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Style interminable: the auto-fictional object of the Humanities in works by Brigid Brophy and Ben Lerner

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ABSTRACT

Style emerged into discursive prominence in nineteenth century Europe at the same time as the classical symptoms of hysteria were given new impetus by neurologists and psychoanalysts. Later, when the Post-War architecture of late capitalism seemed to spell the end of style, 'in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the individual brushstroke' (Fredric Jameson), hysteria started to disappear as a psychiatric diagnosis. To explore how style's structural affinity with hysteria remains current, even as the professionalisation of the Humanities ensures it is disavowed, this essay redeploys D. W. Winnicott's idea of 'transitional phenomena'. I describe the hysterical predicament of the Humanities scholar who is unable to make or find an object of knowledge sufficient to end the distress of their interests. The second part of the essay demonstrates how autobiographic fictions foreground the hysteria of style. Here I place Brigid Brophy, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, and Ben Lerner, writing in the first decades of this millennium, in genealogical relation. I observe how the historical swing from 1970s 'metafiction' to contemporary 'autofiction' registers the interminable predicament of style. Style displaces the object of literary study and preserves its vulnerability through a structure of communicative reticence.

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Coming at the end of a novel about Frédéric Moreau's coming of age, his living, or failing to live, through an age of revolutions and a coup d'état, the final chapter of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* takes the form of hysterical reminiscence.¹ As Frédéric and his best friend Deslauriers meet in 1867 and enter the mode of retrospection, we might reasonably expect a further perspective on all that has already passed in the novel. Yet as they 'exhume' their youth, they land together on a scene from a period earlier

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than any yet recounted, and apparently tangential to the novel's broader concerns. It was the holidays in 1837 (the action of the novel begins in 1840) and the best friends had gone to a brothel where an inexperienced Frédéric presented flowers to 'the girls':

like a lover to his betrothed [...] The girls all burst out laughing, amused by his embarrassment [*joyeuses de son embarras*]; thinking they were making fun of him, he fled, and since Frédéric had the money, Deslauriers had no choice but to follow him. (459–60)

Given earlier descriptions of Frédéric's obsessive lust for Madame Arnoux and her several more available substitutes, the reader is prepared for the note of sexual revelation, even its humiliating quality. What remains unsettling is how this final chapter sits apart from the rest of the work, a primal scene of sexual and financial impotence which the friends agree, in the novel's final derisive mimicry, comprises the 'best time' they ever had. Its apartness underwrites – or undermines – everything that has gone on before: the social world of bourgeois France which the novel had so laboriously described is suddenly revealed as a distortion from this moment of humiliation and pleasure.

The displacement in the final chapter of *Sentimental Education* remains significant for histories of literary style. To all intents and purposes, Flaubert's novel had already ended, its penultimate chapter signing off with the line: 'And that was all' (several pages before the reader closes the book). This penultimate chapter has Frédéric acquaint himself with Madame Arnoux after nearly 20 years of travel and 'society' and receive the sight of her white hair like 'a blow in the chest'. He relinquishes his lust, an emotional reckoning which tallies with the narrative self-consciousness of his comment that 'she has made him feel all the things in books which people criticize as exaggerated' (455–6). Instead of offering closure, however, consistent with Frédéric's self-image as aloof (a person critical of political plays and impressively dispassionate when viewing 'a pile of corpses' during the events of 1848 (284, 314)), the novel overflows generic convention. The final chapter shunts us from the temporally ordered conclusions of a man in society to a disordering memory (or fantasy) of youth. At this point, the reader might feel privy to some ontological discrepancy, a metalepsis akin to the infamous episode of *Dallas* when Bobby Ewing is found simpering in the shower after a full series of being very certainly dead. *Was everything a dream except this?* Can this last word be integrated back into the Balzacian object the novel was supposed to have been, or does it remain forever separated, a symptomatic revelation of pathological corruption? Even Flaubert's ironic nods to Rastignac and Balzac's *Comédie humaine* cannot forewarn us of this formal disintegration. Frédéric's maturity as the protagonist of a

bildungsroman is re-posed at the last, and the question of his beginning – who authored him, how he came to author himself – re-opened.

