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# **Postmodern Postscript**

## **The Traffic in Leeches: Cronenberg's *Rabid* and the Semiotics of Parasitism**

It is now surprising that the English word *leech* derives from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “to heal.” For almost a millennium, the word (at least as written) referred without prejudice to both the doctor and the sluglike animal used by doctors to draw patients’ blood. Not until the late eighteenth century, when new protocols for the extraction by doctors of money and knowledge from patients became primary, did the word begin to be used in writing to refer to parasitism. This change participates in a dense network of changes in technological practices and social relations. Among these, the changing status of leechcraft in medicine (once interchangeable terms) is perhaps less important than the changing status of medical knowledge in capitalism and the status of writing and professionalism with respect to other social relations.

Medieval medicine named the leech; the emergence of power-knowledge under capitalism gave the leech a particularly bad name: the healer—the doctor or artist that lets out bad or excess blood and by the catharsis (operation, text) reintegrates the social body—was coded more pointedly with and against the parasite, interrupting, infecting, and disintegrating through the manipulation of gaps and surpluses. Predictably, it was also toward the end of the eighteenth century that the word *doctor* began to be used in writing as a verb meaning “to adulterate.”

The crux of epistemic change that can be located in retrospect in the late eighteenth century implicates shifting polarities in semiotic relations as well as their discursive extension. The fault lines that divide the signifieds of single words (“leech,” “doctor”) may be tributaries of great fractal canyons extended in discursive space-time. “Literary” or “open” texts have also been “epicentered” (positioned as “origins”) by multiple interfaces of the tectonic plates of discourse.

If the familiar witticism, “the operation was a success; the patient died,” marks the ongoing ascendancy of professional knowledge-production over bodies, the black humor of a patient living through a failed operation in David Cronenberg’s 1977 film, *Rabid*, would mark the relativization of this ascendancy and put all relations under the sign of parasitism—the traffic in leeches. The reading of the film that follows is an attempt to assess the kind of semiotic relations that characterize such a regime, which can be called postcapitalist and postdisciplinary in the sense that capitalism and disciplinarity have metastasized so thoroughly, so globally and molecularly as to become less figure than ground. My desire is to engage the viral (or in the film’s terms, rabid) semiosis that lives parasitically in this ground—without either pathologizing or hyping it.

This semiotic regime calls implicitly for a reevaluation of Freudian processes such as repression, sublimation, condensation and displacement, fetishization, and symptom formation, insofar as these processes tend to refer back to various origins that they distort—primal scene, dream thoughts, originary myth. If Freud problematized such retroactive reductions, American therapists have been good at validating them (e.g., in the search for childhood abuse scenarios) and bad at putting into question the participation of countertransference (or of the role of professional power-knowledge generally) in the retroactive fixing of pathology and desire. Post-Freudian therapists, that is, have tended to take the inaugural moment of psychoanalysis, the apple that fell on Freud’s head, the idea that his female patients’ incest stories were fantasies, and reattach it to the tree of fact, while the post-post-Freudian objective is to juggle it in the air long enough to take a few Eve-like bites as the metaphor gets out of hand. But even countertransference inevitably implies an originary relation that is transferred (away from its “proper” site); the slogan of a parasitic psychology might be the paradoxical “countertransference without transference.”

The observation that the nodes around which psyches are built are never original but have always retroactively been “epicentered” (e.g., as “screen memories”) may complicate but does not fundamentally alter their centrality. This centeredness irreducibly implicates a Freudian hermeneutics in which, for example,

genitalia cannot by definition be fetishes (since fetishization displaces and condenses *from* the genitalia to other sites). Freud's assertion that each dream has a "navel, the spot where it reaches into the unknown," enacts a similar orientational strategy. The metaphor situates the mother's body as the central mystery and validates analytic knowledge that begins—literally and metaphorically—where detachment from the mother leaves off (e.g., with the Oedipal crisis). At the dream's "navel," Freud continues, "dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium" (Freud 1965, 564). The movement of Freud's metaphor from "navel" (a kind of erect hole, not a scarred exit wound but a closed entrance) to phallic mushroom (singular excess of an otherwise rhizomic, acentric network) enacts the substitution of supplementarity that establishes the semiotic center of Freudian interpretation. To literalize Freud's mixed metaphor as a penis growing out of a navel, or to expose the navel/penis as a contradiction rather than a substitution, to betray at their origin (or *as* origins) the inlets and outlets through which interpretation is meant to flow, is the work that Cronenberg's film—and this text, in participating in the theoretical work of the film—would like to perform. This work not only displaces hermeneutic and epistemic status from fatherly mushroom to motherly mycelium, from phallic tree to acentric rhizome, it calls into question the oppositions between them (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3–25).

It is easy to overstate the case for such epistemic shift. New-age rumors of the Death of the Clinic are greatly exaggerated, as is the millennial sense that the ambiguity of "late" capitalism allows us to understand its recent demise as well as its transnational maturity. But thinking ahead of what one's own time will in fact allow to be realized does not foreclose realizations that it may be later than one thinks. Overstatement and totalization of the case inevitably backfire (as they do in the film): the liberatory polymorphosis that would reverse the strictures of Oedipal genitalization (and the direction of time and modernization structured with it) is always collapsing back onto itself, but in so doing it does not merely reinscribe the categories it had sought to deconstruct but perpetuates the story of an ongoing conservation of chaos against the regimes of both order and disorder, and of the living, discursive, and historical bodies that belong to this story: bodies neither/both ephemeral nor/and eternal, holding their own with and against the production of knowledge.

*Rabid* offers an apparently schematic plot. Rose (Marilyn Chambers), a young woman burned in a motorcycle accident, is treated by a doctor who

uses a radically new skin grafting technique. Skin taken from one part of the body is supposed to be “neutralized” in order to allow it to grow back to match the area onto which it is sewn. Instead, when Rose emerges from a coma following the operation, she has grown an erectile blood-sucking appendage (with a needlelike stinger at the tip) that emerges from a little purse-lipped opening in her armpit, where skin from her thigh had been grafted. She is driven by a craving for blood. In hypersexualized embraces she penetrates several men and women (including the doctor and some of his patients) and draws blood from them in an ecstatic kind of reverse ejaculation. Her partners are first stupefied and then become rabid, biting other victims (again with no gender preference) before dying; their victims become rabid in turn. Doctors are unable to develop a vaccine or cure; the plague spreads and martial law is declared; the rabid are shot on sight. Ostensibly to prove to her boyfriend that she is not responsible for the infection, Rose locks herself in a room with one of her victims, who is moving in to attack her as the camera cuts away. In the film’s final scene, a plague-sanitation crew removes her corpse from an alley.

As *Rabid* begins, Dr. Keloid’s partners—his wife and a fatherly older doctor—are persuading him to franchise their clinic into a chain of plastic-surgery resorts for their jet-set clientele. Keloid’s reluctance (“to become the Colonel Sanders of plastic surgery”) is only skin deep; in order to pursue his medical ambitions, he will leave the financial and managerial entrepreneurship to his partners. When news of the accident interrupts the meeting, he quickly acquiesces to the plan, and rushes off to attend to the victim.

What’s rotten in the state of medicine—which is rather casually and satirically noted at the beginning of the film—requires an “accident” to be activated. The film’s title sequence intercuts scenes of the clinic partners’ planning meeting with scenes of Rose and her boyfriend embarking on their motorcycle trip with scenes of what lies ahead of them on the road, grafting together schematically the convergence of circumstances that will generate the fatal sequence whose unfolding will occupy the rest of the film. A vacationing family is lost and the husband disagrees with his wife and son (who insist that he has missed the turn) on how to proceed. The husband relents, but as he begins a three-point turn, the van stalls in the middle of a rural road. “We should never have sold the station wagon,” he pouts, thus displacing and condensing an origin for the present crisis into a prior mistake, another failure to resist a “modernization” scenario. One may imagine a “flow chart” of binarized decisions (to franchise or not, to buy or not, to turn back or not) in which the fatal swerve has always already occurred, is always in process, and is always about to happen. The satiric vignette of the bickering family echoes the scene

of the clinic partners: in both cases an Oedipal nuclear family group (generic organizational unit of the bourgeois state) comes to a crisis in location and direction, and the dominant male relinquishes (in order to recuperate) his sovereignty. Satire is interrupted when the motorcycling couple collides with the van, sending them into a sickening trajectory.

The Imaginary wholeness of the androgynous young couple, clad alike in black leather, cloven together on/with their black motorcycle, when processed through the symbolic aporia of the family and corporation (unstable and internally divided triads), is cloven apart by what amount to His-and-Her Oedipal Crises, given that such a crisis does not merely refer “back” to some previous divergence but (as in Lacan’s parable of the two doors, “Ladies” and “Gentlemen”) is a channeling (canalization) that is made to keep happening (Lacan 1977, 151). The man with his minor orthopedic injuries is sent to “The General [hospital]” (that rough-and-ready representative of medical pragmatism) and pinned together, while the more profoundly damaged woman emerges from crash and clinic and coma—the Female Oedipal Crisis, that mother of all malpractices—with a wicked chip under her shoulder. “Do you feel weak?” Doctor Keloid solicits his patient after she emerges from her coma. “No,” Rose replies, “I feel *strong*.”

The conventional and hierarchical gender difference implicit in the positions of the couple (he drives, she rides)—but relativized by their identical clothing and unity with their machine—is polarized by the trajectory following the crash: the man is thrown clear and the woman is trapped under the burning machine. This gender divergence coincides with the convergence of generically differentiated stories as the family quarrel is interrupted by the impending crash and then the planning meeting is interrupted by its aftermath: three stories (one couple, two triads), clearly differentiated in genre as tragic love story and parodic social satire, are braided together. From this braiding an unstable third genre, horror, will emerge out of the “medical procedural” drama that follows. Since the opening scenes are intercut with the titles, the “film proper” is made to begin with the crash—where genders diverge and genres converge.

As the doctors prepare to operate on Rose, it is Dr. Keloid’s wife who at first objects—and then relinquishes her objection—to his medical procedure as too risky, just as he resisted and then gave in to the franchise “operation.” Caution and entrepreneurship, then, are cross-polarized between medicine and marketplace; the cross-polarizations are themselves polarized between husband and wife; the structure of the polarities and the compromises between them cross-authorize entrepreneurship—and dispense with caution—in both finance and medicine. With

this “X” the film marks the spot where the (husband-and-wife) team of disciplinarity and capitalism strike the Faustian trade-off that inaugurates their ascendancy and fall.

The second “accident,” a more nebulous condensation of causality and locus of the monstrous change, occurs in the course of the medical procedure. Skin taken from Rose’s thigh and sewn to her armpit is sent to a lab to be neutralized; doubly displaced, “it loses its specificity not only as thigh tissue but as skin tissue.” Somewhere in the process, though, it is not neutralized but activated: it neither wholly retains the specificity of its origin nor conforms to where it is implanted. Instead, the procedure produces a dangerous supplementation, the dark side of surplus value, constructed by capitalism as a seemingly occult disturbance in its own logic; that is, in the neutralizability or commutability of bodies, commodities, and texts in the cash nexus. More particularly here, one might read vertically (with Freud and Marx) that money/flesh alienated or instrumentalized from “below” and sutured “above” fails to efface or repress its origin, which returns with distorted vengeance. But “return” and “origin” are rendered meaningless in the process, which is monstrous precisely because all agents and patients and features and functions, all bodies and organs, are “changed, changed utterly” in its sway. The horizontal reading is that a new mediation has been introduced between the body and itself (as films are “media” between culture and itself) as the skin is “farmed out” to a lab to be neutralized. The universal laundering solvent of money (and more generally an official hegemony of valuation and status) by which all differences are to be reconcilable proves to be or not to be biodegradable. In the process, the woman gets a monstrous “upgrade” as her own body seems to “resist” the medical procedure.

We may read the first order of parasitism represented in (or by) the film—professionalism itself in late capitalism—as a deteriorative scenario: having abandoned the ostensible purpose or pretext of reproducing the health of the whole social body—the workings of the depths—medicine has been given over to an aesthetic production of vanity—the play of surfaces—for a parasitic elite. U.S. release of the Canadian film, set in Quebec, engages further “spatialized” and complex contradictions between and within Canada’s sluggish but guaranteed health-care system and the profit-driven, Social Darwinist organized crime of health care in the United States. Although the film does tend to construct (as an absence) an imaginary temporal or spatial *elsewhere* in which such contradictions are not constitutive, it must be *either* the discursive space-time before the birth or after the death of the clinic (and with it, power-knowledge under Western capitalist patriarchy) that the film necessarily but perhaps constructively fails to remember or imagine, or the liv-

ing clinic's seamless whole body of ideology the film would be happy meanwhile to penetrate and infect. The differential between these Imaginaries—the crosscurrent of possible pasts and futures as they ripple the surface of the present—is the disturbance around which the film is elaborated. The Birth of the Clinic is grafted historically forward to the film's contemporary time frame, and its (future) death is grafted back to renegotiate the terms of each.

