, and instead reduce the novel to the binary discussions of ethnoracial difference which Kingston's work eschews.⁸ As Cheng points out, "judgments of Kingston's textual cultural authenticity are all the more ironic when we consider the fact that this 'book of grievance' and of grief is itself intensely *enacting* a quest for cultural origin and authenticity" (84, original emphasis). Kingston herself, in other words, mourns the lack of cultural knowledge and the loss of origin that

⁶ The well-known antagonism between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston stems from what I will characterize in passing as radically different approaches to representing and negotiating culture. Chin attacks Kingston for perpetuating the myth of the subservient, feminized Asian American man, and seeks instead a place for masculinity within Asian American literature. His own work is thus steeped in attempting to shape how Chinese-Americans are depicted and perceived within mainstream America. Cyrus R. K. Patell observes, "Chin has gone so far as to argue that the comparatively large number of Asian American women writers and their commercial success also pose a threat to Asian American manhood." Given Chin's fixed agenda, Patell remarks that it is thus "no surprise that it is Kingston's and not Chin's work that has captured the imaginations of the vast majority of scholars and students of Asian American literature." See Cyrus R. K. Patell, "Emergent Literatures," *Cambridge History of American Literature Volume 7: Prose Writing, 1940 – 1990*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), here pp. 651/674.

⁷ Cyrus R. K. Patell, "Emergent Literatures," *Cambridge History of American Literature Volume 7: Prose Writing, 1940 – 1990*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), here p. 555.

⁸ The rhetorical allusion here to pain is of course relevant to the discussion of hypochondria that follows below; the notion that Kingston "takes pains" to show us things in the novel is, discursively speaking, neither parapraxis nor cheeky pun, but rather an attempt to consider how the body is very much at stake in the text.

her text documents; she addresses tradition dynamically as Patell describes because there is no static, fixed version of culture to provide answers to her questions. As the narrator notes, “I don’t see how they [the Chinese] kept up continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn’t; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along” (185).

Kingston’s comments regarding her writing and its reception speak not only to her specific aims regarding her work as a literary project but reveal a fantasy of assimilation as well. Kingston sees her writing as very much following an American grain, for she compares herself to canonical American writers “who consciously set out to create the literature of a new culture” such as “Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, the Beats.”⁹ David Leiwei Li defends this sentiment by arguing that in Kingston, “we hear another rhythm of the American speech, another accent of the American mythology, another note of American democracy.”¹⁰ While *The Woman Warrior* certainly attests to the experiences of coming of age in America as a memoir that takes place in California during the fifties, we can hear a note of yearning in Kingston’s repeated claims that her work is “in the tradition of American writers.”¹¹ When she states, “I am writing *American mythology* in *American language*,” we hear an insistence on being received as an ambassador not of Chinese-American culture but of mainstream American culture. As she herself puts it, “When I write about America, I feel that I’ve claimed it. It’s a way of being a minority that’s not left out.”¹² This paradoxical situation of being at once a minority and yet in the majority is perhaps what Kingston has accomplished through her writing, for *The Woman Warrior* has been pinpointed as “the most widely taught book by a living writer in U.S. colleges and universities.”¹³ While I therefore do not wish to deny or refute Kingston’s self-identification as above all an American, I also feel we must hear a strain of longing in her insistence that she be identified with mainstream culture. Kingston’s articulated desire to be a minority “that’s not left out” reveals a fantasy of assimilation: that one can be oneself and yet not be that self, that one can be a minority without the damage that accompanies being racially marked as different, and that one can be different and yet not different. This desire, which is not unlike Pecola Breedlove’s wish for blue eyes, attests to the constant pressures invoked by dominant culture, and, we will see, gives way to hypochondriacal preoccupations.

Kingston outlines her dilemmas in facing her cultural inheritance and familial past by articulating the questions that beleaguer her throughout the novel, questions she cannot ask her emotionally distant mother or absent relatives. But she also performatively demonstrates the stakes of such questions by placing the reader in a parallel hermeneutic position. As the narrator wrestles with the stories told to her by her mother and struggles to make sense of them, she also spins new stories, engaging in the very act of “talk story” that Kingston describes throughout the novel as problematic. As Malini Schueller writes, “Kingston deconstructs oppositions between American and Chinese, male and female,

⁹ As quoted by David Leiwei Li in his essay on Kingston, p. 496. Please see following note for reference information.

¹⁰ David Leiwei Li, “*China Men*: Maxine Hong Kingston and the American Canon,” *American Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990): 482-502, here p. 496.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 497.

¹³ As cited by Yuan Shu, “Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*,” *MELUS*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 199-223, here p. 200.

and most importantly between Self and Other by articulating herself through a language in which opposed and diverse voices constantly exist,” a language that proves dizzying to readers.¹⁴ We could thus consider the intensity of reactions to the text—both from its detractors and its admirers—as speaking to this hermeneutic bind; readers perhaps either love or abhor the cognitive position in which they are placed. Just as the narrator must sift through the various stories told to her, knowing that their facts are imprecise, inaccurate or embellished, not knowing when they are her mother’s inventions or when they are culturally rooted, the reader must similarly negotiate Kingston’s stories, from her rendition of the Fa Mu Lan myth to the different versions she recounts of the “no name aunt.”

The performative aspect of this crisis of veracity is crucial to any analysis of the text, for Kingston cannot merely constatively describe her interpretive challenges. It is not my argument here that Kingston willfully or masterfully employs performativity in her text as a rhetorical strategy to accomplish her task.¹⁵ Rather, Kingston’s act of “talking story” or inventive storytelling functions as a result of her lack of choice. Kingston *must* produce stories of her own because doing so is her only option; it is as though she engages in a homeopathic cure of sorts, countering the stories which have haunted her with haunting stories of her own. She explains in “No Name Woman,” for example, the chapter in which she airs the family secret of an aunt who committed suicide, “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (8). The narrator’s only recourse when confronted with her aunt’s “ghost” is thus to imagine different versions of the aunt in ways that are productive to her as an adolescent in modern America.¹⁶ By showing us her narrative handiwork in her different constructions of the aunt, however, Kingston shares with us and exposes to us her own crisis of history.

Anne Anlin Cheng reads this crisis of veracity in the novel as relating to the mother’s personal set of grievances, passed down to the narrator as “inherited trauma.”¹⁷ Specifically, Cheng argues that

the unasked but glaring question in the text is what happened to the mother; what were her losses? We need to turn to the possibility that the immigrant trauma of the mother (surely not even fully registered by the mother herself) has been passed down to the daughter as inherited trauma, trauma without an origin. In

¹⁴ Malini Schueller, “Questioning Race and Gender Definitions: Dialogic Subversions in *The Woman Warrior*,” *Criticism: A Quarterly of Literature and the Arts*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall 1989), here p. 424.

¹⁵ One could argue, of course, that Kingston does exactly this, for she states explicitly in an interview, “You mean when the audiences ask me, ‘Is it real?’—when students ask that? I think people ask me those things because I put the question in their minds. The people give me back the question I give them. I know why they do it. I meant to give people those questions so that they can wrestle with them in their own lives.” However, my own interests are not in authorial intention, and I think that the most compelling moments of the text occur beyond or outside of the author’s plans. For the interview, see Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *American Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter, 1991), pp. 782-791, here p. 786.

¹⁶ I draw attention to the word “ghost” here because it is a trope with multiple valences in the novel, as signaled by the title, and is used to refer both to Western and Eastern understandings of the word: the supernatural; those who haunt us; figures from the past; and those with white skin.

¹⁷ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), here p. 88. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *MR*.

other words, we must hear beyond the narrator's obsessive tales of her own grievance to an echo or rehearsal of the mother's grievance. (*MR*, 88)

Cheng's otherwise keenly insightful and analytically uncompromising work falters in her analysis of Kingston here, for it is not immediately clear why she insists on reading the mother's trauma—particularly when the trauma is “surely not even fully registered by the mother herself” and is not alluded to in the text. As with all rhetorical arguments based on textual omission, it is difficult to support or garner evidence for this “unasked but glaring” claim, for how can we glean importance from absence? Further, why should we follow along with Cheng's claim that we “need” to examine the possibility that the narrator's trauma actually stems from the mother's trauma? What is to be gained from insisting on the narrator's crisis as “an echo or rehearsal of the mother's grievance”?

Cheng's argument appears at an interesting moment discursively in the arc of her chapter. Her discussion of Kingston's text begins in a section entitled “The Apprehensive Sociable Body,” moves to a second section, “Transgenerational Writing” (in which the argument surfaces), and then concludes in a section on “Morbid Community, Ritual Grief.” These three chapter sections enact a movement from social anxiety to grief, or, more broadly speaking, from hypochondria to melancholy. Cheng's argument about maternal trauma, in other words, appears just as she needs to reroute her argument from the discourse of hypochondria (which is how her chapter opens) to the theme of melancholy (which is the theme of her book). Reading the daughter as “a melancholic echo of the mother” enables Cheng to substitutively turn the discussion from daughter to mother, and in so doing, to emphasize an anterior temporality (*MR*, 88). This sleight of hand effectively casts a melancholic shadow over the narrator, so that Cheng can argue that her hypochondria is ‘really’ about the mother's grief, and thus really about Freudian melancholy. As she later puts it, “the mother is the mourner in the text, and the daughter the melancholic repeater of her grief” (*MR*, 87).

Cheng herself perhaps anticipates the reader's hesitation, for she hastens to note that “while this [argument] may look like an overdetermined parable for maternal invasions as such, we should still recognize the force of this invasion and the cultural implications in this particular case” (*MR*, 89). Indeed, the trope of invasion is one that must be emphasized in discussing Kingston's text—and which does not feel “overdetermined” in Cheng's analysis at all. However, there is no textual evidence to support the notion that the narrator speaks “not on behalf of the mother, but *as* the mother in a kind of endocryptic repetition,” for to read her this way is to undermine the narrator's predicament and to cast her as nothing more than an “echo” or facsimile (*MR*, 89, original emphasis). In other words, while the narrator is certainly haunted—indeed, invaded—by her mother's stories, her crisis of history and of origins is undermined if we treat it as a “rehearsal” of the mother's grief.

The discourse of maternal internalization in the novel speaks instead directly to hypochondria and to the narrator's ongoing endeavor to wrest control of her body from the mother's influence. We witness the somatic implications for the narrator in a scene in which her aging mother attempts to convince the adult narrator to come home more often:

‘There's only one thing that I really want anymore. I want you here, not wandering like a ghost [...]. Her eyes are big, inconsolable. A spider headache

spreads out in the fine branches of my skull. She is etching spider legs into the icy bone. She pries open my head and my fists and crams into them responsibility for time, responsibility for intervening oceans. (108)

The graphic scene stages a maternal onslaught of guilt in which the mother's grievances work directly, invasively, and nefariously on the daughter's body, "etching" words indelibly into the "bone." The sharply violent diction ("etching," "bone," "pries," "fists," "crams") is contrasted with the amorphous and sweeping sense of "responsibility," "time," and "intervening oceans" so that the narrator seems a helpless victim, being battered with stories for broad reasons that exceed and escape her. This sense of powerlessness is reinforced by the setting: the narrator is lying in bed, fatigued due to a cold that she attributes to coming home, and she hides beneath the blankets when her mother enters the room ("What did she want, sitting there so large next to my head? I could feel her stare—") (100).