According to Jonathan Culler, Flaubert's irony is supreme at the point at which his protagonist too becomes an ironist.² Yet allowing that Frédéric concludes his formation with a revelation at his own expense does not simply consolidate Flaubert's narrative perspective, nor, as Hayden White implies, does it resolve the novel's style as a form of critical distance from youthful idealism – a psychological wisdom which doubles as a cynical bourgeois betrayal of the revolutionary spirit.³ Doubtless such betrayal is involved, but Flaubert's knowingness should not be taken to transcend the helplessness of his identification with Frédéric. It is my suggestion that Flaubert's style resides in his wounded defection from his own finished accomplishment. Instead of the finished art object, we have an object whose existence wavers on the conspicuousness of a part: a scene omitted from the story then belatedly included, fabricated out of the same 'atrocious labour' as the rest of the novel, yet which seems to *un-finish* that labour, exposing it as the consequence of pathological impotence.⁴ In fact, the final, abrupt scene of self-reading and humiliation in *Sentimental Education* had already played out in public with *Madame Bovary* when the 'invisible and all-powerful' author-God became, in the words of his reviewer Baudelaire, the exemplary hysteric.⁵ Only by agreeing with Baudelaire's diagnosis could Flaubert concede the obduracy (and androgyny) of his identifications: 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi'. This is psychopathology, not as a reduction of art to personal life, but as the indirect means by which art's labour is communicated beyond its finished form. Critical to the legacy of Flaubertian style is how its impersonality depends on a degree of authorial clinginess.

Style means every diegetic act of telling is unsettled by mimetic proliferation: not only from below, accents and dialects wrestling for control of literary discourse, but also from above, the invisible author cast down into their own work, awkwardly doubled as the frail embodiment of narrative authority. Such destabilising ironies draw our attention to the violable boundary between the inside and outside of the work. Though the term is often used critically to describe the optimal presentation of a literary object, or institutionally as a means of cataloguing such objects according to sub-generic similarities, this essay argues the merit of thinking of style less as the appearance and character of an object than the paradoxical mode of its relation. Both writers I focus on here make explicit the Flaubertian hysteria. Brigid Brophy writing in the 1960s and 1970s and Ben Lerner writing in the first decades of the twenty-first century abjure the art of finishing (though Brophy does resort to drawing a fish and writing the word '*Fin*' inside it (237)).⁶ They each become the inhibiting symptom of their own art: ashamed, impotent, over-insistent, and, in the same breath, producers of auto-fictional archives.⁷ By reading these archives, I suggest we can chart

the passage of style through different historical and institutional circumstances as a persisting psychopathological phenomenon which deposits the literary object as a problem of relation, at once inviting identification and warning of the enduring non-rapport between narrative form and life.⁸

Yet why should we bother rehabilitating style as psychopathological when, as Fredric Jameson has so emphatically argued, such individualistic modes of analysis are fruitless in the era of postmodernity?⁹ The most compelling reason for reflecting on 'mere psychology' is in order to help explain our critical vacillation between accounting for the progressive institutionalisation of modern style and acknowledging the idiosyncratic, even pathological character of the attachments style creates. Besides being taxonomised in accordance with various institutional imperatives, the term style has retained its vernacular power as signalling charismatic maladaptation or protest; it indicates the hysterical seduction of presenting an object (or self) insistently and at the same time refusing to localise it or make it transparent in language. Such an association is not intended to de-historicise style, but rather to make apparent the means by which literary work relates author to reader by implicating the missing body of a literary worker. Furthermore, it is not adventitious that Flaubert's protest against his own work opened him to confusions around sex and gender. As I hope my readings of Brophy and Lerner will show, such confusions arise when the image of a body or bodies is reconnected to the labour that produces and supports it. Hysteria was re-born in the nineteenth century as a disorder of sex that also made conspicuous the connection of sex to cultural work – most prominently, the cultural work of *being a woman*.¹⁰ Feminist scholarship has long argued that such work, including the linguistic and emotional work of identity formation, has been under-recognised in histories of labour, and this despite the culturalisation and 'feminisation' of modern labour economies.¹¹ Read in this light, hysterical protest signals a body that has been used, or used up, in the production of culture. Literary style, too, bears the trace of a body that won't disappear yet refuses to settle into a usable image of itself. Hysteria is a body displaying itself through symptomatic displacement, while style (as we've seen through Flaubert) both invites and displaces identification with the authorial predicament.