In any case, the film represents the shift in function (or imagines its own demystification of the function) of medicine as ironically counterproductive, producing (as Marx asserts that the bourgeoisie produces “its own gravediggers” [1972, 483]) a monstrous offspring that will come back to haunt and to destroy it. Disciplinary dysfunction, figured in the mutation that is its by-product, is a series of reversals of flows and channels and the messages and codes that are configured by them: a penis—located not at a man's crotch but at a woman's armpit—that does not ejaculate sperm but sucks blood, that does not impregnate but infects, that is not inserted into some handy orifice but makes its own orifice, violating the body's integrity. To align the terms: a medicine (professional power-knowledge) dedicated not to reproduction but to self-serving narcissism (its own as well as its elite clientele's), neither a fecund source nor a pure channel for a consensual cultural code but a parasitic drain (a gap) and the means of supplementation by noise (a surplus), which does not fit naturally in an economy of mutual or interdependent needs and pleasures but drastically disrupts this economy.

Along with their functions and locations, the identities of all the implicated categories are ambiguated in the process: the penis is not a penis, the woman is not a woman (nor a personality as such: “You're *not* Rose,” the boyfriend insists, in spite of Gertrude Stein), fucking is not fucking is not fucking, and so on. Insofar as this ambiguation has the ambition to deconstruct the ideological categories on which it feeds, it runs the risk of backfiring in several different directions: indeterminacy or different differences are still at least partially containable in the film as professional, nonhuman, nonmale, nonheterosexual—or merely as *accidental*: a regime in which the phrase “shit happens” would be a consoling refusal of interpretation is an exclusive and expulsive one, reducing all indigestible meaning to shit and film to flushing. But the abjection of meaning—as in the final scene in which Rose's corpse disappears into the maw of a receding trash truck—cannot foreclose its repercussions.

The mutant woman who comes to occupy the center of the film figures a dazzling confusion between the sites and functions of production, reproduction, and consumption, succinctly condensed into a prohibited exchange of features (called above “a crisis in location and direction”) between breast, mouth, and

penis (a list that threatens to extend indefinitely to include umbilicus, anus, vagina, hand, eye, needle, and so on). This exchange of features echoes here and there in various vignettes: Rose sucks the blood of a cow in the barn where she's taken refuge, the drunken farmer crudely suggests fellatio ("I've got something you can drink off of, and it ain't no whiskey neither"), Rose penetrates the farmer's eye as he sucks on her breast, the doctor's older (male) partner bottle-feeds his baby, an infected Doctor Keloid cuts and sucks the blood from a nurse's finger instead of cutting the thread with which he is suturing a patient's ear, and of course the rabid make vampiristic attacks and drool the obligatory horror-film generic indeterminate viscous whitish fluid. The mis-circulation of fluids (blood, milk, semen, and mucus—standing in for money and information) accompanies the misappropriation of flesh or instability of identity categories.

In the confusion, the propriety of various otherwise locally socially acceptable practices may become suspect. For example, instrumentalizing animals for food is no longer an option for Rose after the change: her attempt to vampirize a cow is interrupted by vomiting (itself interrupted as the farmer barges in). Likewise, when she tries to eat a steak sandwich she is again interrupted by vomiting (again interrupted, this time by the truck driver she's hitched a ride with, who pulls her back into the cab). The carnivorous etiquette of Western humanism (cows may be eaten, people must not be) gives way to a more demanding cannibalism (people must be eaten, cows must not be). But the change is here described from a humanist perspective that starkly opposes eater and eaten; the parasite negotiates with its host (whether these are doctor and patient, parent and child, employer and employee, or film and viewer) an always historically particular and unprincipled parameter between meal ticket and meal: in the parasitical ecology, there can be no adequation of needs and abilities, no ultimate symbiotic model or final economy that can regulate the chiasmic and deferred interchanges between irreconcilable kinds of power.

The interruptions and metainterruptions are themselves the story. A young man trying to pick Rose up in a mall (he offers her a cigarette) is interrupted before consummating either the smoke or the pickup—or before Rose can penetrate him—when the man he approaches for a light wheels around and attacks him, sucking blood from his neck, before being interrupted in turn by the security guard, who sprays bullets into the assailant, killing the shopping-mall Santa Claus as well—a nice satiric vignette of the collateral damage inflicted on the sacred cows of the old order by friendly fire in the ideological sacrificial crisis. When push comes to shove, the powers that be can dispense with the friendly fatherly figure of the "author

function,” which, as Foucault writes, only appears to bestow “with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations”—precisely the shopping-mall Santa effect—but functions instead as the principle that fixates, reduces, and “impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of meaning” (Foucault 1984, 118–19). But it is no longer disseminations or coitions that are interrupted in the film, but interruptions and parasitisms (barn squattings, vampirisms, hitchhikings, pickups, and so on). By this “squared” remove, as by the multiplied bodily displacements, the film would unmoor itself from the burden of the symbiotic or wholistic paradigm against which it had sought to assert its own nonidentity. The ball and chain allows two free steps before it has to be dragged again. The inevitable failure of this removal can be traced in the nonlinearity by which the doctor’s penetration of his patient rebounds on him; the failure of removal now enters a second stage as well, the effect of Rose’s penetrations now interrupting and foreclosing the act of penetration itself.

Is sucking smoke through a paper tube okay? Should a gentleman offer a lady a cigarette? Is sucking liquor out of a bottle okay? What constitutes rape? Is spraying bullets out of a metal tube okay? Is eating meat cool? Shooting the rabid? Penises in mouths? Penises coming out of vaginas coming out of armpits? Needles in arms? Needles coming out of penises? Coming out? Outing? Penetration? Men nursing babies? Plastic surgery? Sex change? Horror films? Theorizing them? The anal child or Oedipal adult who insistently repeats these questions of what is politic or correct—questions of taste or judgment—is always interrupted by the phallic woman whose thrust is to question how these practices are allowed to configure and disfigure those on either side of them. One might argue, for example, that a gun is a semiotic instrument, a rhetorical device that displaces, condenses, and channels violence, polarizing by its one-way flow the difference between the one who wields it and the one on the business end—a rough definition of violence.

The film sets itself up against a rigorously (but spontaneously and hegemonically) policed regime organized by one-way flows of semen, breast milk, and so on, and the exclusivity of the channels, senders, and receivers configured by these flows. This opposition works by reanimating with a vengeance the pre-modern or predisciplinary body characterized by “fungibility” of bodily fluids and their capacity to transmute into each other (see Laqueur 1987, 116; Duden 1991, 165–70). Only against the absent presence of a disciplinary master flowchart, a “sublime object of ideology,” can the film signify at all; only against an imaginary symbiotic paradigm can it sustain a generic identity as “horror.” But it is toward a “body without organs” and a nonsignifying semiotics that is its milieu—not toward a cen-

tral or transcendental signifier that can be hermeneutically situated as its origin—that the film points with horror and pleasure.

The exceeding of parameters is marked by “gridlock,” a form of nonlinear self-blockage. After violence disorganizes the clinic, police intervention begins with the cops setting up shop there; we see a man being given a Breathalyzer test. The breath itself is channeled and measured; soon identity cards are issued to those who have been vaccinated, checkpoints are set up at entrances and exits, intersections are patrolled, and the dead are collected and disposed by roving crews who block traffic. The gothicization of both order and disorder, of canalizations and decanalizations, and their distribution across the film, work to situate the film’s subject in another semiotic or epistemic space, a chaos that differs in kind from both order and disorder. There remains a question whether the condensation, denaturalization, and gothicization of cross-functionality onto the figure of the mutant woman works as a drain to draw scrutiny away from other practices or to pull them into its vortex. In any case, the film ambiguates along with these practices the implication of the various victims, again offering the viewer the finally futile job of processing each case into a normalizing spectrum of guilt and innocence. At the guilty end, presumably, are the doctor who, in the process of “saving her,” uses the helpless Rose as a guinea pig; the drunken farmer who (echoing the doctor) tries to rape Rose where she has come for refuge; and the sleazy porn film viewer who (again echoing the doctor) offers her protection in order to molest her: male saviors are revealed as parasites. Toward the end of innocence (and of the film, after some *chiaroscuro* between) is Rose’s friend Mindy, who takes Rose in and tries to help her. Rose is first a patient who does not choose her fate (unless wearing black leather and riding motorcycles with pretty boys is culpable); she gains agency first to victimize the victimizers and at last the unimplicated (unless being a perky yuppie named Mindy, with a turned-up nose and pink fashion-victim eyewear, is culpable). As the circulation of victimization cycles back again, Rose herself assumes a version of the doctor’s role (drawing blood from an innocent victim as “an experiment”) and, again, becomes her victim’s victim. The confusion of ends wrought by the nonlinear turbulence of these cycles of guilt and innocence and coolness and uncoolness threatens to level distinctions within as well as between aesthetics and morality.

Insofar as the film works (like many horror films) as a kind of do-it-yourself Dante’s *Inferno*, “you the viewer” may assemble hierarchies of vice and assign the characters and their practices to wherever you like (Fashion-victim shades? Aisle three), but your assignations just assign you back to the cultural position in which you find yourself. To say (for example), BAD film or BAD doctor, as if

disciplining a dog or a child, is to be duped into reproducing a conventional authority: thus the literary critic is positioned conveniently to show you how best to accessorize your cultural wardrobe.

Self-referentiality and self-authorization, those privileged markers of literary and professional subjectivity in the Romantic and post-Romantic West, are obviously rabid here. The confusion between production, consumption, and reproduction that the film displays can be read into or from virtually all Romantic and post-Romantic Western literary texts insofar as the historically overdetermined ambiguous and ambivalent position and cross-functional operation of the culture industry (and eventually, every other discursive organ) in the social body cannot avoid representing itself. In the flux of difference and similarity between the terms of metaphor, the arbitrariness of constitutive distinctions emerges. What is the film qua doctor (or any particular configuration of power-knowledge) trying to do? What is the doctor-slash-film or doctor-cum-film trying to do? What is the difference between a cum film and a slash film, or between cumming and slashing, sex and violence? Does the doctor or the film try to save its patient/audience or merely to save face or make its name at the expense of its patient and finally itself? Self-referentiality circulates among the film's characters and vignettes: the film as couple (embarking, a cool and beautiful hermaphroditic cyborg—in love—with everything possible; the film on the double double reel of the motorcycle/projector); the film as clinic (where the plastic surgery of filmmaking goes on—these endless planning meetings—the film could be franchised—it could be all over the place—with financing and distribution—and I can have my cake and eat it too: I can preserve my artistic aspirations if I let the others handle the business); the film as family (okay, I'll martyr my pigheaded sense of direction and stop being such a maverick—but that blocks me—I don't want to get stuck being middle-of-the-road); the film as crash (split subjectivity: this woman on fire trapped under the wrecked machinery and this stupefied, impotent man thrown clear); the film as operation (it's too dangerous to go on, but now I must); the film as mutant woman (oh my god, now what am I doing? what has been done to me? am I just a monstrous narcissistic ego, sucking everyone dry to keep this thing going?); the film as martial law (I've got to keep it under control, monitor everything—I'm the director here—oh, Christ, I've murdered the auteur/Santa I thought I was); the film as boyfriend (it's out of control, but all I can do is look on in frustration); and finally, after she has devoured the well-meaning viewer who was foolish enough to take her in—and finally, after her attempt to monitor her effect on others is self-defeating, the film is in the can and taken away, leaving indeterminacy as to whether it will spread or not—and the effacement of the trace

(am I destined, then, not even to be remembered as the origin or the vehicle—Typhoid Mary, scourge of god, father, penis, mouthpiece, author, leech—whereby the world of meaning was emptied or impregnated, purged or polluted—just a flash in the pan after all—a couple hours of fame or fucking or film?—but you know and I know—that I—that she—that it—made it happen—demonstrated the otherwise inscrutable semiotic genitalia in operation—and then the bibliography rolled by and then they left the theater). After speaking at the crossing of all these voices and practices I can no longer unambiguously say I.

Film as book, writing as fucking, penis as leech, leechcraft as writing. Being almost reduced to an empty metacommentary on its own production, distribution, and consumption, it threatens to collapse into nonsignifying self-identity. But again, not a penis, not a film, not a leech, not fucking; not over. Not yet. The flood of indistinction and intermetaphoricity wanes; the world must be continuously destroyed and remade with no Ark and no Ararat to ensure the survival of species.