Proximity to the mother, in other words, causes a direct onset of symptoms: fatigue and malaise arise from returning home ("When I last visited my parents, I had trouble falling asleep"), and a piercing headache ensues when the mother sits looming at her bedside (99). The narrator as a result is cast as captive to maternal pressures and powerless to their effects. The hypochondriacal panic here mirrors the many scenes in Kafka in which the son, wincing and recoiling, is attacked by the father. Kingston's scene also resonates with Kafka in the absence of metaphor or simile: the mother does not speak *as though* etching words into bone, but "is etching" them. The mother's words inscribe themselves onto the daughter's body like a tattoo needle, and their content is described through the rhetoric of impregnation, prying the body open to cram it full with the maternal agenda.¹⁸

The problematic relationship between health and home is taken up directly by Kingston, for, unlike Kafka's protagonists, the narrator here confronts her mother:

'When I'm away from here' I had to tell her, 'I don't get sick. I don't go to the hospital every holiday. I don't get pneumonia, no dark spots on my x-rays. My chest doesn't hurt when I breathe. I can breathe. And I don't get headaches at 3:00. I don't have to take medications or go to doctors. Elsewhere I don't have to lock my doors and keep checking the locks. I don't stand at the windows and watch for movements and see them in the dark. (108)

Physical health is thus made a function of distance, equated in this passage with "elsewhere," or away from parental influence and the site she associates with assimilative anxiety. The notion of health is also constructed through a series of negative declarations of what does *not* happen to the narrator: "I don't go to the hospital," "I don't get pneumonia," "no dark spots," "my chest doesn't hurt," "I don't have to take medications." The catalogue extends past the somatic to a broader ability to manage anxiety: "I don't

¹⁸ Paul Outka, in his essay on hunger and food in *The Woman Warrior*, describes this scene as reflecting a "metaphorics of hunger" in that the mother "desires that her empty house/stomach be stuffed full"; "Brave Orchid's hunger," he writes, "'pries open' the 'icy bone' of her daughter's skull" and "threatens to consume" her (172). Yet I see exactly the opposite dynamic taking place; the mother does not pry open her daughter to consume her, but to fill her with stories.

have to lock my doors and keep checking the locks,” “I don’t stand at the windows and watch.” Health is thus constituted as a dual repudiation, as *what does not happen* when the narrator *is not here*. To be healthy—or, more accurately, not sick—Kingston’s narrator must establish safe distance from the mother tongue, meaning both the place she equates with her Asian-American identity and, more literally, her mother’s stories.

Cheng argues that the narrator’s “assertion of absolute health through an active and repetitive negation of illness” reveals “an attachment to a pathological imagination” (MR, 66). She suggests, in other words, that the narrator is a hypochondriac because of an imaginative preoccupation with illness, evinced by the fact that health can be thought of only in terms of the negation of symptoms. She argues further that “this imagination preoccupied with threatening debility transforms familial and racial-ethnic relations into somatic susceptibility” (MR, 66). Several paragraphs later, however, Cheng defines her project in the following way:

I should make clear from the outset that I am not interested in a vernacular understanding of hypochondria *as an imaginary illness* or in suggesting that Kingston’s narrator is ‘making up’ her illness whenever she is at home in Chinatown. Instead I am interested in the subjective and cultural values that the narrator herself attaches to those symptoms and in the psychical pressures that are being revealed [...]. (MR, 68, emphasis added)

What interests me here is the tension between Cheng’s stated interest, which is defined against a “vernacular understanding of hypochondria” that focuses on imagination, and her actual argument, which indeed emphasizes imagination. Cheng never suggests that the narrator is inventing her illness, but she does allude repeatedly to the narrator’s imaginative faculties: her “pathological imagination” is what “transforms [...] relations into somatic susceptibility.” Imagination, in other words, has a participatory role in the narrator’s assessment of health. This emphasis on the creative faculties resurfaces when Cheng states that “*the dream* of a culturally healthy body” in Kingston’s novel “defines itself through displacement” (MR, 66, emphasis added).

Cheng’s book is deeply invested throughout in the logic of fantasy and its role in subject formation, so her allusion to the function of imagination in Kingston is not surprising. What I find striking, however, is that we witness yet another instance of the materiality of the body in its corporeal experience being sublimated to the psychic life of the body. Despite Cheng’s stated intention that she is not interested in an understanding of hypochondria “as an imaginary illness,” she treats it with an unconscious irony in precisely this way. Why does the narrator’s account of bodily symptoms translate for Cheng to an “*imagination* preoccupied with debility”? By definition, imagination involves futuricity or the hypothetical, and the capacity to wonder about what has not transpired. Kingston’s narrator does not wonder aloud about what “might” happen should she live elsewhere; she speaks directly from experience about what has happened. Perhaps her *memory* is preoccupied with debility, but is it fair to characterize her imagination in this way?

Similarly, Cheng refers to the “dream” of feeling “unimaginably healthy” in the text instead of the narrator’s concrete experience of health: “I don’t get pneumonia. [...] I can breathe” (108). She also alludes to the narrator’s preoccupation with illness as

transforming “familial and racial-ethnic relations into somatic susceptibility” (*MR*, 66). But we must recognize in the text that the narrator’s symptoms exceed a mere susceptibility; she does not become vulnerable to illness when at home but becomes ill. In other words, despite Cheng’s intention to read the values the narrator attaches to symptoms without ascribing judgment as to whether or not they “actually” exist, she participates in the vernacular understanding of hypochondria she sets herself against, inferring that the narrator’s sense of health and illness resides in the domain of fantasy.

Regardless of whether Kingston’s narrator describes her symptoms hyperbolically, with a relationship to fantasy, and/or through an imagined version of the self that is preoccupied with illness, she consciously equates her ethno-biographical home with a deep somatic unease that lifts when she departs. Thus, whether the causal relationship that she suggests between being sick and being in Stockton is a fair, accurate, or rational one, we must take it seriously as a legitimate founding premise in her own definition of well-being. Cheng states of the narrator’s declaration, “I’ve found some places in this country that are ghost-free” that “we have to wonder whether the idealized ‘ghost-free’ country is in fact possible” (*MR*, 66). In doing so, she implies that the narrator’s sense of reprieve may be an illusion—a mirage that, objectively speaking, is unattainable.

Yet part of what hypochondria shows us is the extent to which health involves ideals and illusions that are thoroughly subjective, and that abstractions like well-being cannot be deemed “in fact possible” or not. If the narrator feels she has located spaces she identifies with health, then why should this perception be met with skepticism? Cheng recruits Sau-ling Cynthia’s Wong term for mobility in Asian-American literature, “psychological nomadism,” to argue that the narrator has “surely fashioned for herself a subjective map that guarantees perpetual unease” (*MR*, 67). Yet this perpetual unease might be the very condition from which Kingston’s narrator has finally found respite.

In his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie suggests that the “migrant intellect” tends to “[root] itself in itself” rather than in objective reality, and that it is most at home when not at home—for “home” is, of course, a troubled and troubling signifier.¹⁹ As Rushdie notes of displaced writers, citing Grass, Joyce, and Kingston among others,

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however shifting and ambiguous this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. (15)

Rushdie’s beautiful meditation on the opportunities afforded by “long geographical perspective” speaks to Kingston’s investment in the space of “elsewhere” and her validation of distance as offering some sense of belonging and comfort.

Kingston’s narrator, raised on stories of “ghosts,” perceives them everywhere: “the Mail Ghost, Meter Reader Ghost, Garbage Ghost,” the “Social Worker Ghosts;

¹⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin, 1991), here p. 280.

Public Health Nurse Ghosts; Factory Ghosts” (98). Catalogued in an exhaustive litany, these ghosts constitute a haunting presence in her childhood; she and her siblings “hid directly under the windows” until the ghost” outside of the house “gave up” (98). In such passages, Kingston elides the linguistic difference between the Chinese and American signifiers, relaying how easily a child taught to perceive the world as inhabited by “ghosts” might confuse the two realms, taking the mother’s reference for “white person” to mean supernatural presence:

‘Come see the Garbage Ghost get its food,’ we children called. [...] The ghost looked directly at us. Steadying the load on his back with one hand, the Garbage Ghost walked up to the window. [...] We ran, screaming to our mother, who efficiently shut the window. ‘Now we know,’ she told us, ‘the White Ghosts can hear Chinese. They have learned it. You mustn’t talk in front of them again.’ (98)

The child’s sense of horror is confirmed rather than dispelled by the adult figure here. Instead of throwing open the closet doors to show her daughter that there is no monster lurking inside, the mother participates in the spectacle of fear, confirming that her children are right to be afraid.

Though such scenes are of course meant in part to be comic, they also demonstrate why Kingston subtitles her book “Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts,” and why her narrator struggles to “establish realities” and “to figure out how the invisible world” of stories “fits in solid America” (5). Such scenes elucidate Rushdie’s point that the displaced subject “at times straddle[s] two cultures” but at other moments “falls between two stools.” Caught between two lines of signification, the narrator falls between her mother’s intended meaning and her own acquired one in English into a confused space. She concludes, not unreasonably, that she must practice vigilance against the world around her, and that she is right to be distrustful of it; thus we witness the logic of hypochondria at work.

This particular memory of the “Garbage Ghost” occurs in the text immediately before the narrator’s visit home as an adult, thus providing a textual backdrop to her return. Home, we come to understand, is a place peopled with ghosts in her memories; she associates home with being “pressed against the baseboard” with her siblings, hiding from the ghosts lurking outside. That the placement of scenes is not incidental to the narrative is supported by Kingston’s opening line of restless unease to describe the visit: “When I last visited my parents, I had trouble falling asleep” (99). The narrator’s declaration of health to her mother therefore must necessarily include reference to her childhood ghosts:

“I don’t want to hear Wino Ghosts and Hobo Ghosts. I’ve found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there.” (108)

Kingston thus shows us a definition of health that is articulated around assimilative parameters. While Leslie W. Rabine argues in an essay on gender constructions in Kingston’s writing that “it is the mother’s ghosts who breathe life into the daughter’s writing,” we might say that the air of this storied life becomes thickly stifling—hence her

feeling that elsewhere, she can finally breathe.²⁰ If the experience of straddling two cultures causes Kingston's narrator perpetual discomfort in a way that extends to the somatic, then the geographic distance Rushdie describes offers spatial salve to these assimilative pressures. The narrator sounds ruefully pragmatic when she notes, "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing" (237). Her practical rationalizing, however, is perhaps a recipe for health against hypochondria, a way of imposing logic and control over a haunted childhood.

The novel's most provocative scene, particularly for this discussion of health, is the one in which Kingston's narrator harasses a fellow Asian-American classmate, verbally and physically assaulting her in a public school bathroom with brutal viciousness. Cornering the quiet schoolgirl who, it is clear, reminds the narrator of herself, she enacts the part of the middle-school bully in a scene of interrogation and torture. The episode is linked explicitly to hypochondria for two reasons: first, it precipitates the narrator's yearlong "mysterious illness" in which she is completely bedridden—an experience that enraptures her and that also speaks to the toll that the episode of bullying takes; second, the scene is motivated by a sense of ethnoracial repulsion in which we witness the logic of hypochondria at work. The encounter is thus compelling not only for the disgust it awakens phobically in the narrator, but for the convalescence it demands in its wake.

The protracted scene of violence against the girl, spanning several pages, is one that Kingston relays with detached deliberateness as the narrator finds herself alone with her quiet classmate:

She backed away, puzzlement, then alarm in her eyes.
'You're going to talk,' I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the familiar, the weak, the small. 'I am going to make you talk, you sissy girl.'
[...]
I looked into her face so that I could hate it close up. She wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby soft. I thought that I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face. I could poke dimples in her cheeks. I could *work her face around like dough*. (175-176)

The scene is gripping, alarming, because the narrator assumes the part of the tormentor so swiftly. While the text thus far has been intent on documenting all of the narrator's minute hesitations and belabored moments of self-consciousness, here she is suddenly devoid of doubt. Her insistence that the girl speak, seen through repeated imperatives and entreaties to "talk," is also tied intimately to a troubled ethos of speaking and silence evident throughout the novel, from the shamed suicide aunt who remains nameless and unspoken about to the narrator's own "duck voice," her stammering hesitancy when called upon in class, and her frenulum which she thinks her mother cut to keep her from talking.²¹ That her brutality is targeted specifically at the girl's silence is

²⁰ Leslie W. Rabine, "No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston," *Signs*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring, 1987): 471-492, here p. 479.