In this essay, I would like to ask to what extent professional scholars of literature remain sympathetic to this complex identificatory relation. In an age when affect and embodiment have come to discursive prominence, and when it is the common scholarly practice to supplement the precarious object of the Humanities with political and scientific correlatives, style strikes me as a curiously insistent mode of withdrawal from objectivity. It displaces the object of literary study and preserves its vulnerability through a structure of communicative reticence. Accordingly, the first half of this essay is an

attempt to understand style as a symptom, not of individual authors only, but of a critical discipline.

The obscure object of the Humanities

Literary sociologist John Guillory contends that contemporary Humanities scholars are badly in need of objects. Repeatedly asked to justify their work, they have become accustomed to reaching for values they no longer believe in (e.g. the ‘civilising’ value of literature) and confecting impressive methodologies that might bear comparison with those of the natural sciences. In truth, they would be better served simply describing *what* it is they study. That quiddity is so often missing from ‘defence of the Humanities’ polemic is, Guillory suggests, symptomatic of an institutional situation. He leans on the work of art critic Erwin Panofsky to define the character of the double object which he believes Humanities scholars have come to disavow: the ‘document-monument’. The ‘document’ establishes a relation to other documents and points to an ongoing process of cultural fabrication. The ‘monument’ is a ‘document’ objectified in a more brilliant light: it emerges from ‘the stream of time and enlivens what would [otherwise] remain dead’.¹² For both Panofsky and Guillory, it is important to note that a monument in one Humanities discipline, let’s say Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* for an English literature scholar, can be a mere document in another. For the historian of Early-Modern England, a sixteenth century marriage contract might feasibly emerge into a monumentality which Shakespeare’s plays merely document. The point is that together the document and monument comprise the complex and much-needed object of the Humanities.

As an attempt to reassert the importance of aesthetic reception within the disciplinary regimes of the modern university, the Panofsky–Guillory ‘monument’ is suggestive, though itself embroiled in the defence of canonicity. Only a finite number of objects can ever be monuments, while documents can proliferate to infinity, which means the enlivening call-and-response encoded in the monument depends on an obscure process of selection. Indeed, Guillory’s concern for an internet-dominated world of electronic objects, with an endless supply of documents and fewer and fewer monuments, sounds a quite typical note of anxiety about aesthetic value in an age of artifactual proliferation – *which objects will continue to call out to us from the past? And why?*

Guillory’s concern is underpinned by his earlier work, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, where he attempts to clarify ‘the precise relation between a politics of representation in the canon and a democratic representational politics’.¹³ There is a significantly under-interrogated difference, he argues, between political concern for minority

representation within democratic and professional institutions and concern for imaginary representations of race, gender, class and sexuality within a literature curriculum. Though not in straightforward elegy, Guillory regrets some current trends towards expanding and fragmenting the literary canon in the cause of seeing difference represented. His concerns include the privileging of representative experience over attending to the organising medium of language; the implication that representative texts are not subject to unconscious processes of distortion; the treating of class, race and gender as isomorphic when they clearly pose very different questions to literary scholarship; the assumption that it is *de facto* radical to introduce a previously excluded text to the canon; and the whiggish moralism which underlies the notion that old texts are being replaced by 'better', more representative texts. Guillory's unifying idea here is that by characterising the literary canon as primarily a repository of different cultural images we risk contributing to the erosion of the literary object.