As the man in an old cartoon said, watching robots make robots: sometimes I ask myself, where will it end? But this is not just a repetitive reperformance, deterioration, or progress. What's wrong with reproduction, with medicine, with the second law of thermodynamics is that the game of Telephone produces not the same message, nor only an abstraction or schematization or representation or evolution or deterioration or elaboration of a message, but a chain of differences whose irreconcilability—against the hegemonic regime of the same—produces pleasure.

As the film auditions itself for all its parts, it also offers the viewer a number of roles. In an easy bit of typecasting, the viewer is first offered the part of boyfriend, who in the opening scene steps out of a doorway to gaze lovingly at Rose, standing by the motorcycle waiting for him to begin the trip. At first, apparently, in control, he is stupefied by the crash and then can only assume the role of frustrated and impotent onlooker, after only briefly pausing to assess (and, apparently, to dismiss) his own implication as a causal agent (“I didn’t kill her, did I?”). His only substantive intervention works to install in Rose, again in an apparently well-intentioned attempt to save her, the suggestion that she is responsible for the plague. This suggestion only leads her to her own fatal experiment in the attempt to assess her own implication, while he is reduced to attempting to warn her, by telephone, to stop the experiment. Insofar as the boyfriend is less implicated, he is also less damaged: the presumption, anyway, is that he and the viewer—however changed or traumatized—survive the film.

The roles of clinic patients and then of Rose’s victims are the next most obvious for the viewer, with their varying degrees and kinds of culpabil-

ity; that is, their ambiguous desires. For the squeamish, the film offers a stereotypically gay man who is offended at the sight of Rose's damaged body being carried into the clinic. Rose's first victim is a plastic-surgery recidivist whose gazing in the mirror at his new face while smoking a cigarette *through a holder* (both channelings—of gaze and smoke—marking him as not a “real man”) is interrupted by Rose's awakening screams, and whose fatherly attentions and intentions are confused by her sexual embrace.

Rose's third victim is Judy Glasberg, a stereotypically assimilated upper-class Jew, who has returned for her second nose job because “Daddy said it wasn't different enough from his” (another failure of the Oedipal differentiation required for cultural mainstreaming). “I shudder to find out what it all means,” she coos, holding up a tattered paperback Freud: through her the film singles out for special punishment its would-be interpreters. Rose attacks her in a hot tub and places her in a freezer, as the film assembles a nice little cluster of anti-Semitic codes: the Jewish question—where the privilege to renegotiate the directions of differentiation and assimilation can be both marked and unmarked on the body—is disposed by the dualistic thermodynamics of racism (as enforced transit between “sun people” and “ice people?”): Judy, upper-class Jew, daddy's girl, would-be intellectual; Glasberg, superficial as glass, frigid as an iceberg, reluctant lesbian. But here the director includes his own ambiguous signature as well, by the echo of “David Cronenberg” in “Judy Glasberg” (David and Judith both being Old Testament giant-killers). The ambiguous signature and its ambiguous marking of the director's Jewishness remind us that ambiguity of identity has been contained precisely as a marker of Jewish identity. The liminal anti-identity or “queerness” of Jewishness, which cannot help but participate in the racism that coproduces it, here also inhabits a predicament that might be called the “Jewish Science Question” (psychoanalysis—or Marxism?), which may begin by putting into play the mutually cross-constructive and deconstructive relations between Jewishness (itself indeterminably a race, religion, or culture) and psychoanalysis (like Marxism, indeterminably a theory or practice, both always problematic as sciences, subsequently “passing” as literary theory), but reverberates again to evoke, to call into its question, to haunt and to be haunted by the “late” formations of clinical discipline and capitalism.

Does the film work to “reterritorialize” such liminality? The clinic patients are uniformly upper-class and ambiguously sexual; Rose's outside victims are just as stereotypically working or middle-class and straight: the farmer-rapist, the truck driver, the businessman, the porn patron, the dumb mall boy, the Cosmo single girl. It is again unclear whether Rose's indiscrimination and repeated comings-

and-goings between them deconstruct or reinscribe the difference between these inside(r)s and outside(r)s. Rose and the viewer taken in with/by her occupy the role of artist/author, standing inside/outside systems of differentiation (in class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity), switchboards in a game of Telephone. Rose as film as viewer as victim is instrumentalized, but not alone, as sites of reception and transmission. Orgasm is replaced or revealed as *chiasm*; the patient becomes an agent, an object, and a subject of knowledge at the same crossing. The ejaculation-in-reverse of the leech, that singular and locally applied phallic creature, and leaching—the multiple and molecular *jouissance* that erupts nonlocally across the discursive body—are interpenetrating by-products.

But even in the roles of boyfriend and victims we notice the same sequence through which the doctors and Rose must pass—something happens; control is relinquished or shared, one is stupefied or comatose, and one emerges changed, not really knowing what happened or how one is implicated. In a classic hermeneutic striptease, the film leaves us guessing as to what has happened to Rose and what she is doing to her victims, before showing us, in various glimpses, the cross-functional equipment that is felt but never seen by each of her victims, even refusing to emerge under Dr. Keloid's clinical gaze. This overcoded scenario works retroactively to interconstruct incest, historical and epistemic change, professionalization, and semioticization. Something happened. Glimpses of the cross-functional mechanism weave through the film like a needle through fabric. Each time it seems the same—but slightly different.

Oppositions between female desire and orgasm as visually undocumentable and therefore subject to doubt and faking, visible male desire (erection) and orgasm as guarantors of authenticity and closure (hence the generic marker of “cum shot” or “money shot” in masculinist pornography), motherhood as that which is never in doubt (birth as metonymy), and fatherhood as that which is always in doubt (birth as metaphor) have been “epicentered” to operate a signifying system. By leveraging these oppositions, the film gets away with showing a kind of erection and a kind of orgasm (we see the victim's blood being pulled into the translucent stinger) and thus would subvert the categories that control its own circulation according to official status: the film would conflate the ratings R and X into a counterprescription. It is possible to show and to speak of these things only in retrospect, only insofar as they have in some sense ceased to ground a system of meaning, at the place where the realms of *meaning* (culture, literarity) continue to establish their own self-serving and parasitical priority, to bring power down without thereby

erecting themselves in its place, but not without allowing themselves to be saturated with its effects.

Numerous other examples might be adduced, including most of Cronenberg's later films, of a growing "body horror" genre that includes *Rabid* in its rhizomic genealogy. The latest epistemic Big Bang—the explosion, rabid proliferation, and mutation of discourses (literatures, theories, histories) of bodies—enacts performatively as much as it describes an ongoing discursive metastasis that grows not like a circle ("returning" to a predisciplinary bodily paradigm) but like fractal shapes elaborated through a "simple" function that is not a punctual or still center but a feedback loop, an ongoing mutation. Fractal body shapes mark another change in the forms and status of change itself, some of whose square roots will always be imaginary. The hyperdisciplinary ground or "complex plane" (which graphs together real and imaginary numbers) where it is played out is, for better and worse, "where we live now." Even while the famous last words of an imperial modernism—"the horror, the horror" of implication in Other bodies—continue to echo, they begin to be answered by a queer response: get used to it. Get used to it.

### **The Ends of Dreams**

*A man, a homeless man maybe, lived in an old railroad car he'd converted into a kind of museum.*

*It was filled with hanging things, like clothes maybe but also like artworks or artifacts.*

*I don't know if the car was connected to other cars or freestanding, but one minute I was on the platform and the next minute I was in the car, without really being sure how I got there.*

*But it didn't bother me. I think something about the relation of the car to the platform was remarkable, that there was an especially large or small gap or that you had to step up or down or maybe even that the car was on exactly the same level as the platform.*

Not much to go on but a string of indeterminacies (echoed in the string of texts that constitute this section), each time the same but slightly different. Everything could be one thing or another and might or might not be connected: "maybe . . . kind of . . . like . . . but also like . . . or . . . I don't know if . . . or . . . without really being sure . . . I think something . . . or . . . or . . . or . . . or maybe . . ." Even so, this multiplication of ambiguities—the inability to identify anything certainly—identifies the account unambiguously as a dream, an exemplary "open" or "writerly" text.

Amid all this shiftiness is a shift of another kind, a metashift between the plot and its telling: the inside of the car is described *before* the passage into it (even though this seems to be the first time the viewer has entered the car),

so that the passage between them comes as the nonstory's denouement: the middle is the end; the story seems to have been turned inside out. The passage between makes a good ending because it is also where the indeterminacy is *squared*: at first, the passage/nonpassage between platform and car appears as a simple aporia—a juxtaposition of scenes with neither continuity nor discontinuity between them—but then this relation/nonrelation is elaborated, as if retroactively, and found to be constituted by another (or maybe the same) aporia: that the (indeterminately vertical or horizontal) distance between platform and car either existed or did not. It is apparently unremarkable to the dreamer that it should be remarkable at all that something either was or was not the case, as if flipping a coin a hundred times and getting a random distribution of heads and tails were equivalent to having the coin land each time on its edge.

The shift between plot and narrative resembles the process Freud called “secondary revision” (1965, 526–46), a manipulation of dream contents that effects the narratability of the dream. Strictly speaking, secondary revision (and with it, dreaming itself) can *never end*, even after awakening or even (as in this case) where the dream is reported secondhand, since (as in the transmission of any text) every telling must introduce various unconscious noise/information into the dream (see Freud 1965, 537–38); far from simply causing the deterioration of a message, this process produces and is produced by the dream not as a message but as a performative effect.

If the problematic passage from dream to waking can be said to be among the referents of the “passage between” represented repeatedly in the dream, the dream doesn't represent itself but perversely engages its own empty difference from nondreams by incorporating this difference as its problematic. This may help to explain why the passage between should come at the end of the dream (closer to the border between the dream and waking), why the dream seems so continuously to produce and mark its genericity. Likewise, though, the dream indicates that it was never *not* subject to revision, since the reverberations of this passage extend to the very bottom or beginning of the dream.

Even a sloppy reading of the indeterminacy series engages an ongoing conservation of ambiguity that constitutes the “dreamwork.” “A man, a homeless man maybe”: the question of the man's fixity in space or social space makes the “maybe” not a qualifier but an intensifier: not to know whether he is homeless (to be unable to “locate” him) seems to make his condition an exemplary form of homelessness (as in *Rabid*, where ambiguous Jewishness is a primary marker of Jewishness). It's hard to say, too, whether to live in a railroad car is to have a home or

not, when a railroad car moves between points and home is usually treated as an end point: means and ends are folded back onto each other. The next image keeps the dream on the same track: the place is “a kind of museum” because it is also a kind of car and/or home, and because it is also potentially several kinds of museums, one showing “artworks” and another showing “artifacts” (the latter apparently a kind of anthropological or historical museum). Two “kinds of kinds” are linked (museum/not-museum and museum A/museum B), as if horizontally, without privileging difference between or within kinds. The dream maintains or restores indeterminacy in the opposition of the functionality of home (as living space) to the specular or nonfunctional space of the museum, refining the maneuver further by reambiguating the difference between a never-functional artwork and a once-functional artifact (whose museum placement would usually mark a one-way transit from functional use to symbolic display). The dreamwork continually operates to *straddle* these differences and transits. This straddling is not static but slides along as an ongoing foreclosure of foreclosure through a linked series of switches at which it must always go both ways and still cohere—both a kind of track and a kind of train: home/no-home . . . home/museum . . . museum/museum . . . art-museum/artifact museum. The question of “mobility versus fixity” is intimately related to the question of “functional space versus symbolic or specular space,” especially insofar as both questions thematize the relation between dream and waking life in the important sense that muscular movement is neurologically off-line in sleep. The next ambiguity (“connected . . . or freestanding”) functions as a qualification that continues to ambiguate the car’s status (its functionality and/or dysfunctionality) as a home or a train, but, more important, it thematizes the question of *articulation* foregrounded by the image series that constitutes the dream (are they connected? one thing or many things? does the dream move or not?). The finally problematic “gap” elegantly elaborates this same question along *x* and *y* axes (that is, it throws into question the vertical and horizontal distance between platform and car), the car’s questionable mobility and linear connectedness having already problematized the *z* axis (lateral distance).