²¹ The practice of cutting the frenulum, or "tongue cutting," is commonplace in many cultures in order to loosen the tongue and render it more dexterous for ease with speaking foreign languages. As the narrator's

thus especially shocking because the narrator has struggled in so many instances to find her voice, often falling silent because she herself has been too terrified to speak. “At times shaking my head now is more self-assertion than I can manage,” she confesses (172).

The narrator’s own tortured relationship to language therefore informs and fuels her attempts to torture the girl into speaking. Indeed, the scene in the bathroom follows on the heels of the narrator being bullied by her mother, who insists that she go to the local pharmacist and ask for “reparation candy” to “remove the curse” he has placed on their house (170). At the drug store, the narrator stammers incomprehensibly to the pharmacist, miserably feeling “the weight and immensity of things impossible to explain” (171). It is perhaps because the mother infuriatingly concludes that “she taught the Druggist Ghost a lesson in good manners” when the pharmacy begins donating candy to them that the narrator feels her mouth go “permanently crooked with [the] effort” of trying to communicate across such cultural divides (171). Unable to reconcile her two sociolinguistic worlds, one loud, “guttural,” and “chingchong ugly,” filled with superstitions and ghosts, the other “American-feminine,” “soft,” and predicated on Western logic, she exacts her frustration on her shy classmate, taking up the part of bully to escape her own feelings of helplessness (171-172).

Her attempt to elicit speech from the girl thus arises from her own need to locate and affirm the girl’s voice; if the girl cannot speak up for herself, then the narrator will make her—not because, as she feigns, it will benefit the girl, but rather because of her own anxieties regarding language and power. Elaine Scarry, in a different context, notes of scenes of torture that “in the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body” of the interrogated one, torture “bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body.”²² Torture, in other words, attempts to *extract* what is untellable and “incommunicable” from the victim by using pain to convert what is “contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body” into external, comprehensive language. While Scarry’s discussion is obviously aimed at historical examples of the torture of prisoners to understand the structure of torture more broadly, her analysis nonetheless resonates here, particularly in elucidating the narrator’s effort to force the girl to speak. We might say that the narrator wants to extract that “private and incommunicable” relationship to language that she knows the reticent girl also experiences; she seeks to shed light or to “besto[w] visibility” on that same “weight and immensity of things impossible to explain” precisely because speaking has proved so difficult for her. The scene necessarily ends in silence; one of the text’s lessons is that shameful scenes such as the one in the bathroom get repressed because they are too taboo to discuss openly. Her repeated pleas and imperatives that the girl talk thus ironically end with the injunction to not talk: ‘Don’t you dare tell anyone I’ve been bad to you,’ she warns the girl (181).

That the narrator is selfishly motivated in her attempts to elicit speech from the girl becomes particularly evident when her coercion gives way to what more closely resembles begging:

mother later reveals impatiently to her daughter, “I cut it to make you talk more, not less, you dummy” (102).

²² Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), here p. 27.

‘I’ll let you go if you just say one word,’ I said. ‘You can even say, ‘a’ or ‘the,’ and I’ll let you go. Come on. Please.’ [...]

‘There’s nobody here but you and me. This isn’t a classroom or a playground or a crowd. I’m just one person. You can talk in front of one person.’ (179-180)

The desperate quality of her pleas and her posture of reassurance attest to the narrator’s own unconscious identification with the girl; her coaxing sounds here like the interior voice she directs at her own apprehensive self. As she alternates between assaulting her, cajoling her, berating her, and trying to convince her that the episode will benefit her, it becomes clear that her attack on the meek girl is more accurately directed at the qualities she spurns in herself. We see that her vituperation and abuse are ultimately self-directed when she breaks down at the scene’s end, sobbing when the girl will not speak. Her cruel rebukes of the girl, shaming her for her reticence and self-doubt, are articulations of her own anxiety about not fitting into mainstream culture; “Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader?” and, “What are you going to do for a living?” are in fact questions which the narrator is herself troubled by as she struggles with different cultural models of femininity and success (180). The torturer is here the tortured one, and her feelings of victimization—feelings which of course motivate and inform all scenes of bullying—surface in her very attempts to victimize.

The narrator is thus caught in a dual relationship with the girl, on one hand intensely identifying with her, but on the other hand needing to radically distance herself from her. Her identification with her is not a sympathetic one based on empathy, but rather the recognition that she and the girl are perceived similarly by her peers: “We were similar in sports. We held the bat on our shoulders until we walked to first base” and “people and she herself probably thought I was her friend” (173). Further, every aspect of the girl which she finds repugnant is matched by a concern that she herself is the same way:

I hated fragility. [...] I stared at the curve of her nape. I wished I was able to see what my own neck looked like from the back and sides. [...] I grew my hair long to hide it in case it was a flower-stem neck. [...]

I reached up and took the fatty part of her cheek, not dough, but meat, between my thumb and forefinger. This close, and I saw no pores. [...] I wanted tough skin, hard brown skin. I had callused my hands; I had scratched dirt to blacken the nails, which I cut straight across to make stubby fingers. (176)

The narrator thus seizes on the stereotypes of quiet subservience and feminine fragility in the girl, from “her China doll hair cut” to her overall “neatness,” from the fastidious “way she folded the wax paper from her lunch” to her demure “blue pastel cardigan” (175-177).

We might therefore characterize the scene as a self/self encounter which the narrator, with obvious desperation, tries to turn into a self/other opposition. She adopts an alter ego in the scene, assuming a posture that is the opposite of her typical mode. Her new voice, with its bossy imperatives, is perhaps an echo of her mother’s, for her

domineering commands resonate with the way her mother forces her to do her bidding, from “reasoning” with the pharmacist to bargaining with salespeople at department stores. She also self-consciously attempts to assume a pose of racial otherness: she finds herself looking the girl “up and down the way the Mexican and the Negro girls did when they fought, so tough” (176). Her posture here reveals a self-identification with other ethnoracial groups over her own. This is not a conscious impersonation or parody, but rather an unconscious yearning to be otherwise, to be anything but the meek girl before her. The identification with “the Mexican and the Negro girls” and the enamored admiration that they are “so tough” comes not only from a desire to be a convincing bully but, relatedly, to play the opposite to the girl’s reticence, even if only in a hyperbolic and stereotypical persona. All of the personal habits she discusses, from cultivating calluses on her hands to purposely scratching dirt to blacken her nails, are affectations aimed at subverting stereotypes of Asian-American femininity and at appearing to be radically and physically different.

This determination to be different from her ethnic group and its stereotypes speaks to a hypochondriacal logic evident in the text. Throughout the scene, the narrator is simultaneously entranced but horrified by the physical aspects of the girl’s body, which are catalogued in queasy detail: the “weak rubbery feeling” of her cheek, her “papery fingers,” her “powdery-dry” skin, like “tracing paper, onion skin” (177). This concurrent attraction/repulsion mirrors the dynamic of hypochondria, in which illness becomes both disruptive and alluring. Symptoms, catalogued by the hypochondriac in the way the girl’s physical traits are studied by the narrator, offer a site of obsession. If the hypochondriac is fixated on the body’s signification and its failures, then the scene in the bathroom enables the narrator to obsess over the girl’s (and thus her own) bodily traits, what they might communicate (fragility, cleanliness, weakness) and how the racially marked body thus fails according to the models of dominant culture. In coercing and coaxing the girl to speak up, to “make a fist,” to yell, and to “get tough,” the narrator attempts to elicit a distinctly American response from the girl—one of “pompom[s],” personal voice, athleticism, and ego to counter her meek, demure, Asian exterior (178-9).

The ethnoracially marked body fails for the assimilative hypochondriac because of its differences from the internalized American ideal of normativity. The narrator is desolate at the scene’s end over the failed, disappointing body that won’t speak up or fight back—the body that is “the last one chosen” on sports teams, the one that can’t “swing at the ball,” the one that isn’t “the type that gets dates,” the one with its “long,” flute-playing fingers that “couldn’t possibly make fists like other people’s” (179-181). The physically and culturally distinct body is one that has failed in ways that the narrator cannot understand or get past. The apprehension she feels is for what we might term the self-in-Other, or the qualities she sees in the girl and then fears are present in herself. Upon seeing the girl’s neck, for example, she immediately wishes that she could see what her “own neck looked like from the back and sides” (176). Looking at her victim, she fears she is actually seeing her own reflection.

This anxiety also expresses itself as a disgusted fear of contamination. The narrator is repulsed when she touches the girl:

Her skin seemed to stretch. I let go in horror. What if it came away in my hand?
(176)

This phobic repulsion then resurfaces later in the scene:

I had stopped pinching her cheek because I did not like the feel of her skin. I would go crazy if it came away in my hands. 'I skinned her,' I would have to confess. (181)

Her horror arises specifically from the girl's skin, and we see repeated emphasis throughout the scene on its qualities: its texture ("weak rubbery"); its color ("pink and white"); its fragile translucence ("tracing paper, onion skin") (176-177). The skin, which is the immediate and obvious visual site of racial difference, is studiously evaluated and scrutinized as though belonging to someone else. As Cheng notes, "It is as though, in this intraracial exchange, an interracial conflict is nonetheless taking place" (78). In these difficult passages, we see an intensely phobic relationship pertaining to contact with the skin; the narrator, in an irrational moment of panic, fears "go[ing] crazy if it came away" in her hands in a grotesque and racially informed image of skinning.²³ The skin, treated as contaminant or contagion, threatens to overwhelm the narrator because she cannot achieve space from it—it being, after all, her own.

A similar dynamic occurs later in the text when a mentally retarded boy begins following the narrator around after school, lurking outside the family laundry. The narrator fears that they are "two of a kind" and that "nobody" could see that she "had nothing in common with this monster, this birth defect" (195). Again, we see a marginal, weak character engender anxiety in the narrator by the threat of association. The "what if that's me?" panic arises specifically from viewing other Asian Americans from a position of assumed superiority—both the meek girl and the retarded boy are outcasts whom the narrator treats abusively but fearfully—and proximity to such characters invokes an intense hypochondria. The narrator fears that the retarded boy "was sending out germs that would lower [her] IQ" and that "his leechiness was drawing IQ points out of the back of [her] head" (196). The very reasons she seizes upon such characters as inferior thus become precisely the reasons they pose a threat; the narrator becomes intensely phobic of Chinese peers who initially seem very different from her because they might not be so different from her after all.

Immediately following her abuse of the girl, which she characterizes as "the worst thing [she] had yet done to another person," the narrator takes flight into illness. She describes spending the "next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness" and, although there "was no pain and no symptoms," she lays in a "rented hospital bed," uses a bedpan, has "a bell to ring for help," and has her family crank her "up and down" (181-182). It was, she concludes, "the best year and a half of my life" (182). The eighteen months are summarized in one concise paragraph that is the spatial opposite of the bathroom scene preceding it; while time moves slowly in the afternoon scene of abuse, which spans ten pages, the experience of illness takes up roughly a dozen lines. The description of illness, replete with an analogy to "the Victorian recluses" the narrator had until that point only "read about," stands as a removed island from the rest of the text, discursively figuring a rhetorical recluse (182). The scene's brevity speaks to the

²³ Interestingly, the thought of having to confess, presumably to authority figures, is associated not with bullying but with racism. In other words, the point of vulnerability for the narrator with regard to authority isn't that she is abusing the girl but that the girl might rub off on her.

uneventful tranquility of the convalescence; Kingston does not load the scene of illness with reflection or insight because its appeal is in its unloaded vacancy. It is the only biographical incident of importance in the text that is treated so dryly, devoid of narrative comment or authorial analysis. While King-Kok Cheung argues that the narrator's "protracted illness after the [abuse] incident reflects her guilt and misgivings about verbal authority (and her psychosomatic attempt to evade the conflict)," I think Cheung misses the way in which the narrator characterizes the illness—not as self-induced punishment stemming from guilt or as self-imposed imprisonment to avoid conflict, but as luxurious languor in which she locates a pleasant sense of reprieve, which occurs because "the world is sometimes just."²⁴ The passage's lack of detail and commentary attest to this reprieve, which offer a contrast to the tortured, belabored scene preceding it.