Yet it is by no means obvious that critiques of this sort have their own object clearly in view. Who, after all, presents a literary text as merely representative of a social group? In what array of contexts – institutional and extra-institutional – do we imagine literary works being received today? And was the idiosyncratic genius of the romantic age really so free of the burden of representativeness as Guillory's argument implies? Surely, every non-standard dialect elevated to the canon has depended on a work of political or economic force: the folk has long agitated through the exceptional poet's mouth. Guillory is on safer ground, it seems to me, when he sets out the institutional conditions which make today's situation unique – not because different cultural images have ceased to be the locus of real politics, but because they are in greater danger than ever before of being co-opted by an institutional (and spectacular) logic which is primarily technocratic. As Guillory writes: 'It has proven to be much easier to quarrel about the content of the curriculum than to confront the implications of a fully emergent professional managerial class which no longer requires the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie'.¹⁴ This crisis of bourgeois culture has longstanding significance for the history of literary style, but the form it takes in the contemporary university deserves special attention. Most specifically, the fact that English-language composition is far removed from what is taught in Literature and Creative Writing programmes testifies to the divergence between general cultural literacy and literature, and to the authority the former has to organise and potentially trivialise the latter. The contemporary university as an institutional culture with no need for literary language to make it cohere, transforms the modernist predicament. This is how Guillory pitches it through Bakhtin: the discourse of literary language is endangered by a structure of complicity between grammar and an array of representative voices or static images. 'Style is nothing other than a

certain relation to grammar, a relation most visible at the vanishing point of grammar's abrogation', he writes.¹⁵ It is the dynamism of this continually reconfigured relation of voice to grammar which is most vulnerable to technocratic mystification.

There is a significant connection, then, between the missing object of Humanities discourse and the dynamics of style. Yet to suggest that the re-apprehension of the former depends on the latter would be too simple, if only because it suggests that style is attributable to the object rather than operating in relation to it. It is the nature of the relation to the literary object which remains most at issue – what can it mean for the past to be 'enlivened' through a literary monument except that it is *enlivened for* someone? Here, Guillory's work proves elusive. It follows from his argument that personal and politically sympathetic readings of literature, reliant upon imaginary identifications, may be said to obscure the impersonality of the literary object and in this way, despite their affectivity, foreclose on life. This predicament is close to that of moral sentiment attending the rise of the European novel, which, as Michael Bell has shown, took the historical form of a paradoxical injunction whereby spontaneous feeling 'assumed the ... authority of principle.'¹⁶ The modernists' aversion to all things sentimental may have resisted the troublesome conformity implied by this culture of feeling, but they did not have the resources to destroy it. Howsoever they valorised 'impersonality' and 'objectness' these same, predominantly male writers, from Flaubert to Beckett, could not exclude personal sentiment. This concession points to the formative impossibility of recovering a mere object for the Humanities, and at the same time reminds us of the peculiar persistence of object relations. Clearly, style cannot be seen to operate independently of contemporary modes of cultural identification, yet it nonetheless insists on the discrepancy between a conspicuously absent author and the reader – a discrepancy embedded in the problem of textuality. Furthermore, despite its modernist promise to set the reader free from sentimentality, from institutionally sanctioned feelings and imaginary identifications, style is structurally incapable of resolving this promise into an objective form of knowledge.

The hysterical humanities

Style is less a quality attributed to an object than an object's mode of relating – an object, we might add, whose reality is inseparable from fantasies projected upon it. In this sense, it is conceptually tied to what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott calls 'transitional phenomena', the means by which subjects are relieved of the burden of having to establish the difference between internal and external worlds. The following is one of Winnicott's most familiar remarks on the matter:

An essential part of my formulation of transitional phenomena is that (as I have said *ad nauseum*) we agree never to make the challenge to the baby: did you create this object, or did you find it conveniently lying around?¹⁷

Clearly, we make no such agreement when it comes to creative writers, whom, apparently, we are never done challenging. Yet it is true that vacillation between critical treatments of formalist technique and of historical context means it is rare for literary scholars to announce the object exclusively ‘made’ or ‘found’. Nor indeed are we in the habit of connecting this undecideability to the operation of style as both a matter of artful construction *and* unconscious trace. We must bear the paradox of both ‘made’ and ‘found’, says Winnicott, in order to live.