The Gordian knot proposed by Einstein’s famous thought experiments with relativity—featuring a moving train and an observer on a platform (Einstein 1961, 9–34)—may be cut by the famous blues standard where the narrator is poised “with one foot on the platform and the other foot on the train,” but the dream goes a step further, deftly and continuously solving the problem of how to avoid being shorn in two along any number of axes. For the dreamer, a woman who has always intimately juggled multiple lives, cultures, and ethnicities and for whom “home” has always been problematic, it is easy to see how success may consist not

in assimilation or difference but in maintaining indeterminacy or betweenness. The dreamwork, a perseverance of perversity, allows her to be between (neither/both marked/unmarked) without either being shorn in two or rendered invisible, a privilege (maybe *the* privilege) that none of her cultures fully enough allows her.

The dream enacts a logic in the spirit of Donna Haraway's qualification of Julian Huxley's definition of biological individuality ("indivisibility—the quality of being sufficiently heterogeneous in form to be rendered non-functional if cut in half"): Haraway adds the reminder that someone may be "an individual for some purposes, but not for others" (1991, 216). Just as the Barthesian text that always participates in multiple trajectories in multiple and irreconcilable frameworks, coherent agency and mushy abjection are not simply opposed but productively interpenetrating.

The following dream, reported to me by another friend, develops the implications of dreamwork:

*I was standing in front of a house at dusk; the silhouette of a person was visible on the translucent curtain of an upper room. It was as if a tour guide were telling me, or as if I were remembering something I didn't know I knew: that a deformed man lived in the house, and that he never left the upper rooms but liked to oversee what was going on in the street below. It reminded me of a passage in The Stranger where Mersault sits on his balcony, watching the street scene change.*

*Then I was in the basement of the house, a long, cavelike passageway. The walls were made out of some translucent white plastic, uniformly lit from behind and bathing the hallway in a white light. I was following a woman, apparently my tour guide, down the hall. All the light made it hard to see. I kept following the woman, who never turned around and always stayed at the same distance in front of me, but she seemed to be getting smaller or maybe the hall was getting narrower, or maybe it was just a trick of perspective. Then the woman was gone; although I hadn't taken my eyes off her, I couldn't remember her disappearing.*

*I kept walking. Then I had to stoop, then crawl, and finally the passage became so small I had to pull myself along on my stomach. At the end was a kind of opening, like a mail slot, with a hinged flap with a little chain attached. I managed to squeeze my arm around my shoulder and grab the chain. The end of the tunnel began to deform as I pulled it toward me. It was as if I was pulling the chain through my own body, until the slot began to get pulled open around my face. As my face squeezed through, I slowly began to open my eyes—in the dream and in real life: that was what was weird; it was such a seamless transition.*

This dream picks up the theme and strategy of transition and nontransition elaborated in the first dream. Its opening indeterminacy of remembering or being told (interior cognition or exterior perception? alone or in someone else's presence?) appears in conjunction with the dreamer's problematic relation to

the house and its strange occupant (a mirror or Other to the dreamer?), echoed again in the split between upper room and basement passage in the house itself. The elided passage into the passage and the disappeared disappearance of the guide develop the aporetic logic that drove the first dream. Even when ambiguity among shrinking woman, narrowing hall, and shifting perspective is, in fact, resolved as a narrowing, it is in turn not noticed by the dreamer that this resolution would have foreclosed the perceptual possibility that the woman might have been shrinking (since a narrowing hall would have made her seem larger—not smaller—as she goes): provisional certainty is purchased only at the price of further contradiction. Likewise, the distance between the (male) dreamer and the female guide and the size of the dreamer's body remain constants, as if these consistencies were purchased relativistically at the cost of troubling all other perspectival frameworks, as if a certain relational continuity of self had been established *against* physio/psychological developmental scenarios that mandate that the relative size of the dreamer's body and his distance from a mother or from the feminine must *change* in a normative direction.

The dream offers just enough anatomical specificity to render it radically ambiguous. The basement (as opposed to the overseeing "mental" space of the upper floor) certainly suggests some kind of bodily site, but what? The long, sphincteric passage, apparently connected at one end to the house, and with a slot that leads "outside" at the far end, suggests maybe an anus, a urethra, a vagina, a penis, or even a throat (which finally "speaks" the dreamer by deforming its otherwise slotlike mouth) or an eye (with its sphincteric pupil). The mail slot—as "male" slot—suggests the opening at the end of a penis, but arbitrarily to select this pun or another feature as definitive is to miss the ecology of indeterminacy that the dream works to maintain. By keeping these multiple passages open to each other—keeping them in question by neither conflating nor isolating them—the dream keeps the disciplinary and developmental body at bay.

Verbal and figurative echoes that run through the dream also bind and ambiguate upper and lower: translucent curtains above and translucent passage below, the deformed man upstairs and the deformation of the passage below, the balcony "passage" from *The Stranger* and the basement "passageway." What the dreamer remembered most specifically about the Camus passage was that Mersault, just after his mother dies, watches the street all day from his balcony, realizing only after the fact that the day had ended, when "a cat, the first of the evening, crossed, unhurrying, the deserted street" (Camus 1954, 29). This retroactivity (that the day had ended without Mersault noticing, even though he had been watching it continuously), in conjunction with the mother's death, correlates with the disappearance

of the female guide and the ongoing question of presence/absence in the dream. But if this disappearance marks a necessary separation, the dream's end again works to resituate this separation in a narrative whose ongoing origin, means, and end are not separation/individuation or return/assimilation but *betweenness* in an ongoing ecology of closure and openness.

The birth or expulsion scene that ends the dream meticulously deconstructs the passage from interior to exterior by situating the opening of the eyes as, simultaneously, both a dreamed and a waking action. Unlike cases where some real sensory input is incorporated into the dream, this maneuver questions the framework of interpretation and incorporation: as if the body were the dream that opens its eyes onto the world, as if the body were the eyes (since the slot is pulled open around the head as the eyelids are pulled back around the eyeballs, equating the body's head with the head's eyes). The interpenetrative topology of the dreamer pulling his body through the passage and then pulling the passage through his body is finally and even more succinctly enacted in this single eye-opening gesture. Far from bracketing the dream safely away from waking life, it makes the dreamer's day begin with an eye opening that is not an emergence into a categorically different world (an Enlightenment awakening to knowledge and vigilance) but an ironic quotation mark that articulates dream and waking life in a simple horizontal series, like an interlinked chain or the cars of a train.

Like the two dream-ends, the final paragraph of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* employs a complex strategy to level differences:

*The opposition of the dream to wakefulness, is not that a representation of metaphysics as well? And what should dream or writing be if, as we know now, one may dream while writing? And if the scene of dream is always the scene of writing? At the bottom of a page of Emile, after having once more cautioned us against books, writing . . . , Rousseau adds a note: ". . . the dreams of a bad night are given to us as philosophy. You will say I too am a dreamer; I admit it, but I do what others fail to do, I give my dreams as dreams, and leave the reader to discover whether there is anything in them which may prove useful to those who are awake" [p.76]. (Derrida 1974, 316)*

Syntactically at least, Derrida's text echoes the famous final question of Shelley's "Mont Blanc" ("And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" [1977, 93]) and, thematically at least, the famous final question of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" ("do I wake or sleep?"). By embedding Romantic echoes alongside the "original" Romantic intertexts of Rousseau, by letting Rousseau have the last word and letting Rousseau's words seem to "speak for" the author, and by aligning "the bottom

of a page of *Emile*” with the final paragraph of his book, Derrida’s text deforms the relation between a “primary” and a “secondary” text (and between Romanticism and poststructuralism) by making it an interpenetrative one aligned with the ambiguous relation between dreams and writing and, by extension, of dreams and waking. The trick is again to write from, through, and toward a betweenness that simultaneously refuses to be configured *as* or *by* either an Enlightenment modernity or an anti-Enlightenment Romanticism. The passage activates the inertial or simply disingenuous assertion of self-identity (“dreams as dreams”) with and against oppositional difference (“the opposition of the dream to wakefulness”) in a combinatory of alignments and oppositions, so that self-difference becomes the ongoing condition of possibility and impossibility of a self.

Conceptual artist and text theorist Joseph Grigely works similar problematics of alignment and opposition in his 1993 diptych, *Guardian Angel*, an enlarged frontispiece and title page of a 1917 eugenics textbook. In the book, the



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**THE GUARDIAN ANGEL**

*Guardian Angel.* Conceptual artist Joseph Grigely reversed the position of this frontispiece and title page for his 1993 painting.

frontispiece would have been on the reader's left, making the cliff in the picture stand at the outer edge of the text. A boy reaches out to the scary void beyond and before the text, while an angel, her wings spread over the boy and girl like an open book, beckons them back to the safe ground of the text. Grigely has transposed the title page and frontispiece, revealing by this single gesture the *sinister* aspect of the text. The cliff that stood between book and world now divides text from picture and painting from itself. The boy's hands and gaze now reach out to the title page's cloudy promise of EUGENICS as his feet approach the abyss. It's hard to tell, now, whether the angel is beckoning the children back or pushing them toward the cliff. Where the world had been (the dangerous world that eugenics invents in order to save us from it) is now a strip of wall between the canvases, and where image and text had been bound together is now the open space around the canvas. By the single gesture of transposition (very like the eye-opening topology at the end of the dream), *Guardian Angel* asks what happens to the reader of the book in becoming the viewer of the painting, seeing as how the book has been turned inside out. Rather than offer a refuge, the artwork now seeks to infect the world.

The ambiguous closure of Freud's essay on the psychotic Judge Schreber ("On the Mechanism of Paranoia") performs a similar maneuver on the relation of analyst to analysand and, more generally, of psychoanalytic knowledge to paranoia and madness:

*Since I neither fear the criticism of others nor shrink from criticizing myself, I have no motive for avoiding the mention of a similarity which may possibly damage our libido theory in the estimation of many of my readers. Schreber's "rays of God," which are made up of a condensation of the sun's rays, of nerve-fibres, and of spermatozoa, are in reality nothing else than a concrete representation and external projection of libidinal cathexes; and they thus lend his delusions a striking similarity with our theory. . . . I can nevertheless call a friend and fellow-specialist to witness that I had developed my theory of paranoia before I became acquainted with the contents of Schreber's book. It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe. (1963b, 48)*

The Romantic opposition between science as a referential and objective experimentation on an Other and art as a recursively subjective self-experimentation (i.e., with the artist as both doctor and patient) is revealed here not simply as a fixed structure but as a machine that produces permutations, by the end of the nineteenth century, in the gothic Jekyll-and-Hyde scenario and in a psychoanalysis whose strength and weakness is that it can never quite shake its engage-

ment in self-analysis, never unambiguously distinguish its method from its object. Schreber's paranoia differs from Freud's theory, apparently, not simply by externalizing what psychoanalysis internalizes, but because its "concrete representations" are at once too metaphorical and too concrete. That which Freud calls "libido," in other words, cannot be reduced to discrete "representations" or embodiments, functioning instead to infiltrate various embodiments or cut across realms of experience; it is mandated to assume "a thousand shapes and forms" without being reducible to any of them.

A final dream text demonstrates how the unresolvable dialectic of openness and closure observed in all of the above texts operates to make the text available for recoding while attempting (and by definition, always succeeding and failing) to control the terms by which it is received.

She was reading a book—but it was as if it were also a movie she was watching—called *The Song of Roland*. It was a kind of eighteenth-century novel, about the lord of an estate who would cross-dress (in gender and class) in order to have sex with various partners, but it turns out that the couples were always (apparently) heterosexual, but *both* partners were switching genders to get there—that is, the gardener was dressed as a man so Roland dressed as a scullery maid to make love to him, but the gardener also turned up as a lady and Roland wore *his* best (male) finery to make love to her.

She found the book/movie very funny, and (still in the dream) went off to tell it to a man (with whom she'd been flirting in real life), but instead of enjoying it with her, he launched into a humorless semiotic analysis, much to her disappointment.

I noticed two important changes between the time she first reported the dream (in 1990) and the account she reconstructed for me three years later. Her first account had ended with the revelation that the same heterosexual couple had been beneath all the outfits and impersonations all along; the second account (excerpted above) ambiguates the identity and sexual identity of the couples beneath the outfits by stressing that *the outfits* are continually shifted and coordinated to make an "(apparently) heterosexual" couple each time. A preliminary explanation for this slight but dramatic change may involve the fact that the first time the dreamer reported her dream to me, she had been flirting with the possibility of a romance with the man depicted as the "analyst" in her dream, so it is understandable that the denouement and desired telos of the dream would be, for her at that moment, the single coupling. But since she had become engaged with the man who appeared in the dream (shortly after—perhaps partly as a result of—reporting the

dream to him) and had lived with him for the past three years, the balance of her narrative understandably shifted toward problematizing this (now boringly predictable) account by emphasizing the extent to which each partner may not be stably “the same” to begin with, and the extent to which each has to engage in “switching genders to get there.” “There” is still a heterosexual telos, but switched from a matter of naked truth to dress performance. One might say that the dream and its tellings work to “balance” indeterminacy and heterosexual certainty; what sexualizes and narrativizes it is an indeterminacy between determinacy and indeterminacy. The move from a “truth” standard to a “performance” standard enacts a predictably post-modern historical logic, a topological turning-inside-out around a heterosexual axis that remains curiously intact. The dream’s ongoing openness to renarrativization is also its openness to—and foreclosure of—closure.