The Bluest Eye: Race and Coming-of-Age

If Kingston's text involves a troubled relationship with silence and speaking, opening with the mother's warning, "You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you," Morrison's novel similarly is invested in enforced silences; its opening line, "Quiet as its kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941," invokes a sense of taboo and a town's repressed secret.²⁵ In both texts, the lack of communication and the tight-lipped shame between characters contributes to their perpetual unease as they come of age in a country still grappling with how to address race and ethnicity.²⁶ Both Kingston's narrator and Pecola Breedlove have a heightened awareness of what they should not ask their parents or peers, of what does not get discussed or named, and they suffer under the weight of this oppressive silence. For Pecola in particular, who becomes the victim of incest when she is raped by her father, and thus becomes the very marker of what is taboo, silence and averted eyes become all that she knows. The only refuge available to her is to escape in the fantasy of a culturally instilled ideal; Pecola, still only a girl, convinces herself that having blue eyes—like the big, blue eyes of her dolls and the

²⁴ King-Kok Cheung, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," *PMLA*, Vol. 103, No. 2 (March, 1988), pp. 162-174 (here p. 164).

²⁵ Jennifer Gillan offers an invaluable reading of the temporal context and historical situation of *The Bluest Eye*, arguing that the backdrop of the year (1941) and the names of the three prostitutes in the novel (China, Poland, and Maginot Line) speak to the United States' involvement in World War II. Gillan argues that the American intervention in other nations' ethnoracial conflicts serves as a way of repressing its own anxieties regarding race and oppression. For more, see Jennifer Gillan, "Focusing on the Wrong Front: Historical Displacement, the Maginot Line, and *The Bluest Eye*," *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer, 2002): 283-298.

²⁶ I do not mean to imply that questions pertaining to race and ethnicity have now been settled—or, for that matter, properly articulated—in the United States today. The fact that both Kingston's and Morrison's novel continue to engender debate and to attract readers speaks to the fact that assimilative struggles and the task of negotiating one's identity as a minority subject are as pertinent now as when both books were first published.

admired girls in school—will redeem her, fulfilling all that is missing or marred in her life.

The Bluest Eye attests to hypochondria in that it shows us an obsessive and restless preoccupation with the body and its failures. In hypochondria, the subject sees himself as inextricably bound to illness, the concept of health an impossible vision that pertains only to others; persistent in the literature of hypochondria is a sense of being destined for ill-health, even when there is no physical evidence to support this claim.²⁷ The presentiment of being headed inevitably for personal defeat resonates powerfully in minority literature where the racially marked subject often identifies with failure and feels that success, whether monetary or bodily, is not for him. Indeed, characters like Pecola Breedlove and the narrator, Pauline MacTeer, absorb the ideological message that they will never feel fulfilled, and that they will always be left wanting what they cannot possibly have—blue eyes, for example, or white skin. When cultural ideals are tethered to bodily traits, Morrison shows us, the body becomes from the outset a source of anxiety and failure—the body of the hypochondriac.

Black Self-Rejection and the White Ideal

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* describes the failure to “measure up” which the minority subject is conditioned and perhaps condemned to feel. As Bhabha argues, mimicry on the part of the colonized is never successful; the best the colonized subject can achieve in his emulations of the “fetishized colonial culture” is an “*almost the same but not quite*” mimicry, which is to say an “*almost the same but not white*” status.²⁸ Bhabha further reminds us, in a formulation drawing attention importantly to the corporeal, that

black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body (B, 92).

The fractured quality Bhabha describes captures not only the parceling aspect of the racist gaze, but the minority subject’s uncomfortable sense of being dissected and placed under scrutiny as well. The white gaze divides the black body in order to deny it wholeness and integrity, seeing animal parts of “bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie” in order to perpetuate its own myth of purity, or “the undifferentiated whole white body.” This logic is indeed “phobic,” needing to scrutinize and designate the Other as animalistic and beastly in order to maintain its own metaphysical fantasy of integrity.

²⁷ For more, see Carla Cantor and Brian Fallon, M.D., *Phantom Illness: Recognizing, Understanding, and Overcoming Hypochondria* (New York: Mariner, 1997).

²⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), here p. 89. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *B*.

That Bhabha's work is deeply informed by Morrison's writing seems particularly evident here, for though he does not discuss *The Bluest Eye* overtly, his argument calls to mind an opening scene from the novel²⁹:

Rosemary Villanucci, our next-door friend who lives above her father's café, sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Freida and me that we can't come in. [...] When she comes out of the car we will beat her up, make red marks on her white skin, and she will cry and ask us do we want her to pull her pants down. We will say no. *We don't know what we should feel or do if she does, but whenever she asks us, we know she is offering us something precious and that our own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept.* (11, emphasis added)

Morrison poignantly draws attention here to the "white myth of the undifferentiated whole white body," a myth which has clearly been internalized by the narrator and her sister. The two black girls understand well that Rosemary's offer to pull her pants down is an offer of "something precious," but also an assertion of racial superiority over the girls' "almost the same but not white" status—hence why the girls must refuse her offer in order to maintain their own pride. Rosemary calls attention to her own body as an entity of value, thus marking a vainglorious pride of ownership which, she knows, black girls are not meant to feel for their own bodies. Rosemary smugly asserts her privilege, reveling in the have/have-not dichotomy between her and her black neighbors that extends beyond material possessions; her father's café, his Buick, and her bread and butter form the economic component of what is also corporeal luxury: to have white skin that has not been subjected to the racist gaze.

Indeed, this intact and unscrutinized relationship to the body finds sharp contrast in Cholly, who when young "had been surprised in some bushes by two white men" during his first sexual encounter and been made to endure their bemused chuckling and the beam of their "flashlight right on his behind" (42). This thrice-repeated scene in the novel graphically captures the parceling racist gaze as Bhabha describes it, displacing the black body into "signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie" and denying it the intact integrity reserved for whiteness. The black body as Bhabha reads it is butchered into parts for white appropriation; the racist gaze, in this case highlighted by the beam of a flashlight, sees animal parts rather than person. That the gaze is directed specifically at the anus is not incidental, for it enacts an invasive penetration: "the flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile" (148).

Having internalized their gaze, a humiliated and emasculated Cholly develops a "loathing" that "made him tremble," not for the white men but for his black companion (151). We thus not only see the white gaze at work in the scene, but how its internalization leads to black self-loathing in ways that are tied to the physical body. As Linda Dittmar puts it, *The Bluest Eye* "displac[es] social pathology and failed human

²⁹ Bhabha's work bears an interesting relationship to Morrison's writing, for although he expresses an indebtedness to her work in the opening of *The Location of Culture*, he only discusses *Beloved*, never commenting on or referencing other texts by Morrison. Linda Dittmar points out, however, the thematic and narrative parallels between *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, arguing that the two share much in common. For more, see Linda Dittmar, "The Politics of Form in *The Bluest Eye*," as discussed and referenced below.

values *into* the black community” in order to show us how racist rejection becomes internalized and unconsciously absorbed by the community.³⁰ In tracking this internalization in each character at a point in young adulthood, however, Morrison shows us the complicated “education” each character receives in coming to an abject understanding of selfhood.

While Rosemary Villanucci’s offering is easy to reject because it comes from an insufferable adolescent who wants to lord her advantages over her friends, Morrison shows us that the most injurious ideals and myths are the ones that do not present themselves as a choice which can be refused. The narrator, for example, puzzles over “the secret of the magic” that “little white girls [...] weaved on others,” and why adults “look at them and say, ‘Awwwww,’” but do not do so for her (22). The allure of the pretty white girl is especially damning when it prompts “the eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street,” and the “possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them” (22-23). Even black women want white babies, the narrator intones, cooing at them, eyes softening around them. As Anne Anlin Cheng puts it, “the little girl must internalize not only the white ideal but also the ideal of black womanhood as longing after the white ideal” (18). Thus, Claudia’s only desire when presented with dolls at Christmas—dolls which are inevitably white—is to dismember them in an attempt to discover the secret magic they contain.

The myth of the white ideal and its capacity to fulfill is embraced by Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola’s mother, who holds an unambiguously rapturous relationship with her white employer’s possessions and lifestyle. When she is hired to be a servant for the Fisher family, Pauline Breedlove surveys “their linen” and “silk draperies,” their “stacks of white pillow slips with embroidery” and “sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers,” and decides to become an “ideal servant” because “such a role filled practically all of her needs” (127). Her gratification comes not only from the Fisher’s material possessions but from her newfound sense of power; the same “creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her” in her new position (128). More importantly, she takes to the Fisher girl as a surrogate daughter, soothing her, caring for her, and providing for her maternally in a way that she does not for Pecola. When Pecola accidentally knocks over a berry cobbler cooling in its pan at the Fisher home, for example, her mother angrily slaps her, yelling at her with words “hotter and darker than the smoking berries” while tending to the Fisher girl, to whom she speaks, by contrast, in a soothing whisper with “honey in her words” (109).

Adopting her employer’s possessions and family as her own, Mrs. Breedlove finds fulfillment in the illusion she constructs of belonging to the white, moneyed space around her. Her own home and family come to offer no more than “the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely,” and the language of darkness and light speaks eminently to race here (127). The message Pecola unconsciously takes away is that her own inability to fulfill her mother is linked to the failures of her black body, which will never offer smooth “yellow hair” that would “roll and slip” between her mother’s fingers (127). The insidiousness of the white ideal is its

³⁰ Linda Dittmar, “‘Will the Circle Be Unbroken?’ The Politics of Form in *The Bluest Eye*,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter, 1990): 137-155, here p. 138.

capacity to seduce a mother away from her family, winning her affection, her loyalty, and her emotional investment by offering the fantasy of power through proximity to it. That this seduction is complete can be seen in Mrs. Breedlove's lament, "*my floor, my floor... my floor*" when the cobbler spills, and in her possessiveness over what is not, and never will be, hers (109, emphasis added).

Throughout the novel, we see that black self-rejection begins with and is rooted in a disenchanting and disappointed relationship to the body. Pauline Breedlove's withdrawal from her home life originates from her fascination with the movies, which have a bewitching influence over her. Watching a Jean Harlow movie after copying her hairstyle, she finds that a tooth in her mouth has come loose from decay, an event she takes as a smarting rebuke to her pride:

I could of cried. [...] I don't believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. (123)

Pauline thus receives an "education in the movies" and, in equating "physical beauty with virtue," Morrison shows us that she "stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap" (122). This cinematic instruction in beauty makes Pauline "settl[e] down to just being ugly," not only because the Hollywood spun fantasies of happy domestic life and doting husbands will never be hers, but because the revered white body will never be attainable, and her body will never comply with the images on screen. The internalized feminine ideal thus proves to be a home wrecker, haunting Pauline and mocking her for her missing tooth, plaited hair, and permanent limp to the point that she resents any reminder of her actual life, from her home to her children to Cholly. Her resignation and sense of defeat from that point forward ("Everything went then") signal an abject relationship to her body acquired cinematically; her "education in the movies" instructs her only in desire and self-loathing.