Yet Winnicott also makes a crucial distinction between what he calls ‘object relating’ and ‘object use’. The former describes the precarious condition of a subject underwriting the existence of their object, unable to admit the object might exist independently of their mind. Paradoxically, we can only help someone believe in the external existence of an object by encouraging them to destroy it. Though we usually think of aggression as an egoic defence against the imposition of something from outside, for Winnicott aggression helps determine the external world: if a subject fails to be aggressive enough toward her identifications she is trapped in a state of ‘object relatedness’, interminably protecting and preserving the object from her own cruelty, afraid that it won’t survive her hate.¹⁸ Juliet Mitchell has reformulated Winnicott’s distinction as a question: ‘Why ... is the [subject] who cannot destroy and hence use his object so afraid of madness?’¹⁹ The answer resides in the facilitating environment: only subjects secured by a good enough environment of care will risk destroying the objects of their attention.

Yet this important acknowledgement of environmental factors makes Mitchell’s following characterisation of the exceptional artist sound idealistic and, at most, only partially correct:

The exceptional artist takes more-than-average risks; chances the possibility of the non-survival of the object [...] Art in which the artist is the same as his/her creation is object relating; art that withdraws, fearing that its destructiveness will kill the object, stops short of greatness.²⁰

On this view, the exceptional artist produces only art objects which have attained a finished form. Since the exceptional artist is also the exceptionally facilitated artist, however, a corollary question presents itself: when does the great ‘risk-taker’ become merely complacent? When does the writer kill her darlings with too much aplomb? While it seems natural to identify style with ‘object use’, a mode of creative destruction opposed to sentimental identification with objects deemed too precious to destroy, we might usefully temper this viewpoint by recalling Flaubert’s inability to finish, his compulsion to

return to a time before his novel started, and the distressing authorial insistence which haunts his work. Flaubert's 'hysteria' offers a crucial structural link between impersonality and pathological sentimentality, allowing us to reflect on the discursive coincidence of hysteria with modern style.

The hysteric, writes Mitchell, presents an over-insistent ego which is not felt to exist. He suffers from affects yet to be 'abreacted' (using Freud and Breuer's term), which is to say feelings which have not found their object. Because the hysteric has no certain orientation towards an external object, he is compelled to seduction, mimicry and the parthogenetic fantasy of producing a baby from himself, asking the question over and over again 'am I a man or a woman?' – and insisting he is both. For Mitchell, the hysteric's germinal question is 'where do I stand?'²¹ Foucault offers an exceptionally affirmative view of this embodiment, calling the female hysterics of the late-nineteenth century the 'first anti-psychiatric militants'.²² Presenting with bodies too vulnerable to destroy, they replenished themselves in fantasy, their 'almost nothing' pathologies and shifting symptoms refusing to provide mere content for a realism manufactured elsewhere.²³ As a mimetic disorder that necessarily hides in plain sight, hysteria demands objectification by compelling the production of knowledge claims it will continue to unsettle.

To return to Guillory's vocabulary of the monument: how might we distinguish the object of the Humanities which 'enlivens what would [otherwise] remain dead' from the hysterical act of replenishing the self through fantasy? Probably, this is an unanswerable question, yet the displacement of the object it implies, from the historical world to the imagined self, points towards the enduring predicament of style. Freud, for instance, considered monuments to be 'memory symbols'. Though writing of statues, rather than objects of the Humanities more broadly, his speculation remains relevant to literary works:

[W]hat would you say to a Londoner who today stood sadly before the monument to the funeral of Queen Eleanor [at Charing Cross], instead of going about his business with the haste engendered by modern industrial conditions, or rejoicing with the young queen of his own heart?²⁴

Here, the monument truly enlivens only those whose daily routines are not disturbed by its existence. It becomes a usable object when its historical reference has been sufficiently destroyed and is left standing as a formal, quasi-grammatical convention around which everyday vitality is organised. The sad 'neurotic' on the other hand is trapped in his reminiscence of the statue's original reference – its theme. It is not a 'real' object for him, but a layering of anachronistic projections and sentimental identifications. The distinction between healthy and pathological subjects in this example is clearly overdrawn. After all, the healthy person for whom the object has

an easily defined function is nonetheless condemned, in Freud's text, to 'modern industrial conditions' – hardly synonymous with psychological freedom. And while we can agree that weeping over a thirteenth century Queen seems excessive (just as it might to weep over the fate of Richardson's *Clarissa*), there are plentiful instances of un-relinquished attachment that nonetheless seed new vitalities.