Another significant event occurred in the interval between tellings: the movie *Orlando* had been released. At the beginning of her 1993 account, in fact, the dreamer cautioned me that “it’s starting to get mixed up with images from the movie *Orlando*, as were images from the book mixed up in it.” The release of the movie can only reperform for the dreamer the temporal and generic knot that constituted dream and book in the first place. Again, the knot is constituted as a combinatory of multiple alignments and oppositions between a series of shifts (“switchings”): the shifts *within* the dream between the book/movie and its telling and then between its telling and analysis, the shift *between* the dream and its telling, and then between the two tellings of the dream, and then between the book and movie of *Orlando*. The relation of the real movie of *Orlando* to the book reperforms a version of the ongoing problematic of the dream: as Peter Stokes has observed (1996, 312), Virginia Woolf’s Orlando “enjoyed the love of both sexes equally,” while the movie’s Orlando mutates from man to woman but remains unambiguously heterosexual in each case.

The dream’s book/movie title is a textbook case of overdetermination and condensation, combining the medieval *Song of Roland* (which the dreamer knew of, but had never read), the novel *Orlando* (which she’d read), the pop song “Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner,” and the “semiotic analysis” of Roland Barthes (both of which she knew). The book and movie *Tom Jones*, another primary association she made with the picaresque dream narrative, was also obliquely grafted into the dream’s web of Rolands, via the “Thompson” of the song title: in fact, Tom was the name of the man to whom she told the dream and became engaged. This knot of names, especially the transposition that links “Orlando” and “Roland,” enacts in the signifier what has already been established in the signified: a point of

caption that is not simply a fixation but a strange attractor that generates permutations to cover the field in which it operates.

So what, if anything, makes the series of texts, of odds and ends of dreams that constitute this section, add up to anything but anecdotes? What kinds of claims can be authorized by such a series, about postmodernism or anything else, simply because its elements have been chosen to resonate with a certain coherent logic or because the dreamers happen to live in postmodern North America? In other words, what makes this series or its logic representative of anything? Or if not representative as such (able to stand for something else), perhaps then it can be called performative, since performative statements enact rather than represent but depend for what Austin called their “happiness” on a structure of authority they cannot in themselves constitute. In the classic example, the christening of a ship is a performative act, but the “happiness” of the gesture—the extent to which the christened name “sticks”—depends on a ceremonial structure that authorizes the christener to act as such.

The dream produces a certain kind of performative agency for itself: by being told, it makes something happen. By being divided into two sections, book and narration, the dream deftly makes any subsequent telling a retelling or re-performance; it attempts to ensure its priority over anything that can be said about it. In fact, the dream gave the dreamer a real “pick-up line,” the success of which depended on the response *not* being the one represented in the dream (my response, on the other hand, fit then and now; a bit uncomfortably, into the role of humorless semiotic analyst that the dream had written for “Tom”). Rather than simply validating the dream, its success (the “engagement” of its respondents) necessitated that the dream be rewritten. The dream poses a question, written into which is a selection mechanism for organizing respondents, but the dream is not Diogenes looking for truth or a sphinx awaiting its Oedipus; it operates finally not to make the world into its own image or its Other (in fact, it seems to ask, ambivalently, to be resisted) but only to be a player in an ongoing intrigue that it sustains and that sustains it. The performativity of a question, its purchase on the world, is beyond both criteria of “truth” and “happiness”: what it wants is to conserve itself as a question.

### **Some Semiotic Panoctopi**

Lacan found a model of syntactic recursion in the fact that “the mere recoil of a ‘but’” may utterly change the meaning of a previous sentence, “from which we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning ‘insists’ but that none of its elements ‘consists’ in the signification of which it is at that moment capable” (1977,

153). Freud's "Rat Man" had, long before, perfected to a neurotic fault the retroactive and nonlinear structuring force of the return of the repressed: "Something always inserted itself into his pious phrases and turned them into their opposite. For instance, if he said, 'May God protect him,' an evil spirit would hurriedly insinuate a 'not.' (Freud 1963b, 51). As it turns out, American popular culture (via *Saturday Night Live's* Wayne and Garth) would later adopt the Rat Man's tic of adding, at the end of facetious assertions, an ironic *not*.

Lacan elaborated the otherwise still largely linear image of the "signifying chain" into a kind of fractal chain mail: "rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings" (1977, 153). This maneuver twists the image of the linear chain of recursive links into a recursive chain of recursive links, but at the expense of putting linearity *en abîme* in the form of an infinite linear regress in *scale*. Insufficient in itself to factor out Saussure's "linearity of the signifier," this maneuver only necessitates another that transforms the fractal chain mail into an even shiftier play of similarity and difference. This time Lacan takes off from Saussure's model of the linguistic sign, showing the word "tree" separated from its signified (a picture of a tree) by a bar:

*Let us take our word "tree" again . . . and see how it crosses the bar of the Saussurian algorithm.  
(The anagram of "arbre" and "barre" should be noted.)*

*For even broken down into the double spectre of its vowels and consonants, it can still call up with the robor and the plane tree the significations it takes on, in the context of our flora, of strength and majesty. Drawing on all the symbolic contexts suggested in the Hebrew of the bible, it erects on a barren hill the shadow of the cross. Then reduces to the capital Y, the sign of the dichotomy which, except for the illustration used by heraldry, would owe nothing to the tree however genealogical we may think it. (1977, 154)*

The anagram of "arbre" and "barre" begins the chain of images by suggesting one version of the dichotomy or splitting (that is, between vowels and consonants in variant arrangements) upon which the possibility of signification is based. Freud had observed his grandson repeatedly throwing a spool of thread and pulling it back, uttering the words "fort" (gone) and "da" (here) as he did so. Freud found in the game the child's attempt to master, by repetition and fantasy, his mother's otherwise uncontrollable absences and returns. Lacan may have thought that Freud had acted more as a proud grandparent when he understood the articulate words "fort" and "da" in the "long, drawn-out o-o-o-o" and "joyful 'da'" that he reports having heard (1961, 8-9). Nonetheless, Lacan finds that the incident marks the be-

ginning of the construction of a subject by language, through the mere opposition of “two phonemes” and, apparently, the regularized sphincterization of throat and mouth that form them; that is, by their very abstraction or formality and its purchase on the body.

In Lacan’s elaboration, the signifier “tree” splits into the two categories of its constitutive letters no less than its signified branches into two taxonomic categories (*robur*, plane tree) and these into emblematic qualities (strength, majesty), but the form of this branching cannot detach itself from the “tree-ness” it was meant to describe. Likewise, the reduced form of the tree, the capital letter Y, bears no inherent relation to live trees except by the simplified heraldic emblem, the question of genealogical relation and derivation again being unthinkable apart from its embodiment in the figure of the tree, the point here being that similarity (more likely than difference to be regarded as self-evident, natural, or given) is also produced by the sign as a result of what are selected as “essential” features. Lacan’s multiplication of trees derives from but runs counter to Saussure’s insistence on the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified, producing instead a resemblance that roots itself in the bar between them, a resemblance signaled by the anagram that marks a metonymic slide. The sign, then, is always a kind of catachresis: the relation of “tree” to tree is itself a kind of tree, but this redoubling simultaneously flowers into a self-similar metatree (i.e., a metametaphor) and turns back on itself so as to preclude the possibility of tree-ness at all, becoming a rhizome of metonymically sprawling categories (marked by the empurpling of Lacan’s prose at this juncture).

Umberto Eco recurs to the “tree of trees” figure in modeling semiotic relations:

*The real problem is that every semantic unit used in order to analyze a sememe is in its turn a sememe to be analyzed. . . . Each of them should constitute, inside the tree, a sort of embedded sememe generating its own tree, and so on ad infinitum, each of their semantic markers in turn generating another tree. The graphic representation of such a landscape of everlasting recursivity cannot be imagined. (Eco 1976, 121–22)*

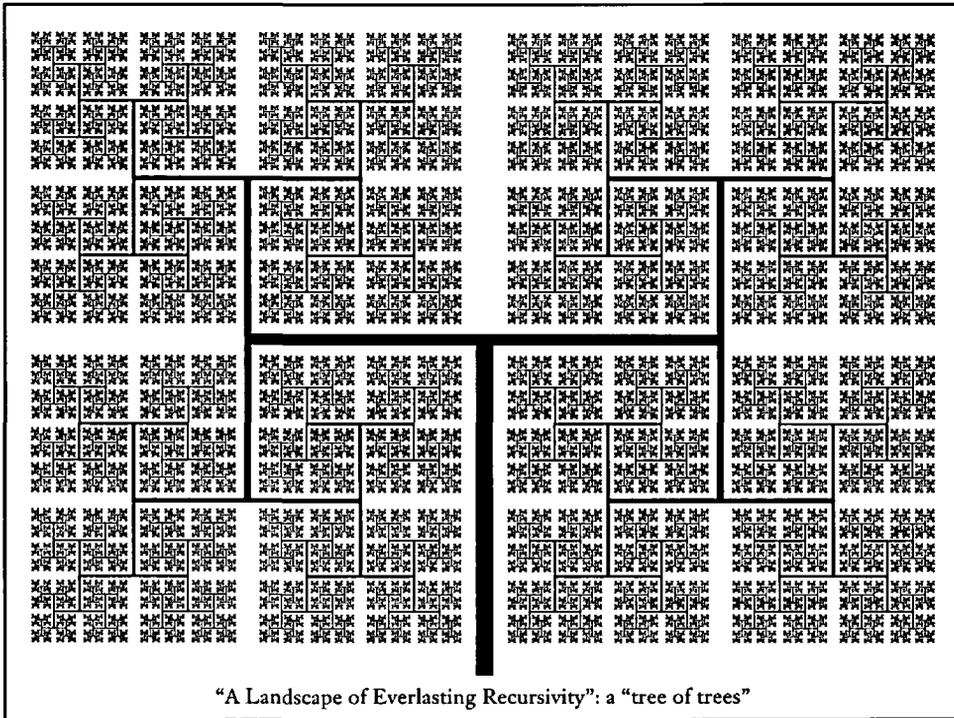
As it turns out, “graphic representations” of Eco’s old problem of trees and metatrees are now a dime a dozen: since Mandelbrot’s 1977 *Fractal Geometry of Nature*, fractal “landscapes of everlasting recursivity” generated by elaboration of simple “feedback loop” functions have become widely available—in coffee-table books, make-your-own computer programs, studies of Romanticism and postmodernity, and so on. Eco’s tree of trees is structured around the same contra-

diction as Lacan's "ring of rings," only reversed: the metatree models infinite recursion, while the tree (or tree-ness itself) is a model of *non*recursion (its branches cleave apart but never back together).

This contradiction achieves its avatar in a new generation of fractal paradigms, where trees and rings miscegenate and lose their rigidity, becoming fractal "cascades," or, in Floyd Merrell's more recent model of the semiotic universe, a roiling cluster of octopi:

*Consider each sign possibility to be a point . . . with an infinite set of lines connecting it to all other points in the universe. . . . Each sign-point is like a chimerical octopus whose body is the point and whose tentacles are the infinite number of lines emanating from that point ready to suck in one or more of all the other sign points. (Merrell 1988, 260)*

If Merrell's semiotic panoctopus illustrates the interdependence of each sign with every other sign, it is unclear how such thoroughly cross-connected structures could be flexible or move at all. Rather than forming a giant adamantine crystal, though, Merrell's semiotic universe is a squirmy, squishy, shifty, swarmy,



skeletonless thing, a snake pit whose mode is a violent carnivorous flux in which each member is “ready to suck in” or incorporate its neighbors (a universe made for a decade of corporate, national, and transnational restructurings). This recursive flux is often aestheticized (against the “bad” linearity or fixity of obsolete models) by association with what David Bohm calls an “implicate order” (see Merrell 1991, 55), a model that describes musical sequence after the fashion of Lacan’s syntactic recursion.