This education in ideals occurs in a similar way a generation later for Claudia, Freida, and Pecola, who learn from television that they are meant to revere Shirley Temple. Just as Pecola must witness the loss of her mother to the Fisher household, Claudia laments that, in the television program, Bojangles dances with the charming young Temple. To her, the show represents another infuriating case of the spell cast by white girls over black adults, for Claudia notes forlornly that Bojangles "ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (22/19). She adds retrospectively that she "learned much later" to admire Shirley Temple and that the change from "pristine sadism" to "fraudulent love" was "adjustment without improvement" (23). As Pauline Breedlove reveals, the process of cultural indoctrination involves embracing white ideals at the necessary cost of repudiating and rejecting the self; physical beauty, which Morrison notes is one of "the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought," becomes more dangerous and nefarious when involving racial signs of difference and the body (122). As Cheng further points out, Morrison shows us through tracing such characters' personal histories the complex "web of self-affirmation, self-denigration, projection, desire, identification, and hostility," and through Pauline and, a generation later, Pecola, we see that "underneath the pop-psychological insight of an 'inferiority complex' lies a nexus of intertwining affects and libidinal dynamics" (17). That this

complicated acculturation occurs through internalizing whiteness is underscored in the text by Pecola's voracious consumption of milk, which she drinks vast quantities of—not out of greed, but because “she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face” (23). Drinking milk, Pecola consumes the white ideal of somatic perfection, an ideological consumption that will ultimately cause a psychic breakdown.

This relationship between ideological intake and psychic rupture is foreshadowed by the “Dick and Jane” reading primer, which intrusively transmits its message of normativity. Repeated three times in the prologue, it first appears in grammatically and syntactically correct form (“Here is the house. It is green and white.”), then appears without punctuation or capitalization (“Here us the house it is green and white”), and finally appears without any spacing (“Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhite”). This typographical collapse enacts and replicates the process of ideological intake in which concepts are taken in and absorbed. Dick and Jane may initially seem strange and comically forced in their two-dimensional and flat enactment of verbs (“Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane”), but Morrison shows us that the ideal of the white family is repeated so often, transmuted in so many different forms, that its message becomes absorbed and internalized. As Morrison explains in an interview, “the primer, with its picture of a happy family” serves “as a frame acknowledging the outer civilization. The primer with white children was the way life was presented to black people.”³¹ She thus employs primer excerpts to frame the chapters in the novel that are not narrated by Claudia; the chapter on Pauline Breedlove's youth, for example, begins with a fragment of the primer concerning the maternal ideal: “SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICE.” The primer functions not only to offer bitter contrast to the harsh, unrelenting reality of existence for characters, but to demonstrate through its typographical collapse and repetition how unconsciously ingrained white ideals are.

The typographical breakdown also serves as a portent of the dangers of the racializing message of such ideals and their potential to be psychically injurious. The primer, through its claustrophobic and dizzying rhetorical collapse (“Hereisthehouseitisgreen”) anticipates Pecola's psychic breakdown when she hallucinates that her wish for blue eyes has been granted. Linda Dittmar argues that the “obtrusive and increasingly unreadable” excerpts serve discursively as “hostile assaults,” creating “an angry dialectic between documentation and fictionality and between the public domain of early childhood acculturation and the private one of personal experience.”³² Taken thusly, the white ideal appears not as a tranquil and pacifying daydream but as a cacophonous and disruptive nightmare. The primer excerpts denoting white picket fences and suburban comfort provide an ironic contrast to the grim depictions of poverty, alcoholism, absent fathers, abuse, and self-abjection that Morrison depicts; their oppressive force marks the injurious weight of abjection which Pecola absorbs as the daughter of the Breedloves who, throughout the novel, serve as the embodiment of ugliness.

³¹ Toni Morrison, as quoted by Thomas LeClair, “The Language Must Not Sweat,” *New Republic*, Vol. 184 (March 21, 1981): 25-29, here 28-29.

³² Linda Dittmar, “The Politics of Form,” p. 141.

Pecola's wish for blue eyes thus represents a double wish—not only to *be* different physically, and to be perceived as a girl with “those pretty eyes,” but to *see* differently as well (46). Morrison creates a pun of sorts through Pecola's wish, which is a wish to see and be seen anew, to appear different and to perceive differently—to view the world around her through a beautiful new filter. Eyes become a fetishized body part to Pecola precisely because they represent the locus of perception. Pecola is all too aware of “the eyes of other people” watching and judging her, or failing to see her at all, in the case of the white shop-keeper whose vacant gaze communicates to Pecola her lack of significance (47). Pecola's wish is thus not for blond hair or white skin, but for the source of her anxiety and abjection—her eyes, through which she perceives her assigned place in the world—to change. That she believes her wish has been granted speaks to the power of self-perception; Pecola interprets the town's stares and whisperings as jealous murmurs regarding her new blue eyes. Her interior monologue, captured in dialogue with an imaginary friend in a hallucinatory passage, reveals the process of racialization and how visibility is conferred.

If Kingston's narrator must leave Stockton in order to find “ghost-free” places where she can achieve health, the Breedloves face a more dire predicament, needing, it seems, to escape their own bodies: Cholly, through alcohol; Pauline, through the Fisher fantasy; and Pecola, through her wish for blue eyes. Indeed, the quest to achieve a sense of feeling “at home” or being comfortable in one's skin is troubled and in question throughout the novel. This thematic is taken up literally, in the property predicament of being “put out” of one's house, as befalls the Breedloves and opens the storyline of Pecola coming to live with the MacTeer girls. But the novel also suggests that the broader struggle is to not be “put out” of one's own self, and that the same unease and uncertainty associated with property ownership applies to one's own body as well. The only somatic comfort in the novel is to be found in old age, after “lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror,” when the “sour” odor of age speaks to a body no longer caught in the complicated web of desire, ideals, and abjection that ensnares each character in the text (139). In old age, there is the final corporeal luxury of being “irritable when and where” one chooses, of being “in fact and at last, free” to settle into one's body, precisely because it is a body no longer caught up in the harrowing and exhausting battles of negotiating the hurdles of youth and adulthood, hurdles explicitly related to racialized coming-into-being (139). *The Bluest Eye* thus attests to the consequences and effects that culturally instilled desire can produce, particularly on a young girl, whose relationship to self is already troubled by puberty and adolescence. Resisting any naturalization of the process of idealizing whiteness, Morrison instead depicts it as an ambiguous and complicated metamorphosis, no less foreign, violent, or alarming than Gregor Samsa's.

Part II.

Shame: A Postmodern Allegory of Hysteria

The sorrow that has no vent in tears makes other organs weep.

—Henry Maudsley (nineteenth-century English anatomist)

He [Freud] made of hysteria a language (made it speak) but one whose relation to the body was decentered, since if the body spoke it was precisely because there was something called the unconscious that could not.

—Jacqueline Rose, “Dora: Fragment of an Analysis”

Turning away from narratives of assimilation in America and to a postcolonial setting, Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame* (1980) offers an allegory relating the secession of Pakistan from India during the 1950s. Rushdie’s work is in keeping with the broader theme of assimilative hypochondria in this chapter, for we witness somatic preoccupations in the novel that are tied to the project of negotiating one’s identity under the weight of cultural pressures. While we see characters in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Bluest Eye* struggle to inhabit their bodies comfortably because ethnoracial difference is marked and measured through physical traits, the characters in *Shame* are more accurately hyper-embodied, imbued purposefully with characteristics and symptoms that are meant to speak loudly to the reader. The body thus becomes a loaded site in *Shame*, not only because the novel is a self-conscious allegory, but because Rushdie’s trademark style of employing magical realism invests much in the physical body. Every appendage and somatic feature in Rushdie’s works from the size of one’s nose to the time of one’s birth bears exaggerated significance in the narrative.³³ Readers of Rushdie are therefore perhaps not surprised to encounter the conspiring maternal trio of Chunni, Munnee and Bunny who seem to produce a son immaculately, or their son, Omar Shakhil, whose waist grows in proportion to his ego.

Shame is unique in Rushdie’s oeuvre, however, in that it designates one character as the *soma* of the text, thus prompting the narrator to proclaim, “This is a novel about Sufiya Zinobia. [...] Or perhaps it would be more accurate, if also more opaque, to say that Sufiya Zinobia is about this novel.”³⁴ Sufiya serves as the physical embodiment of the text’s repressed shame. She burns, blushes, and erupts with boils as the characters around her refuse to acknowledge or confront their own ethical and moral responsibilities

³³ Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* takes as its starting point the set of children born at the stroke of midnight on the day of India’s independence, who are thus born at the exact moment a nation is born, and who are imbued with magical abilities as a result. One of these traits is a startling and memorable nose, belonging to Saleem Sinai. Rushdie himself was born during the summer of 1947, and has often discussed the significance he reads into his own birth year.

³⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New York: Picador, 1983), here p. 55. Cited in this chapter hereafter by page number.

in the dirty task of nation building with which they are consumed. Posited and marked as a reflection of “emotions that should have been felt, but were not,” Sufiya encapsulates “all that unfelt shame” to the greedy and power-hungry characters surrounding her (125); her burning is, simply put, a sign to remind the “watching family eyes” visually of the “regret” and “guilt” that is “piling up” around them (125). Her physical symptoms are treated as a psychosomatic disorder akin to hysteria for, like Freud’s Dora, Sufiya’s symptoms are read as the physical expression and manifestation of repressed and unconscious emotions. As the “preternaturally receptive” witness to “all sorts of things that float around in the ether,” Sufiya—who is mentally retarded—cannot mentally process what she absorbs, only beam it back symptomatically and viscerally (124). Like Dora, her symptoms are taken to be speaking for her in code, in place of language she cannot face or articulate.

But if these are two works relating to hysteria, why discuss them in the context of hypochondria? What would it mean to read a case study on one psychoanalytic disorder through the lens of another? And what would such a reading enable or facilitate in a novel? My reading of *Dora* and *Shame* will focus not so much on the female patient, but on the diagnostic and interpretive processes surrounding her. These two texts speak directly but inadvertently to hypochondria because, in each, a physician and the surrounding narrative are intent on reading the body along certain lines. In both works, the physician acts like a sleuthing detective, obsessing over the signifiatory possibilities of the body’s symptoms—not for the patient’s benefit, but for motivations that are less obvious. If the doctor/detective/narrator in each case is intent on creative narratives from the body’s symptoms, he partakes in a hypochondriacal reading, for he is also endlessly preoccupied with the body’s features and its signifying function. The discourse of hypochondria speaks not only to the patient, but to anyone involved in the act of reading and interpreting the body in a preoccupied and obsessive way, to the point of stubborn insistence. This section, in other words, does not attempt to “re-diagnose” Sufiya and Dora, but rather to look at the hermeneutic process surrounding the diagnostic process as attesting to hypochondria.

It may to some still seem discordant to bring together Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame* and Freud’s famous *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, for how would an explosive postmodern novel from the 1980s share territory with a psychoanalytic Vienna case study from the 1890s? Upon closer examination, both texts, though partaking in different genres, concern themselves with psychosomatic events and feature strikingly similar diagnostic quests for cognitive mastery over perplexing symptoms. In both, the narrative centers around a female patient, specifically a young woman whose symptoms are said to be speaking in the place of narrative, as somatized expressions of psychic trauma. Both texts also bear witness to an enterprising male physician who enters the scene and, from the comfort of an established perch, swiftly deduces the cause of his young patient’s distress, reading her baffling symptoms persuasively. Rushdie’s protagonist, Omar Khayyam Shakil, a physician and medical scholar called upon to treat young Sufiya Zinobia’s alarming onset of multicolored boils, finds himself obsessed by her case. His final diagnosis, the publication of which catapults him into fame in Rushdie’s fictitious world, is that Sufiya is “willing the damage upon herself” (147).

Freud is similarly called upon to treat the coughing and voiceless Dora, brought to him by the girl's father. Freud, hired as a sort of psychoanalytic detective, uses his analytic prowess to crack the case of Dora open.³⁵ He diagnoses Dora's symptoms as somatic manifestations of her inner psychic life and ambiguous, conflicted sexuality, and she becomes representative in psychoanalysis of hysteria.