In his AIDS memoir, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, David Wojnarowicz develops a related octopal image in the visionary tradition of Ezekiel, Blake, and Ginsberg. Here, though, semiotic violence and embodiment are irreducibly implicated, beyond aestheticization, in a world where chaos everywhere underlies both “our order and disorder”:

*My arms sometimes feel twelve feet long and I get consumed by the emptiness and void surrounding and lying beneath each and every action I witness of others and myself. Each little gesture in the movements of the planet in its canyons and arroyos, in its suburbs and cities, in the motions of wind and light, each little action continuing, helping to continue the slow death of ourselves, the slow motion approach of the unveiling of our order and disorder in its ultimate climax beginning with a spark so subtle and beautiful that to trust it is to trust our own stupidity; it sparks in the inversion of wind and then flowers out momentarily in black petals of smoke and light and then extends vertically in an enlargement of a minute vision. In the very center, if one could withstand the light, it would appear to be octopal in its appendages. Wormlike tentacles thousands of feet long vibrate stroboscopically in the bluish mist that exudes from its center. The center is something outside of what we know as visual, more a sensation: a huge fat clockwork of civilizations; the whole onward crush of the world as we know it; all the walking swastikas yap-yapping cartoon video death language; a malfunctioning cannonball filled with bone and gristle and gearwheels and knives and bullets and animals rotting with skeletal remains and pistons and smokestacks pump-pumping cinders and lightning and shreds of flesh, spewing language and motions and shit and entrails in its wake. It’s all swirling in every direction simultaneously so that it’s neither going forward nor backward, not from side to side, embracing stasis beyond the ordinary sense of stillness one witnesses in death, in a decaying corpse that lasts millions of years in comparison to the sense of time that this thing operates within. This is the vision I see beneath the tiniest gesture of wiping one’s lips after a meal or observing a traffic light. (1991, 68–69)*

For Wojnarowicz, living with AIDS makes the world speed up *and* slow down simultaneously, as a game does for someone who’s gotten very good at it or who must compensate for a slowing body with intelligence, with something that operates at the border of perception and cognition, where history

and futurity are compressed and “downloaded” into the present. Treelike models—for example, the move in a chess game from which a thousand paths fork (a rough model of the “many universes” interpretation of quantum theory)—leave off where Wojnarowicz’s recursive temporality begins. Subsequent moves in such a game may make an earlier move turn out to have been a brilliant stratagem or a fatal misstep (or to have been one by virtue of having seemed to be the other). But this process enacts more than a simple recontextualization of the past, since presumably the players choose each move, to begin with, by evaluating its place in multiple possible series of moves it may participate in producing. Even so, the “implicate order” of games offers only a heuristic model that must be displaced in turn to enter a life politicized far more thoroughly than it could be with win-lose-or-draw outcomes.

Wojnarowicz’s universe operates by “somenesses,” always between infinitude and finitude, totality and locality, history and futurity; where all differences are split and split again, not only into a dust from whence we came and to which we must return but into the ongoing whirlwind where they are partners. If the danger of this “leveling” is that it precludes simplistic oppositions or alignments between “general good” and particular interests (how can the relative importance or “scale” of anything be evaluated?), it assumes this danger—and with it, the thoroughly political nature of the universe—as its condition.

Wojnarowicz’s octopal vision links his own proprioception (“my arms sometimes feel twelve feet long”) with the fractal branchings of many-armed “canyons and arroyos,” as if Blake’s wormlike worldline of the fallen human life, by being multiplied in its extension in time and space, can no longer be distinguished from the indiscretion or mystical participation of predisciplinary bodies and their implicate worlds. What happens in the process is not simply that linearity is abolished or compromised or rectified with mystical flux, the solid ground of matter and vitalist Enlightenment energy reduced to that which underlies them both, a wormhole-ridden quantum foam of constantly reconfiguring possibilities. Instead, fractal recursions and interpenetrations of the two reveal or produce an even more virulent form of linearity, the juggernaut of “the whole onward crush of the world as we know it,” and with it the recognition that an adequate politics, of life and death, can only be drawn in multiple caduceus-like diagonals.

The insistence of the vision in “the tiniest gesture of wiping one’s lips after a meal or observing a traffic light” serves to indicate how meaning insists in a configuration always located somewhere between randomness and system or between language and brute fact (i.e., in gesture or simple machinic sequence). What

is at stake at each figurative location is the policing and rhythming of canalization; here, the timing and placing of the flow of traffic and pedestrians, and the timing (mealtime) and placing of the entry of food (by mouth) into the body. It is not merely *meaning* that insists in these canalizations but also futility and absurdity in the face of the irreducible messiness of a universe where all provisional orderings are subsumed by a larger disorder (“rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic”) or built on the shifting sands of a ubiquitous microdisorder, a continual tyranny as they try and fail and try to stabilize arbitrariness and necessity, sex, and violence, themselves. Wojnarowicz’s discourse is driven by ongoing refusal to cop a generic attitude about these insistences (e.g., meditative detachment, picaresque *carpe diem*, righteous indignation, clinical high seriousness, or elegiac heroism).

But rage. Not for order or apocalypse, beauty or justice, but to live and die in the fractal borderlands between, where the unbearable intensity of a too short life and the pathos whereby “too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart” always intersect, where “Being Queer in America” means to live out and to sustain in the world by any means necessary the monstrous knowledge that comes with having “a little less future.”

### **Chinese Romanticism, Postmodernity, and “Obscure Poetry”**

If Romanticism is ongoing “opposition to capitalism in the name of precapitalist values” (Sayre and Löwy 1990, 26), what kinds of Romanticism might accompany shifts toward a market economy in China? How would a “postsocialist” Romanticism resemble and differ from more or less “postfeudal” Romanticisms of late-eighteenth-century Europe, and how would it inhabit the postmodernity in which it would find itself?

It is relatively easy to see how reactionary fascist and/or ethnic-nationalist Romanticisms can be generated in the wake of the collapse of a state such as the Soviet Union. It may be more difficult to discern what more progressive forms of Romanticism might also accompany such a collapse or the more gradual changes in China. Such a Romanticism, arguably, already emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Chinese Empire. Student antigovernment protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919, inaugurated what became a national cultural movement to reject Confucianist tradition and to democratize Chinese culture. Profoundly nationalist *and* internationalist, the May Fourth Movement’s commitment to Chinese political and cultural independence was combined with heightened engagement with Western literature, philosophy, and theory. The Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921, was an offspring of these commitments and engagements.

This period is the subject of Leo Ou-fan Lee's *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (1973). Lee's modernist Romanticism is an "outlook" that often accompanies a period of transition, the view of life as "a process of individual and subjective experience" and of reality as "a fragmented flow" (295). For Lee, Chinese Romanticism of the 1920s is especially marked by "dynamism" as a particular legacy of European influence. Lee follows the process whereby "a whole century of European romanticism — especially its French and English varieties — was swallowed up enthusiastically by one generation of Chinese literary men in one decade" (294). This characterization of cross-cultural engagement as a kind of trans-historical binge (with Romanticism cast as a new type of cultural opium addiction fostered by the British in China) implies a corollary belief in a chronologically normative literary development. Indeed, Lee describes how the belief in an organically deterministic and linear literary development "through the stages of classicism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, and neo-romanticism" (276) was widespread among Chinese literati of the period.

If, like Chinese critic Liang Shih-ch'iu's 1926 "Romantic Tendencies in Modern Chinese Literature," Lee's title marks the simultaneity of Romanticism and modernism in China as a temporal problematic, forms of Imagism can be said to enact this simultaneity both in Chinese and Western poetry of the period. Ezra Pound's modernist anti-Romanticism was as virulent as his Romantic anticapitalism, the latter in the name of a fascist-inflected medievalism. Pound shaped Imagism under the influence of Chinese poetry in translation, and Chinese poet Hu Shi's reading of Pound's 1913 Imagist manifesto strongly influenced his own manifestos of 1917 and 1918, which in turn played an important role in the May Fourth Movement. Eliot Weinberger calls this sequence "one of the neater symmetries of modernism: the East discovering in the West what the West had found in the East" (1986, 73); Sean Golden and John Minford call it "a circle turned full" (124). While the narrative of reciprocal exchange may be generous by Western standards, it can be downright rude under Chinese protocols, whereby the Gift (if cross-cultural appropriation can be so designated) tends to function more to produce differences as it circulates, to be by definition impossible to reciprocate in kind. The circle will, in fact, turn out to be eccentrically nested amid messier asymmetries and Möbius half-turns, the global yin-yang of cross-cultural interaction an incurably viral "difference engine" (e.g., see Weinberger's "Paz in Asia") as well as a vision of pacific wholeness and completion.

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this is found in the various ways in which the agendas of the May Fourth Movement were taken up and altered by Chinese socialism. While Lee could still wonder stagily, in 1973, "whether

the recent Cultural Revolution cannot be regarded as the resurgence of a kind of collective romantic spirit," he sets the stage for the inevitable sequel: "the problem of romanticism in a socialist setting will certainly be a most intriguing theme for another act in the drama" (296). Twenty years later, Liu Kang stresses a narrative of "interrupted development," whereby post-Mao literature and cultural theory take up "the recovery and continuation of the incomplete cultural enlightenment of the May Fourth Movement" (24), especially the humanism and subjectivism that Mao struggled so tragically finally to displace. By evoking "enlightenment," Liu Kang takes up a popular May Fourth Movement term for its own project. Likewise, Liu Kang implicitly extends Chinese poet-critic Sun Shaozhen's 1980 reevaluation of the May Fourth poets as well as his recuperation of the May Fourth modernist argument that "art has its internal laws of development" (quoted in Tay 1985, 146).

Among the most coherent movements in post-Mao Chinese literature has been *menglong shi*, usually translated as "Obscure Poetry" (a critic's epithet that stuck, ironically or not). Like the Chinese filmmakers now achieving international recognition, the leading Obscure Poets were children and adolescents during the Cultural Revolution and came of age as artists in its aftermath. Director Chen Kaige (an old schoolmate of Obscure Poet Bei Dao) offers in *Farewell My Concubine* a symbolic account of the liberatory promise that the Cultural Revolution held, in its inception, for students subject to the rigors of Soviet-style education. Accordingly, it is difficult to say whether the humanism and subjectivism of this generation is more of a "recovery and continuation" or a backlash—or how they will be recast in turn by "another act in the drama."

While its "debt" to Imagism has been noted too often, several characteristic features of Obscure Poetry also suggest its complex relations to Romanticism, especially its new emphases on subjectivity and on subjective experience, and along with these, the tendency to endorse a mutual opposition between aesthetic and political discourse. Paradoxically or not, this tendency can remain a radical one in China only as long as the opposition itself continues to be thoroughly politicized; this observation also illustrates the danger of mistaking Romantic "features" as definitive when they signify very differently in different historical contexts. In any case, as we will see, Obscure Poetry, like Romantic poetry, tends also to accord special privilege to "poeticity" or self-reference, to symbolism over allegory, and to fragmentation and dynamism, although what these features mean in Chinese postmodernity is up for grabs.

Another problem with such a comparatist account, however, is that it tends to underwrite an Orientalist masternarrative of development, accord-

ing to which modernization, for the East, always amounts to Westernization, an account that places the East always a step behind the West-becoming-itself.

Even sympathetic accounts of Obscure Poetry seem unable to shake this narrative. William Tay's early (1985) article is a case in point (although I should add that my use of it as a foil in what follows belies its importance in championing Obscure Poetry against critical opprobrium and neglect). Citing as exemplary a Gu Cheng poem that works by juxtaposing a flash of red and green against repeated images of grayness, Tay considers that, in the West, such "imagist experiments . . . can no longer elicit the kind of 'defamiliarizing' effect which they once had." (Curiously, the 1993 black-and-white U.S. film *Schindler's List* was hailed as innovative for including a flash of red that, just as in Gu Cheng's poem, occurs as the color of a child's clothing.) Tay drives home his point with particular emphasis: "Even in the modernist poetry from Taiwan, which was once heavily indebted to various avant-garde movements of the West, such concentrated color imagery has long been considered passé" (1985, 137). Likewise, Golden and Mitford, writing on Obscure Poet Yang Lian, characterize the post-Mao era of Chinese literature by its "great deal of interest in modernism (which in most cases has been long obsolete in the West)" (1990, 124). By these accounts, then, shabby Western Imagism and threadbare modernism are still welcome as hand-me-downs to the West's poor and backward cultural relations in the East, whom they still have the power to shock and delight. Alternatively, these accounts would have West say to East, as William Wordsworth said to his sister (in "Tintern Abbey"), with that Romantic mix of nostalgia and condescension: "in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes" (Wordsworth 1969, 165). It seems, then, that these accounts have just as much to say about the eternal return of Romantic narratives in the West as about the recurrent beginning of modernity in China that they construct.