For both Sufiya and Dora, the body becomes allegorized, a site where meaning is mapped and read. Both of their bodies "write" or express perplexing symptoms, speaking encodedly in ways they themselves cannot decipher; each woman is baffled by her afflictions. Their enterprising physicians "read" these symptoms persuasively and provocatively, with much self-congratulating and fanfare; perhaps relatedly, each doctor becomes libidinally attached to his charge. But, interestingly, neither patient is satisfied by the proffered diagnosis³⁶, nor do her symptoms abate. Indeed, it should not be immediately assumed that the physician in each case is necessarily fully invested in the recovery of his charge. Both physicians are intent on reading their patients along specific lines, as a coded site which demands interpretation, and they therefore show themselves to be more invested in malady than in health. Further, both insist on their own interpretations even though the evidence before them that should give them pause. These two works thus serve as hypochondriacal readings of patients, in which the body's legitimacy and its failures becomes a site of preoccupation and libidinal attachment. As we will see, Sufiya and Dora get recruited as examples of patients whose symptoms speak the unspeakable. Their texts—a medically informed novel that reads at times like a case study, and a narrativized case study reads at times like a novel—attest to how the body's failures can become a site of fixation, not only to patient but also to physician.

Before we can turn to Sufiya and her acute blush, we must first note her surrounding context. Rushdie's novel takes place in fictitious "Q.," an allegorized substitute for Pakistan in which the intertwined stories of three political families—the Shakils, the Hyders, the Harappas—relate Pakistan's secession, its internal sociopolitical struggles, and its troubled relationship to India and England. The space of Q. represents, as Samir Dayal argues, an effort on Rushdie's part to "re-imagine and trouble received notions of belonging in nationness or to particular zones—Pakistan or India; London or Bombay—not so much from a cosmopolitan unanchored perspective as much as from within the interstitial" space of Q. itself.³⁷ The provenance of Q., in other words, already marks a region in which boundaries and signification are in question; as an allegory, it suggests an unstable ground or "protean device" in which speech and characters are always already highly "encod[ed]."³⁸ Sufiya thus resides in a world where each

³⁵ This language of "cracking the case open" consciously mirrors Freud's own diction relating to his treatment of Dora, as we discuss in detail below.

³⁶ It should be noted here that Sufiya might be said to lack the interpretive tools to assess her diagnosis because she is mentally retarded. However, her condition does not improve under Omar Shakhil's care, a fact that is underscored by the text's final scene, in which she attacks and beheads him.

³⁷ Samir Dayal, "The Liminalities of Nation and Gender: Salman Rushdie's *Shame*," *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 31 (1998): 39-62, here pp. 40-41.

³⁸ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), here pp. 1-3.

character's role is representationally charged; prior to the diagnosis of hysteria, her symptoms partake in the play of coded signification.

Her blush, as one might predict in this allegorical setting, is no simple affair. First, her blush is presented hyperbolically as the "rubescient" Sufiya "goes so beetroot hot that *her clothes can smell of burning*" (89/124, emphasis added). Yet this narrative mode of exaggeration, typical of Rushdie's animated rhetorical style, is contrasted with an insistence on veracity. The narrator tells us in one of his frequent interjections, for example, that Sufiya's improbable afflictions are "real enough" (124). We are similarly told that Sufiya's *ayah*, or nurse, once "scalded her hands" in giving the child a bath due to the "red flame of embarrassment that spread from the roots of the damaged girl's hair to the tips of her curling toes" (124). Sufiya's blush cannot go ignored and, indeed, the narrator cannot help but comment on it. Sara Suleri persuasively comments on this self-critiquing, hyper-aware narrative voice in Rushdie. She notes that a project such as *Shame* which takes on the "uneasiness that besets postcolonial fiction" inherently must "take on as its fictional provenance a series of events so sensational, so violent in its currency as gossip, that the text is impelled to construct elaborate defenses against the lure of melodrama."³⁹ While the narrative voice indeed seems at times aimed at disarming critics or protecting the author by "focusing obsessively on its own literariness and its status as a formal artifact," the narrator also is uniquely interested in Sufiya's ailments, repeatedly drawing attention to them.⁴⁰

The narrative insistence on the truth of Sufiya's symptoms combined with the constant inclusion of evidence to support the fact of her illness place Sufiya in a double bind. On the one hand, the narrator reminds us of the literal, non-symbolic way in which Sufiya suffers somatically as a patient who tests the bounds of medical knowledge. On the other hand, her symptoms function allegorically, for the narrator comments that her "reddenings" serve as a reflection of "all that unfelt shame" around her (125); she figures not only as a result of her environment but as a mirror of it as well, for she "absorb[s], like a sponge," all of the shame of those in power around her, in her politically figured household, and beams it back (124). She is a patient whose suffering we are supposed to take literally, yet she is also the metaphorical embodiment of unfelt political shame whose relation to the body seems purely figural.

Sufiya's own relation to illness and suffering calls to mind the hypochondriac, for the evocation of repressed trauma and unconscious complicity in her actions works textually to call into question whether she is "physically" ill or "merely" psychically wounded, and the connection between the two. In the novel's terrain, where subjectivity is overdetermined in its allegorical evocations and where boundaries and borders are already in flux—historical reality vs. novelistic fiction; Pakistan as a nation vs. Q. as a fictitious space, etc.—any distinction between psyche and soma grows tenuous. In other words, it becomes exceptionally difficult to discuss Sufiya's symptoms or her relation to illness "within" the novel, "before" interpretation, for she is always already being interpreted, and the novel itself is always already reaching past its own boundaries.

Indeed, before Omar Shakhil begins his medical evaluation of her, the narrator has commenced his own diagnostic account. The interpretive process begins with the

³⁹ Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), here p. 174.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

narrator's analysis of Sufiya's blush, and his commentary seeks to collapse the separation between mind and body:

Blushing is slow burning. But it is also another thing: it is a psychosomatic event. I quote: 'A sudden shut-down of the arterio-venous anastomoses of the face floods the capillaries with the blood that produces the characteristically heightened color. People who do not believe in psychosomatic events and do not believe that the mind can influence the body by direct nervous pathways should reflect upon blushing, which in people of heightened sensibility can be brought on even by the recollection of an embarrassment of which they have been the subject—as clear an example of mind over matter as one could wish for.' (126, original italics)

The narrator quotes here from a medical textbook, offering the longest citation in the novel. His source is not fabricated or part of his fictitious landscape, but is, to quote from his own language of veracity, "real enough," though outdated as a source of information.⁴¹ We call attention to the narrative and citational practices here because they seem to function as rhetorical ticks, as their own set of symptoms; the narrator ruptures the allegory of Q., bursting into its bubble with his medical textbook, to emphasize his view that Sufiya's symptoms are not merely physical. The narrator's recourse to scientific material on the blush serves as a way to buttress this claim, so that we are encouraged to interpret Sufiya's illness more broadly as relating directly to psychic trauma.

That Rushdie ruptures the allegory of Q. in this moment of paratextual citation is perhaps not a surprise to his readers, for scholars have commented on this tendency in his novels. Sara Suleri aptly describes Rushdie's genre as "self-disliking allegory," or allegory which must constantly call attention to its mode of narration in disclaiming and distancing ways in order to negotiate the task of postcolonial storytelling.⁴² Rushdie's use of a mediating nameless narrator thus offers a discursive strategy for handling the implicitly controversial mode of articulating through fiction the historical circumstances of an event such as Pakistan's secession. At times, the narrator perhaps strikes us as "Rushdie's counterpart," as Samir Dayal notes in passing in his commentary⁴³; at others, it is easy to obscure any distinction between Rushdie and the narrator, treating them as one and the same, for the narrator's voice often recedes. Yet this mode of narration must not be overlooked or cast aside, for it speaks not only to the sociopolitical aspect of Rushdie's project, but to the treatment of the body and illness as well. Through the added narrative layer, Rushdie calls attention to the hermeneutic process surrounding Sufiya and her status in the text. Her symptoms become more uncertain—but also more loaded—because two diagnostic voices (the narrator's and the physician's) partake in discussing them.

The relation between narrator and author grows more intriguing as the textual interpretation of Sufiya's symptoms becomes less subtle:

⁴¹ Rushdie notes in the acknowledgments section of the book that this quotation comes from *The Life Science* by P.B. and J.S. Medawar (Wildwood House, 1977).

⁴² Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, p. 174.

⁴³ Samir Dayal, "The Liminalities of Nation and Gender," p. 46.

The plague of shame—in which I insist on including the unfeared shame of those around her, for instance what had not been felt by Raza Hyder when he gunned down Babar Shakil—as well as the unceasing shame of her own existence [...]—the plague, I say, spread rapidly through that tragic being whose chief defining characteristic was her excessive sensitivity to the bacilli of humiliation. (145)

These narrative interruptions indicate that Sufiya's symptoms are already mediated by the act of storytelling. By showing us the narrator's own preferences in what he "insist[s] on including" with her afflictions, and that he reads these afflictions as the "tragic" result of her sensitivity to the "bacilli of humiliation," Rushdie reminds us that Sufiya cannot exist outside of an interpretive process. We do not, in other words, have access to any "pure" presentation of her symptomology, for as the narrator makes clear, any narrative presentation of symptoms will always already partake in an interpretive process. As Athena Vrettos concisely puts it, "to be ill is to produce narrative," and the articulation of somatic experience into language (here, not by Sufiya but by the text) means that an interpretive process is always already underway.⁴⁴

Before Dr. Omar Shakhil comes along, then, we already have a detective on the case of Sufiya, reading her symptoms and writing up her report. We note here as well the graphic and elaborate way in which the narrator describes Sufiya's illness, not merely summarizing her symptoms as consisting of boils and rashes, but offering a full page of descriptors. We see the "blotchy rashes, red and purple with small hard pimples in the middle," the "great jets of spittle [that] flew out through her lips," the boils "between her toes" and the "buboes" centered in the "armpits" (145). This detailed catalogue suggests a narrative *jouissance* found in the process of recounting symptoms. Perhaps the medical case study as a genre attests to a certain narrative pleasure that is derived from capturing symptoms in language with precision. Both the narrator and Omar Shakhil (and, as we will later see, Freud with relation to Dora) translate Sufiya's somatic state, and both do so textually: the narrator in his detailed passages, and Omar Shakhil in the case study which catapults him to fame in Q., *The Case of Miss. H.* (147).

Sufiya's symptoms are not only catalogued with narrative zeal in their raw somatic detail but are exaggerated to the point of constituting a form of medical magical realism. With the linguistic flamboyance typical of Rushdie's style, her symptoms are described hyperbolically in vivid Technicolor fantasy, forming a color-coded landscape of hills and valleys, as "extraordinary vermilion lumps" give way to "black buboes" (145). If a grotesque poetry of exaggeration and color arises in Sufiya's symptoms, it is because Rushdie so skillfully draws attention to the ability of the symptom to seduce through its very grotesqueness. The passages devoted to Sufiya's condition, so lush in their detail and lingering in their languid pace, mimic passages from poetry that dote on the object of the lover's gaze. These passages thus anticipate the fact that Omar Shakhil will become studiously enthralled and then enraptured with his patient—even in her "dribbling, incontinent" state (145). The lyrical element in these passages mimics the pleasure Omar Shakhil will derive from interpreting the case. Symptoms, in other words, whether to narrator or physician, present an interpretive lure.

⁴⁴ Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), here p. 2.

The hyperbolism of Sufiya's condition, in addition to conveying the appeal of the symptom, also suggests a relation to parody. Sufiya's body becomes so allegorized that it is difficult to conceive of her illness realistically. Ironically, the raw physical detail of her ailments makes Sufiya surreal physically. Burdened with her "family's shame made flesh," Sufiya develops an inner "beast" that possesses her demonically and begins a campaign of unconsciously acted violence—a beast which seems nearly comic in nature (144). Her assault, for example, begins on the neighbor's "two hundred and eighteen turkeys," which she systematically beheads and eviscerates by drawing "their guts up through their necks with her tiny and weaponless hands" (143). Yet the text seems to celebrate rapturously the violence of her attack—as it will later celebrate the violent breakdown of her body—perhaps because Sufiya's act represents power in the hands of the powerless. Throughout, *Shame* narrates and documents the historical violence of Pakistan's initial years as a fledgling nation with power controlled exclusively by men, with ambition and ruthlessness always trumping ethics and conscience. Sufiya's attack, though by no means glorious or purposeful, nevertheless lends power to a disabled and seemingly powerless figure: a young girl who is mentally retarded and dismissed by her own family as a "moron." Her "tiny and weaponless" hands, though seeming to accomplish no more than a gallinaceous attack, work against the force of masculine political power (143).

The idea that Sufiya embodies and enacts a sense of justice in the text is easier to spot in its concluding scene, as she attacks Omar Shakhil and he—shameless, spoiled, indulged—finally faces the consequences for a life lacking conscience. Sufiya's fully metamorphosed beast, awakened, serves as "the 'the incarnation of their [everyone's] shame,'" and enacts a textual karma in killing off Omar (210). This seemingly cathartic ending in which Omar must face Sufiya, however, only further problematizes Sufiya's relationship to her body and its signification. Throughout the text, her physical body is posited as carrying multiple valences: we are urged to treat her symptoms as "real" and are offered evidence accordingly, but then we are instructed that these symptoms are psychosomatic manifestations of Sufiya's hypersensitivity, and that the only "bacilli" to have infected her are those of "humiliation" (145). She similarly carries the promise of justice through her physical metamorphosis, turning into a beast that can enact a violent retribution, though it is one which first must take a comedic turn through a backyard of turkeys.

Throughout these shifts, Sufiya brings to mind the hypochondriac, for her relationship to illness and to her physical body is always uncertain. Omar Shakhil's diagnosis of her in particular suggests an unconscious compliance in her actions, for he asserts that Sufiya is emblematic "of the power of the mind to affect, 'via direct nervous pathways,' the workings of the body" (147). Shakhil's diagnosis is underscored textually by the cited phrase here ("via direct nervous pathways,") which refers to a passage not from his case study but from the narrator's previously cited medical textbook; the doctor and the narrator, our two sources of authority, are in agreement about Sufiya's psychosomatic state. If, as Cheng argues, "hypochondria is a way of perceiving the world and one's body with respect to social relations," then pre-pubescent Sufiya, "a twelve-year-old girl with a three-year-old mind," cannot claim authority over these perceptions

(146).⁴⁵ It would be more accurate to say that the narrator and Omar Shakhil, intent upon understanding Q. and their own relation to it, read Sufiya hypochondriacally, becoming fixated on her symptoms as articulating a language that could limn the unspeakable relations in a struggling new nation. Sufiya, as the unwitting bearer of a disruptive body, gets recruited by narrator, physician, and author alike for their own hermeneutic claims.

Freud demonstrates a rhetorical quirk in his case study on Dora similar to that of Rushdie's self-conscious narrator. Mindful of potential reproaches and critiques, Freud constantly interrupts the presentation of the patient's history with disclaimers and with directives on how he is to be read. As Neil Hertz points out, Freud "anticipate[s] being reproached for both the nature of" Dora's story "and for the manner of the telling."⁴⁶ Aware of how his audience will react to his candid discussions with Dora on such matters as oral sex and homoeroticism, Freud intervenes with long footnotes and explanatory asides, offering psychoanalytic evidence—often in the form of his own theorizing—that Dora is well aware of such subjects. Like Rushdie, Freud realizes that his provocative and controversial subject matter will incite criticism, and he thus attempts to disarm his critics rhetorically. If Rushdie constructs defenses to authorize his mode of postcolonial fiction, Freud does so to protect his own work, in the sizable contribution he felt he was making to psychoanalysis. Upon completing the case study, Freud noted that it was "the subtlest thing" he had "written so far," the female patient once again in the service of the male writer/doctor.⁴⁷

As with Sufiya, we face a tangled web of familial interactions with Dora: Herr and Frau K., Dora's parents, and, peripherally, the governess. Dora, an eighteen-year-old, presents to Freud with "attacks of nervous coughing" and "loss of voice" (15). Once again, we must examine the backdrop of the patient, which for Dora consists of an obsessive mother who ignores her children and husband; an adulterous father who sneaks around with family friend Frau K.; Herr K., who makes a pass at Dora and pursues her; and the governess, a confidant until Dora realizes that she is in love with her (Dora's) father. Freud famously reads Dora's symptoms as relating to this complicated web in various (and sometimes conflicting ways). Freud interprets Dora's cough, for example, as a result of her sensing "the pressure of his [Herr K.'s] erect member against her body" when he attempts to first kiss her (23). Because this perception is "revolting" to her, Dora substitutes it with the more "innocent sensation of pressure upon her thorax, which in turn" acquires an "excessive intensity" because the original source (the penis) has been "repressed" (23); hence, the cough. In an alternate reading, Freud suggests that the illness serves as an "ultimatum" to her father: Dora will be sick as long as he is with Frau K., so that her symptoms send an "either her or me" message to him (48). In a third reading, Freud asserts that Dora feels conflicted by a "gynaecophilic" or homoerotic undercurrent

⁴⁵ This definition of hypochondria comes from Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 69.

⁴⁶ Neil Hertz, "Dora's Secrets, Freud's Techniques," in Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, eds., *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), here p. 222.

⁴⁷ Freud, as quoted by Philip Rieff in the introduction to *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), vii. Rieff says that this remark was made "the day after he [Freud] had finished writing" the case study, but does not specify its source.

of feeling towards Frau K. (55).⁴⁸ In sum, Dora hates Herr K., loves Herr K., hates Frau K. out of jealousy, loves Frau K. erotically, and loves her father.

What interests us in these various readings is the one possibility that does not get named: that Dora's symptoms might result from Herr K. molesting her. Dora recounts an early episode, when she is fourteen years old, of Herr K. orchestrating events so that he could be left alone with Dora and then "suddenly clasp[ing] the girl to him and press[ing] a kiss upon her lips" (21). Dora tears herself away and flees the room. Two years later, when she is sixteen, he "had the audacity to make her a proposal while they were on a walk" at the lake (19). She notes that he sends her "flowers every day for a whole year," gives "her valuable presents," and spends "all his spare time in her company" without "her parents noticing anything" odd (28).⁴⁹ When Dora's father uproots to Vienna to be with Frau K., Dora notes that she would meet Herr K. in the streets very often, and that "he always used to turn round and look after her" (27). Dora notes that "for some time" after the first incident, she "avoided being alone with Herr K." (21). She exhibits more generally an "avoidance of men engaged in affectionate conversation" (23). Following the incident at the lake, she reproaches herself for not having told her parents about Herr K.'s advances sooner (23/86).

Though Freud does acknowledge that the "experience with Herr K. — his making love to her and the insult to her honor which was involved" constitutes a "psychic trauma," he proceeds to argue that this trauma is "*insufficient* to explain or to determine" the symptoms (20, italics mine). According to Freud, the predictable heteronormative response from Dora following Herr K.'s first advance would be pleasure: "this was surely just the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen who had never before been approached" (21). Dora's "violent feeling of disgust" is read as aberrant, and as the basis for interpreting Dora not only as sexually confused but as deeply in love with Herr K. Freud also notes of the case history that it perhaps, initially, "does not upon the whole seem worth recording," for it is "merely a case of *petite hystérie*": just another girl with her nervous cough (17). And so we note in the case history, before the interpretation has fully commenced, an anxiety of insufficiency: Freud worries that his reader is bored, that the case is lacking, that Herr K.'s little advances do not explain Dora's symptoms in a satisfying way.

Freud's analysis, which constitutes the vast majority of the case study, builds upon itself, his interpretive energies fuelling him forward. In his characteristic rhetorical style, he notes, for example, that "the interpretation we have just been discussing [...] may give rise to a further remark" (45). We thus see that Freud's argumentative structure fuels itself, perpetuating itself; his interpretation opens the door for more of the same and Dora, true enough to her symptoms, is left without a voice. Indeed, Freud comes to the conclusion that, for the purposes of interpretation, an analyst can "translate point-blank"

⁴⁸ Patrick J. Mahony offers a compelling reading of bisexuality and transference in the case, noting that Freud's last meeting with Fliess occurred just a few months before he began Dora's treatment, and that Freud's "own bisexual conflicts [turn] up unexpectedly in his analysis of Dora's symptomology." See *Freud's Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical, and Textual Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), here p. 27.

⁴⁹ Herr K.'s calculated ways of cornering Dora recalls here Humpert Humpert's strategic seduction of Lolita.

the patient's comment, "I *didn't* think that" into "Yes, I was unconscious of that" (50, emphasis added).

This "no means yes" movement is replicated in his interactions with Dora. Freud's prevalent reading of Dora's symptoms, of course, is that "she had for all these years been in love with Herr K." (30). When Freud "inform[s]" Dora of this conclusion, she does "not assent to it" (30). Later in the analysis, Freud notes that his expectations

were by no means disappointed when this explanation of mine was met by Dora with a most emphatic negative [...]. If this "No," instead of being regarded as the expression of an impartial judgment (of which, indeed, the patient is incapable), is ignored, and if the work is continued, the first evidence soon begins to appear that in such a case "No" signifies the desired "Yes." (51)

Freud notes that Dora "admitted" that she could not be "as angry with Herr K. as he had deserved" (51). This concession is meant to convince us of the "feelings of love which were constantly pressing forward into [her] consciousness" (51). But Dora's lack of anger is admitted here in a peculiar context: she recounts one day bumping into Herr K. while with a cousin, who did not know him. "The other girl had exclaimed all at once: 'Why, Dora, what's wrong with you? You've gone as white as a sheet!'" (51). Dora is unaware of her body betraying her because her anger, Freud explains, is unconscious. Indeed. But it is the *cause* of this unconscious anger that we would like to question.

We do not, of course, anachronistically "expect" Freud to come to the conclusion that Dora exhibits the now widely recognizable signs of a victim of sexual abuse: shame, avoidance of the abuser, and feelings of self-reproach. That Freud believes Dora's account of events should be comforting when her father dismisses her allegations as a "fantasy that has forced its way into her mind," aided by Herr and Frau K.'s tag-team slander of Dora as an "over-excited" and inappropriate young girl (19). We wish only to suggest that Dora blanches when she sees Herr K. for reasons other than love. This is obvious, of course, but worth stating because Freud's insistence on precisely the opposite of the obvious, on an unlikely love, is arguably what makes the case so compelling. The medical case, perhaps like the detective story, appeals to the reader because we eagerly anticipate the shrewd investigator to uncover that which we were not expecting. That Freud should read his patient against the grain, against the obvious, as love disguised as hate, is perhaps what leads to the satisfying sense that "few greater pieces of detection have been written."⁵⁰

While it is not our purpose here to offer an alternate reading of Dora's symptoms, we would like to note, as an aside, the role that coughing plays for Dora's father. Dora recollects that, "from time to time," her father would "begin to cough and complain, until suddenly he would start off to B—, and from there [would] write the most cheerful letters home" (27). Coughing serves Dora's father as a way of escaping a miserable home; we wonder if Dora's own cough, if it is to be read psychosomatically, expresses a similar wish for escape. Both of these readings would offer a hypochondriacal analysis of the cough, wherein the body's symptoms facilitate and enable escape; illness in this

⁵⁰ Philip Rieff, in the introduction to *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*.

framework would prove highly desirable for Dora and her father, for she could evade Herr K., and he could escape to the site of his affair.

While Dora blanches, Sufiya reddens. Let us return to the question of why Rushdie's narrator must insist on his psychosomatic readings of our blushing patient. A reading of Sufiya's symptoms in this way is necessary to the plot, for her ensuing violence must be understood in relation to shame. We remember here that Omar Shakhil is figured throughout the novel as shameful because, having been raised by three indulgent mothers in a mansion sealed off from the outside world, he is "entirely without shame" in a way that is reprehensible (79). Hedonistic and constantly indulged, Omar in his youth calls to mind a postcolonial version of *À Rebours* for, like Des Esseintes, he is cut off from the outside world in a strange, exoticized mansion offering its delights and respite from the chaotic world. As the "beast" within Sufiya consumes her, her progressively worse acts of violence can be read as a backlash against Omar's lack of shame.