By a related but different temporal shell game, East-West symmetry can also begin to look more like the West selling the East back its "true" and "unchanging" heritage. For example, Tay characterizes Gu Cheng's two short poems "Red Coral" and "Pearl Oyster" as "concrete, concentrated descriptions embodying no particular message"; this "lack of message," he speculates, may have prompted one Chinese critic to complain that "the themes are befuddling." The critic, Tay replies, "has probably forgotten that *yong wu shi* (thing-describing poems) abound in classical Chinese poetry" (156). This more-reactionary-than-thou response seems to situate politicized poetry as merely a relatively recent socialist aberration, against which

a long, seemingly apolitical tradition can still reassert itself, essentially unchanged. As we will see, the poets themselves offer a different account.

To put Obscure Poetry into more adequate comparatist narratives requires first an engagement in the ways in which the poems in question themselves work to produce, authorize, and ambiguate certain kinds of narratives.

Gu Cheng's "Curve" ("Huxian") is identified by Tay as a typically Imagist poem "in its use of unconnected, montage-like juxtaposition of images" (139):

A bird in the gusty wind  
Deftly changes direction

A youth tries to pick up  
A penny

The grapevine in fantasy  
Stretches its tentacle

The wave in retreat  
Arches its back  
(Tay 1985, 138)

If modernist "juxtaposition" can end only with a kind of stasis that constitutes, at most, a dynamic equilibrium in which differences among images vibrate within a stabilizing sameness, characteristically postmodern "recursion" tends to generate unresolvable and metastasizing series. To investigate how the poem works the intersection of these strategies is also, as I hope to show, to begin to engage the logic of what Xudong Zhang, describing "contemporary Chinese cultural reflection," identifies as "a dialectic historically positioned within the historical conjuncture of premodern, modern, and postmodern" (1994, 140).

The first half of the poem enacts a critical trajectory. The first stanza posits an actor both autonomous from but dynamically "in" its dynamic environment; this positing is possible because the word "in" (*zai*) makes it radically indeterminate whether the bird turns *because of*, *in spite of*, or *regardless of* the wind. The second stanza counterposes to the bird's dynamic agency the humbler image of an action not much more than a conditioned reflex, the halting and stooping motion of the youth to pick up a coin. From the heroic acrobatics of the bird, its confidently executed revolution in the midst of perhaps countervailing forces, the poem swoops or stoops to earth, to the stooping to earth, to the gravity-binding reflex. If

juxtaposition of images asks the reader to find patterns of similarity and/or difference, here the reader is challenged to discover or invent active syntaxes that can relate the images. Passing from the first to the second image, then, one may find either the enactment of a demystification or the temporal progress of a narrative that itself curves from the official version or original energy of the Cultural Revolution to its effect, especially on the young, of offering sudden access, if one would only stoop (and one always does) to the flash or promise of new power and liberty. Remarkably, this stooping for the coin might also be taken, proleptically, to characterize critically economic and cultural openings that have since arisen in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. This single double-edged image can be read as the emblem of a Chinese postmodernism that, as Xiaobing Tang has described it, “has to include at once a rejection of the repressive political order and a critique of the rapid process of commodification,” a double rejection that works to “create a new field of uncompromising demystification” (1993, 296).

But the second half of the poem changes this trajectory dramatically. Not surprisingly, Tay translates the third and fourth stanzas to heighten the effect of juxtaposition by making them syntactically parallel to the first: “in the gusty wind” is echoed by “in fantasy” and “in retreat.” A more literal translation would have to stress that it is *because* (*yin*) it is a fantasy that the grapevine stretches as it does, and *because* it is recoiling that the wave behaves as it does. This new and repeated construction tends to set the last two stanzas in parallel and *against* the first. Instead of privileging one translation over another, though, this observation only serves to demonstrate that the differences that the poem generates among its translations are not separate from it but an extension of its own logic, its own nonequivalence to itself, the articulative tension among the dynamically ambivalent or shifty alliances and oppositions that constitute the poem’s affect and effect in the first place. (See also the very different version translated as “Arc” in Gu Cheng’s *Selected Poems* [1990], 27).

More substantively, Tay’s translation substitutes a menacing “tentacle” for Gu’s “chrysalis-thread,” but again, the translator’s poetic decision serves to highlight what is posited in either case: that fantasy overattributes individual agency (i.e., by making a plant into an animal), whether the fantasy is of intervening more decisively and aggressively than one’s power allows (i.e., of being a tentacle instead of a tendril) or of more thorough withdrawal and self-enclosure than the world affords (i.e., of cocoonlike involution rather than vinelike sprawl). Gu’s “because” does counterpose more forcefully the real to the fantasized: because it is a fantasy, the otherwise rhizomic and parasitic sprawl of the grapevine is transformed into a ges-

ture of cocooning and self-enclosure, with the implied end of self-metamorphosis to come, a precise account of how the fantasy of “self-organizing” Romantic or humanist subject-formation operates. At the same time, insofar as the “chrysalis-thread” suggests silk production, the organic metamorphosis that it enables is situated almost entirely in the literal “framework” of human (agri)culture and commodification, a critical connotation that Tay’s “tentacle” fails to grasp.

The fantastic logic that shifts grapevine into chrysalis repeats, at a “smaller” scale, the shift from extensive to intensive action that characterizes the shift from the first half of the poem to the last. This sense of withdrawal links the third stanza, in turn, with the final stanza’s image of retreat or recoil. In other words, the poem not only juxtaposes the four curves described by the stanzas but embeds curves recursively within and between the stanzas as well, continuing *both to progress and to recoil* at several scales as it moves from the image of the turn to the halting and stooping, to withdrawal and self-enclosure, and finally into retreat.

The final stanza confirms this contradictory recursive progress. “Rears up” might be a more literal translation than “arches,” but the choice again indicates a productive ambiguity in the poem: are we to imagine, here, a wave that swells and falls back as the pattern in which it participates moves forward (ongoing condition of ocean waves, or of subjects in history), or the vertical swell of a wave that rears up as it pushes against an insurmountable obstacle, precipitating a retreat? Business as usual, or the crash against an absolute limit and a dramatic turnaround? The image of the wave’s back (a doubled term, *bei ji*, literally “back-spine”) seems also to work at two scales, making the wave not only a spine in itself but also the vertebra of a metaspine of successive waves—at any scale, a curvature that aligns the straining of the upright-evolved human form against gravity with the ocean’s straining against horizontality as it is pushed by winds and pulled by the moon.

The poem’s juxtaposition of curves that each must be in some sense “the same” nonetheless make up a metacurve whose thrust is to differ as it goes, enacting an overall movement from reality to fantasy, extension to withdrawal, evolutionary progress to reactionary backlash. This movement, in turn—a syntax or trajectory or logic that the poem challenges us to invent to account for the series of images—is not a simple two-stage process, for it remains pointedly ambiguous, ambivalent, and irreconcilable with itself as it goes. Is it possible, then, to find or invent a metasyntax that could hold its irreconcilable possibilities together, could validate the recognition that progress and backlash, the Cultural Revolution and post-Mao period, and Romanticism and postmodernity are movements that are always somehow simultaneous, if only because their temporal extension cannot sim-

ply constitute what they “are” but what they *make happen*? If juxtaposition produces a challenge to construct a context for disjoint images, and then a metacontext that can contextualize irreconcilable contexts, recursion describes the way this process does not simply yield transcendent syntheses but, at every step and in total, keeps falling back onto itself. This description enables the central problematics of Imagism to be linked with the problem of translation generally, since the multiple connotations, conventions, and literary histories in which an individual word or image or syntax is associated in one language can never be reproduced in another without producing multiple—often unpredictable or radically contingent, and sometimes definitive—excesses and lacks. As it turns out, this problem is also more specifically the problem of translating Chinese poetry into English, since Chinese allows syntactic ambiguity to play a much more integral role than English will allow. If *Obscure Poetry in exile* posits as a question whether it is possible to produce a metalanguage or metaculture in which Chinese and English would be accommodated and reconciled, it simultaneously enacts the way in which the impossibility of this project has recursive and extensive effects in both Chinese and English. The global yin-yang or “circle turned full” enters its postmodern avatar as a spiral or “strange attractor” in which symmetry and asymmetry are always simultaneous and coextensive.

Like “Curve,” Bei Dao’s “Gains” elaborates an ambivalently recursive economy:

A single mosquito  
has enlarged night’s size  
taking a drop  
of my blood

I am a mosquito  
reduced by night’s size  
taking a drop  
of night’s blood

I am a sizeless  
hovering night  
taking a drop  
of heaven’s blood  
(1991, 63)

“Gains” offers a series of three developing propositions about two actors—a mosquito and a presumably human narrator—and their stage, the night; or to put it

more pointedly, two local agents and the global corporation or state they work for and/or against. In the first stanza, a mosquito acting as night's agent adds incrementally to it by taking blood from an individual narrator. Secondly, narrator and mosquito are equated rather than opposed and set as one against the night, the vastness of which seems to reduce the individual to a petty thief who must steal back some of its own blood. In place of the first stanza's simple zero-sum game or parasitical one-way expropriation, the second stanza offers a properly dialectical (although still antagonistic or cross-parasitical) relationship between individual and collective formations; the third stanza seems to resolve the dialectic and to produce a new antithesis. Finally, then, the features of narrator, mosquito, and night (actors and stage, dancers and dance) are conflated in the denouement of a process that might be called (after Keats's caricature of Wordsworth) "egotistical sublimation": over the course of the poem, "I" is repeatedly dislocated in order that the subject (i.e., that subjectivity) can transcend scale by embodying both local and global (by being both mosquito and night; by being "sizeless"), while autonomizing itself as a continual and dynamic motion independent of any ground or context ("hovering"), since it has become its own invisible yet all-subsuming context ("night"). Whether this process should be identified as the logic of Romantic subject formation or of postmodern capital circulation is, typically, up for grabs. In any case, the new "gain," which the poem itself attempts self-referentially to perform, requires and produces a new Other, here called "heaven"—the poem's "surplus value." Significantly, though, it is unclear whether this development should be regarded as the subject's gain at the expense of parasitical predation on this Other (the despoiling or commodification of what now seems to be "heaven," of what had previously been allowed to be unreifiable, unnameable), or as the subject's unprecedented access to an inexhaustible surplus that its own metamorphosis has produced—money for nothing. Insofar as the poem can be read as a possibly critical rehearsal of Romantic/humanist subject formation (with "heaven" inserted in place of the proletariat?), Bei Dao's mosquito-subject is both smaller and larger, more parasitical and more autonomous, more frenetic and more stable than Wordsworth's sluggish leech-subject of "Resolution and Independence." In that poem, Wordsworth had used the images of leech and leech-gatherer as proxies in his meditation on the problematic status of the writer as both parasite and healing agent, but Wordsworth's meditation is "resolved" by the specular "help and stay secure" to be found in a mystified self-sufficiency, a resolution Bei Dao profoundly ambiguates. Wordsworth completed his hymn to heroic self-sufficiency on having just received his substantial patrimony, while Bei Dao wrote "Gains" in the economic and cultural "hovering" of his post-Tiananmen exile to the vagaries of the

international culture-circuit. These biographical details index the kinds of economic and cultural contradictions that characterize the status of the writer in postfeudal and postsocialist/postmodern Romanticisms.

In identifying the process of "Gains" more explicitly with the writing process, Bei Dao's "Composition" further elaborates a subject that is both dissolved and produced by textuality:

#### Composition

starts in the stream and stops at the source

diamond rain  
is ruthlessly dissecting  
the glass world

it opens the sluice, opens  
a woman's lips  
pricked on a man's arm

opens the book  
the words have decomposed, the ruins  
have imperial integrity  
(1991, 75)

Like "Gains," "Composition" enacts a series of dislocations in order to produce a final image that offers a paradoxical payoff: here, a new kind of power. The leading characteristic of textual power, the power of words and of the book, is that its abjection and fragmentation *is* its power; it achieves integrity by being dissected, dislocated, decomposed, and in ruins; its postmodern empire can and must be neither/both Chinese/English.

The otherwise stereotypically Romantic figure of ruins runs through *Obscure Poetry*. Explaining, in 1981, that "the old kind of poetry has always propagandized about a 'non-individual' 'I' or 'self,' an 'I' that is self-denying and self-destructive," Gu Cheng caricatures such a self as "a grain of sand, a road-paving pebble, a cogwheel, a steel screw." Once such a self "has eradicated his most concrete, individual being, he himself finally loses control and is destroyed. The new kind of 'self' is born on this heap of ruins" (quoted in Tay 1985, 147). A decade or so later, Bei Dao repeats this topos when asked about his relation to traditional Chinese poetry: "Tradition today is like a house in ruins; we can't live in it; it must be reconstructed. But it must be reconstructed on the foundation of that ruin" (1994a, 8).