The two opposing "poles" of "shame and shamelessness," then, are never brought into balance in the text (118). Omar and Sufiya as representatives of these poles do marry, but the marriage is never consummated. Omar Shakhil sleeps with Sufiya's *ayah*, sending Sufiya into a confused turmoil; she feels insufficient, lacking, jealous, repulsed. Indeed, it is virginal Sufiya who perhaps best exhibits Freud's theory of the "supervalent" thought, defined by the fact that "no amount of conscious and voluntary effort of thought" can "dissipate or remove it" (47). Sufiya, mentally retarded, tries to concentrate her energies on her "favorite things," her positive childhood memories. But she is consumed by the fact that her husband "does not come" to her bed, and by the mysterious "thing itself" that her *ayah* performs for her: "the horrible thing and the horrible not-doing-the-thing," the act of sex and its absence (227). Sufiya is repulsed and entranced in her pre-pubescent relation to the sexual act and, because access to it is denied from her, she must submit to the beast of shame within her.

Omar Shakhil reads Sufiya's shame in a slightly different way than the narrator and publishes these findings "in his treatise, *The Case of Miss H.*" (147). Omar's "devotion" to his patient is "perfectly genuine," but he reads Sufiya as "willing the damage upon herself" (147). His case study becomes "famous in medical circles" because it proves that "even a broken mind is capable of marshalling" a somatic "rebellion," a bodily revolt (147/8). It is worth remembering here that Sufiya arrives at Omar Shakhil's office at a point in his life when he needs to immerse "himself in his duties" in order to "keep going," so that she seems to him to be a "godsend" (147). The patient in this case saves the doctor and, shamefully, Omar Shakhil cannot recognize this. He, an immunologist, reads Sufiya's plague as one she brings upon herself, as an autoimmune disorder; she is a victim not of the forces around her but of her own system.

Freud, like Omar Shakhil, congratulates himself on his case study and confides smugly to Wilhelm Fliess that he has had a "lively time," and that "the case has opened smoothly to his collection of picklocks."⁵¹ Freud's choice of language here is revealing given his own attention throughout the case study to figurative speech and, specifically,

⁵¹ Freud, Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, October 14, 1900.

to keys and boxes.⁵² Freud reads boxes and jewel-cases as symbolic of the vagina (*Schachtel*, for example, which Dora uses to mean “box” is also a derogatory term for “woman”). Freud’s own “unlocking” of the case through the “lively” insertion of picklocks could be read, without a great stretch of the imagination, as phallically charged. And while Freud gives much attention to Dora’s libidinal pleasure in her relation to boxes and cases, he does not submit his own discourse to the same analysis. Yet his diction evokes a sense that Dora yielded to him, that “the case has opened smoothly to his collection of picklocks,” and that by patiently and gently manipulating Dora, she has eventually succumbed to him.

Freud engages in a hypochondriacal interpretation of Dora, reading her bodily symptoms, as Jacqueline Rose asserts, as speaking a coded language that requires deciphering.⁵³ This act of symptom-translation is intent on perceiving the body with respect to social relations and cultural pressures. Throughout the case, Freud stretches to read Dora’s symptoms, for he is on his own quest for cognitive mastery over them and for the sake of the psychoanalytic field. As Charles Bernheimer points out, “hysteria [is] the bedrock of psychoanalytic theory, and indeed, *Dora* in particular was meant to provide the ground for Freud’s theoretical flights.”⁵⁴ In other words, through his case study, Freud authorizes himself to decode hysteria through a masculine project that asserts cognitive mastery over the feminine other.⁵⁵ Performatively authorizing himself as a translator of hysteria, Freud is able to establish a cornerstone of psychoanalytic study. Like Omar Shakhil, Freud also becomes quite captivated by his patient; when the case is closed, he writes that “the consequence is that today I feel short of a drug.”⁵⁶ Intoxicated, Freud and Omar Shakhil write their case studies. They pat themselves on their respective backs while their patients, the subjects of their treatment, serve as the allegorized sites of their theorizing.

Just as Sufiya rejects Omar Shakhil in the novel’s final scene, beheading and consuming the husband/physician to whom she will not submit, Dora rejects Freud and announces that their sessions are over, relenting neither to his diagnosis nor to his libidinal attachment. Perhaps both Sufiya and Dora come to understand in the end the way in which their physicians have become hypochondriacally invested in their cases, insistent upon reading their physical symptomology as relating to social relations, intent on creating metaphysical narrative from an ambivalent mix of physical signs. Blanching and burning, Dora and Sufiya resist such claims.

All four texts treated in this chapter address the notion of cultural belonging and the weight of social pressures. Dora is under considerable familial pressure to accept Herr K., and her father in particular relies on her cooperation so that he can continue his affair. Likewise, we see three other daughters who are caught in complicated webs of relations:

⁵² Jane Gallop traces the motif of keys in Dora’s case study in *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

⁵³ Jacqueline Rose, “Dora: Fragment of an Analysis,” *m/f* 2 (1978): 5-21, here p. 12.

⁵⁴ Charles Bernheimer, *In Dora’s Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), here p. 22.

⁵⁵ Neil Hertz’s reading, briefly alluded to earlier, offers a particularly elegant analysis of Freud’s own unconscious identification with Dora as hysterically producing fragmented narrative that is vulnerable to authority.

⁵⁶ Freud, Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, January 25, 1901.

Kingston's narrator struggles to locate a personal voice in negotiating her Chinese heritage and American peers; Pecola Breedlove invests in the fantasy of blue eyes as delivering pride and acceptance; and Sufiya, as the product of shame, serves as its textual receptacle as well as its cathartic and clearing force. All four of these characters, on the cusp between girlhood and adulthood, must deal with various forms of cultural shame and taboo, from the anxiety of being a disappointment by virtue of being a girl in Chinese culture for Kingston, to the confusion of an unconsummated marriage for Sufiya, to the marker of the incest taboo for Pecola. The daughter pays the price in these texts for the family around her, absorbing its tensions and left without a voice. The body speaks out instead in these cases, for and against what it cannot name.

Epilogue

Maxine Hong Kingston recounts in *The Woman Warrior* her difficulty in fulfilling her parents' expectations of her as a daughter, and her ambivalence about meeting those expectations. She remembers that she would refuse to do chores and, if forced to do the dishes, would purposely crack one or two. "Bad girl," my mother yelled, and sometimes that made me gloat rather than cry," she recalls.¹ "Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" Kingston's text on one level dramatizes the tensions that arise from cultural conflict, such as the traditional Chinese practice of stating a preference for sons over daughters and the psychic injury of this while growing up in contemporary America.² Her embrace of being a "bad girl" enables her, in her account, to fantasize that she is closer to being a boy, and thus her performance of stubborn adolescent rebellion enacts a desire to be dutiful, to be closer to the ideal of a son rather than the disappointment of a daughter.

But Kingston's anecdote is more appealing, to me at least, for its other interpretive possibility, which is an implicit pleasure that she finds in resisting what is expected of her and in being a willfully uncooperative subject. "Even now," Kingston states, "I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot. I eat at other people's tables but won't invite them to mine, where the dishes are rotting."³ This practice of countering expectations and taking up the role of the "bad" subject speaks to a rebellious mode of being that Kingston portrays as liberating. We can imagine a certain freedom to be found in burning food, withholding social invitations, and letting the dishes go. And this might be the same appeal that *Bartleby* articulates of "preferring not to," of choosing not to comply, of letting prevailing social expectations fall to the wayside.

The characters I treat in this project perform this resistance, for the most part, unconsciously and somatically. *Bartleby* does not tell us what he would prefer not to do, and Kingston's narrative evades explanation when recounting her period of convalescence. But every character I treat in this book is, on a certain level, a "bad" subject in the ideological sense, for each character resists the process of becoming an ideologically cooperative subject. Each is "on strike" against some element of prevailing societal norms, though unable necessarily to say why. As Judith Butler notes in this context, "If I am someone who cannot *be* without *doing*, then the conditions of my doing are, in part, the conditions of my existence."⁴ The characters I treat, from *Bartleby* to

¹ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1976), p. 47. I refer to the narrator as Kingston herself in this particular instance because the particular passage from which I am quoting consists of memoir rather than fiction (as much as the two can be distinguished in the text), as well as for ease of reference.

² To be clear, this psychic injury is of course not limited to the backdrop of America; I do not mean to imply that such a practice is not injurious in China. However, Kingston's text elucidates the way in which traditional cultural practices can be especially harmful when taken out of context; children of immigrants are confused by cultural practices or unable to recognize them as cultural, instead misperceiving them as personal.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), here p. 3.

Pecola Breedlove, have only at their disposal the conditions of their doing, which is to say their daily rituals and practices as bodies in the world. Unable to speak directly to the norms around them or to remake their environments altogether, they instead unconsciously take up a somatic practice (a “doing”) to alter in some way the conditions by which they exist. Pecola’s hallucination that she has blue eyes, for example, enables her to perceive differently the stares that follow her as looks of envy rather than of disdain.

The characters I treat in this project thus yield a crypto-critique of ideology, an encoded, enacted resistance that is veiled by the body. They are all notoriously enigmatic, from Des Esseintes to Sufiya Zinobia, and the critical scholarship surrounding them reveals a strained effort to decode or decipher them, to render legible their strange and evasive figures. Hypochondria proves useful as a discourse here because it connects the shared provenance of their subject positions, and the way in which they are all similarly engaged in a struggle against ideology. Hypochondria also, perhaps more importantly, facilitates a manner of reading which does not attempt to translate their symptoms, but rather treats these as inherently untranslatable. According to hypochondria, symptoms can never ultimately be translated or decoded, for their function is to displace, to evade a single register of meaning. The hypochondriac’s effect of unsettling the diagnostic process thus offers a poignant and provocative way of reading in which total cognitive mastery cannot be achieved. Such a reading process takes into account multiple registers of meaning, places limits on the hermeneutic process, and examines the social context surrounding an unintelligible body to ask how the character might be responding to cultural pressures.

In closing, I am reminded of the way in which melancholia as a psychoanalytic concept has come into vogue in the past few years in literary theory and cultural studies, and the way in which it has prompted consideration of a politics that would be informed by its features. For example, in their influential volume *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, editors David L. Eng and David Kazanjian suggest that “the politics and ethics of mourning lie in the interpretation of what remains—how remains are produced and animated, how they are read and sustained.”⁵ Indeed, Anne Anlin Cheng’s work on race and melancholia, which I cite throughout this project, considers how the framework of melancholia might alter how we conceive of and approach race relations.

Hypochondria perhaps similarly offers potential as a discourse to reorient the way in which we consider familiar paradigms, and to articulate the beginning of a praxis or approach. While I am not suggesting here a “politics of hypochondria,” I do think that hypochondria offers the promise of an ethics that would allow room for unaccountable subjects whose identities or subject positions are not readily apparent. Hypochondria suggests an approach that would stimulate an ongoing and suspended process of readings and re-readings, while maintaining a certain hermeneutic decorum, respecting that which is untranslatable. What would it mean, after all, to read and re-read as the hypochondriac does, to be vigilant and attentive in this way? What might be gained from a practice of reading that would be both tireless and patient, insistent on its own necessity while supple in the possibilities it considers?

⁵ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, eds., in their preface to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. ix.

We might here recall Jacques Derrida's statement, "*Ce qui me guide, c'est toujours l'intraductibilité,*" or "What guides me is always untranslatability."⁶ To be informed by the discourse of hypochondria might indeed involve being guided by an irreducible unknowability, and being moved by that which is untranslatable. To accept those who are unintelligible without attempting to decipher, recruit, convert, or demean them would be a practice animated by the discourse of hypochondria. And that, I think, would be much.

⁶ Jacques Derrida in conversation with Hélène Cixous, as quoted by Shireen R. K. Patell, "Untranslatable You," *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (November 2005): 897-912, here p. 897.

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