Between them, in other words, Gu Cheng and Bei Dao found *menglong shi* on the ruins of *both* “tradition” and socialist “modernity.” In a similar spirit, Bei Dao and his fellow editors of the early democracy-movement literary journal *Today* trenchantly chose the ruins of the Qianlong emperor’s European palaces as the site, in 1979, for two now-legendary poetry readings where (as Bei Dao later described it), “under very close surveillance by the police, a thousand people appreciated difficult works of poetry with enthusiasm” (1994b, 13). The European-style palaces on the outskirts of Beijing, vengefully destroyed in 1860 by English troops during the Second Opium War, pointedly mark China’s ongoingly problematic and ironic relation with Western culture and imperialism. Typically, as in Western academic accounts of Chinese “Imagism,” this irony is suppressed in most Western mass-media accounts of the democracy movement, which prefer to focus on such icons as the papier-mâché Statue of Liberty paraded in Tiananmen in 1989.

For Xiaobing Tang, it is the “peculiar, but historically wrought absence of cultural normativity” in China that “makes irony the dominant mode of writing and reading” (1993, 294). While “such a disintegrative cultural environment certainly reminds one of the historical background from which Western modernism emerged” (and, one might add, of Chinese modernism in the 1920s),

*it is postmodernism, however, as a general description of being simultaneously modernist and modernist manqué, that best characterizes contemporary Chinese culture which, due to the lack of any legitimate normativity or rather because of a synchronic juxtaposition of different, if indeed incompatible, modes of production, gives continuous rise to irony and displaces all efforts to stabilize meaning. (295)*

Heterochrony and interpenetration of modes of production cannot now characterize China against the West, except to situate it as exemplary, since these have become definitive postmodern characteristics. If there is a (typically Orientalist) distinction to be made between a China where starker temporal and modal contradictions prevail and a West in which the mix of times and modes approaches a kind of pixilated puree, it is in either case only in the play of resonances and disjunctions across scale between pixel and “big picture” that the course of postmodernity can be charted.

Like postempire China of the 1920s, post-Mao Chinese culture has been marked by a stepped-up engagement with Western texts, especially those of cultural theory. During the so-called Culture Fever, as Xudong Zhang describes it, the “flood of ‘texts’ was overwhelming, and indeed constituted a world exhibition of discourses,”

*from Max Weber to Habermas; Nietzsche and Heidegger to Derrida and Foucault; from Russian thinkers such as Berdyaev and Shestov to “Western Marxists” ranging from Adorno and Marcuse to Althusser and Fredric Jameson; and from Freud and Lacan to the so-called logical empiricism. The picture is slightly different if we keep in mind that these are not names conjoined in a carnival of the presentiment of the hegemonic modern, but rather images standing for a “nonhegemonic universality” provided by a diversified collective experience, by an unconscious project in its mosaic form. (1994, 144)*

While terms like “Fever” and “flood” recall the logic of pathological excess by which Lee characterized Chinese appetite for Western texts in the 1920s, the difference between Lee’s modernist account of modernism and Zhang’s postmodernist account of postmodernism is, again, that simultaneity or temporal interpenetration—and the permeability of cultural boundaries in space—are post-modern *norms*, aberrant only with respect to modernity’s account of itself. Zhang’s “world exhibition of discourses” does, of course, retain its own irony toward global colonization by the shopping-mall culture of postmodern capital, perhaps recalling some of its antecedents: the great Victorian exhibitions in which capitalist technologies and images of its Others were sold to the folks at home and, before these, the almost archetypical exhibit of Western science and technology that an English expedition brought to Qianlong’s China in the Romantic year 1793, the failure of which led to English imperialist enterprises to “open the market” by force. The recognition that the narrative of colonization by capitalism, by technology—and even by “Westernness” itself—from Romanticism to postmodernity, was and is and will prove to be a perpetually incomplete project *in the West itself*, as well as in the East, is a definitive one for the project of “nonhegemonic universality” (the syllabic if not dialectic partner of Xiaobing Tang’s “uncompromising demystification”).

If demystification or temporal irony gets played out as the double rejection of a past characterized by “political repression” and a future characterized by “commodification,” this rejection must also paradoxically include the rejection of Romantic narratives that characterize temporal progress as ongoing liberation and ongoing commodification in the first place. This temporal multiple rejection is itself matched, in Chinese postmodernism, by another double negation of the spatial metonyms “West” and “East”: “The logic of the ‘great cultural discussion’ can be explained away neither as a tacit or outright sinification complex nor as a faithful or twisted interpretation of foreign texts, but rather as the dialectic presentation of itself under the guise of either of the former two and through the critical negation of both of them” (Zhang 1994, 140).

These two double negations, one could say, are what enable Xiaobing Tang to make an optimistic distinction between the rise of capitalism in post-feudal Europe and postsocialist China; Tang's distinction can be characterized as "optimistic" if only because, this time,

*any humanist optimism about laissez-faire capitalism and the market is a historically precluded illusion. Unless shielding themselves with bad faith, the advocates of free enterprise and its legitimizing ideology of liberalism, even though they may represent an emergent and productive social force in a national context, will never enjoy the same masterful confidence as those Enlightenment giants who, in revolt against political absolutism, resolutely stood up to call for an age of reason and individual freedom. In short, any form of utopia, within the boundaries of a nation-state, now becomes a categorical impossibility. (1993, 293)*

While Liu Kang deployed "Enlightenment" as a term of approbation to index a resumed continuity with an interrupted organic development in China, Tang deploys it as a term of opprobrium to establish China's new break from a (Western) continuist history. In either case, the choice of "Enlightenment" as the definitive trope is prejudicial at least insofar as, always already on the heels of Enlightenment, it is Romanticism that sets itself up as both a new break and a renewed continuity with organic development, that constitutes a falling away from the "masterful confidence" in "an age of reason," and that, finally, may best be described as the apotropaic enterprise of "shielding . . . with bad faith." It was precisely in these terms that Paul de Man described Romanticism as a poetics whereby the doctrine of the "symbol" is "substituted for that of 'allegory' in an act of ontological bad faith," attempting thereby to repress "a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament" by "a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge" (de Man 1983, 211, 208). In the United States, at any rate, Tang's "bad faith" is still very much the creed of corporate politicians and their cultural counterparts (e.g., in films such as *Schindler's List*), who seem never to tire of repeating that entrepreneurship and venture capitalism will indeed save the world and liberate the oppressed.

Xudong Zhang associates a Chinese dialectic operating in "the historical conjuncture of premodern, modern, and postmodern" with the hovering site of spatial coordinations and displacements in scale between local and global (i.e., "fractal") phenomena: "In the 1980s, the Chinese situation is characterized by the fact that a new domestic social space opened by the resumed and speeded national project of modernity coincides and intertwines with the globalization of market and cultural life often called 'postmodern'" (1994, 154).

To say that versions of this conjuncture, the site of maximal betweenness rather than a “leading edge” in cultural time or space, have been and are ongoing and definitive in both China and the West from Romanticism through postmodernity is not to belie historical and cultural discontinuity and contradiction but to insist that, in the last instance, the embodiment of discontinuity, contradiction, and heterochrony is the ongoing work of cultures—no less than of the subcultures and metacultures they mediate.

The perverse and Romantic heterochrony that inspired William Blake to announce (in 1793, the year of the McCartney expedition) that “Empire is no more!”—at the moment when English imperialism was cranking up—is in some sense only an echo of more thoroughly heterochronous postmodern annunciations. Singer-poet Leonard Cohen’s recent announcement of a molecular revolution being enacted in everything from power struggles in kitchens to megacorporations and “from those nights in Tiananmen Square”—the announcement that “Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.”—is, likewise, doubly an anachronism because officially too late and, realistically, premature. Cohen’s whimsical hope (or “wild patience,” as Adrienne Rich put it) is conjoined to a problematically Romantic mock nostalgia (for “the Berlin Wall” and for “Stalin and St. Paul”) in the face of a “Future” where “things are gonna slide in all directions” under the relentless “blizzard of the world” (Cohen 1993, 367–72). This imagistic and temporal configuration is curiously affirmed and negated by Bei Dao’s reminders that “old snow comes constantly, new snow comes not at all” and that “the upward path of the future / is a gigantic slippery slide” (1991, 31, 65).

After this rhetorical blizzard, a typically postmodern argument from the science of evolution makes a fittingly polemical epigraph (and a fittingly perverse epitaph for Romantic Orientalism). Gould argues that “a *general, temporal retardation of development has clearly characterized human evolution*” and that “*this retardation establishe[s] a matrix within which all trends in the evolution of human morphology must be assessed*” (1977, 365; emphasis in original); in other words, apes (for example) are born less fully developed than fish, and humans are born less fully developed than apes, but by virtue of this retardation they gain more flexibility in engaging their changing environments. A similar heterochrony may dictate that latecomers to “modernity” gain thereby the power dynamically to orient the postmodern.

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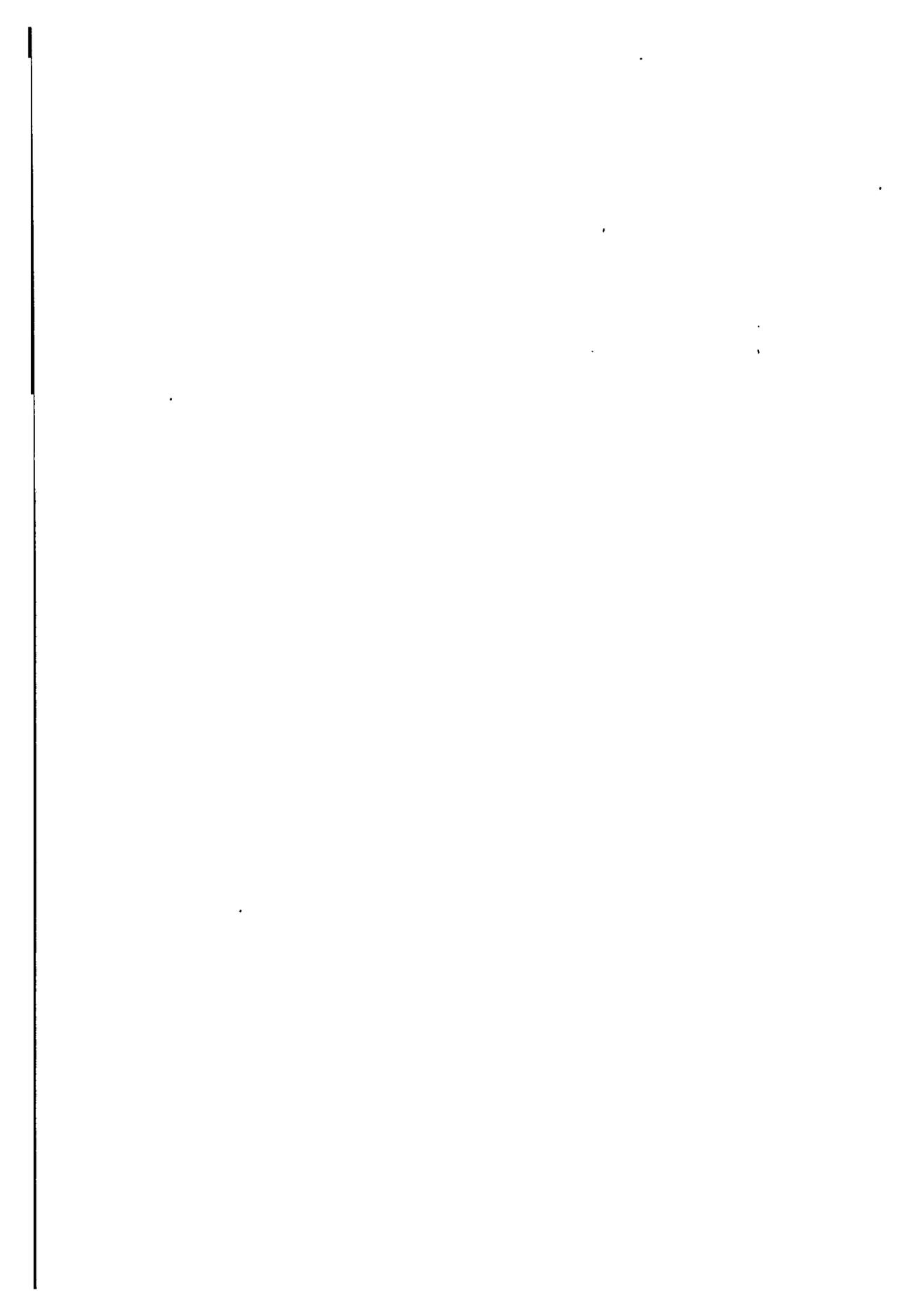
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