An excellent recent example is the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston by Black Lives Matter protestors in Bristol in 2020. Exhuming the statue's historical meaning, rather than regarding the statue disinterestedly as a formal orientation in their everyday lives, the protesters can be thought of (but wrongly dismissed) as hysterical. They are destroying a physical object in order to remain faithful to a historical identification. Another, perhaps more helpful, way of putting this is to say that the protesters render conspicuous an environment not good enough to facilitate object use: they have been pushed into a precarious mode of identification. This is also how psychopathology and politics come together in the reception of literature: as a form of knowledge which relies on fantasy identification. Inevitably, however, such a formation also produces, and sometimes registers, its own inconsistencies. Most obviously, there is the felt discrepancy between any image deemed representative of historical experience and the material medium of the work – e.g. the Colston statue is *only* a statue; *Clarissa* is *only* a novelistic fiction. But also, as Robyn Weigman has persuasively argued, the 'I' of the critical Humanities is forever haunted by a 'We' it optimistically imagines and at the same time forbids itself for fear of hysterical over-speaking (incorporating the other into the self).²⁵ We shall see in the literary examples which follow how the grammar of this discrepancy remains the principal problem of style.

The transmissibility of style: Brigid Brophy reading Ronald Firbank

In the 1970s, modern style was explicitly theorised as a psychopathological symptom. Sartre's unfinished (interminable) biographical study *Flaubert – The Family Idiot* (1971-) connects the author's private neuroses, his seizure at *Pont L'Évêque* and apparent retreat from the world, to the historical predicament of the European middle class. According to Sartre, Flaubertian style was a proleptic symptom for the bourgeois de-realisation of the world. Most significantly, something prevented 'Little Gustave from grasping words as simple signs', their dense materiality freighted with unbearable weight. He was voice-averse, unsure where he stood in relation to others, unable to register the feeling the signs conveyed. His infantile refusal to speak becomes a reluctance to publish as well as a sexual frigidity, an intentional impotence or asceticism, performing its own

relinquishment.²⁶ If Flaubert's pathology is simultaneously a capital investment in the self (Sartre leads the accusation) then the desire to write to, instead of personally meet with, his lover Louise Colet, his commitment to endlessly revising his writing, and his famous abhorrence of clichés or local colour (*idées reçues*) all testify to a discrepancy between style and personal voice which is also a relational predicament. Flaubert as hysterogenic subject, at once too little and too much, withdrawing and insistent, transforms the gothic split between the homely and the foreign into an everyday discipline, a laboured conscription to the written sentence. Jacques Lacan in a much less exhaustive treatment of Joyce (*Seminar XXIII* 1975–6) would point to a similar psychopathology deriving from the inconsistency of the author's bodily imaginary and a crisis with respect to following and feeling signs.²⁷ And Brigid Brophy's study *Prancing Novelist: In Praise of Ronald Firbank* (1973) shares this historical period's commitment to psychopathologising style.²⁸

I shall focus on Brophy's study because it exemplifies a moment of contest within anglophone letters when postmodern fiction, alongside confessional poetry and identity politics, had to be defended against a left-sociological discourse which had sought to dismiss it on the grounds it was pathological: the 'culture of narcissism' and so on.²⁹ Linda Hutcheon's late-1970s defence of metafiction, for instance, insists that *all* novels are born out of the imaginary (narcissistic) self-reflection which postmodernism makes explicit in more processional terms.³⁰ Brophy works from a similar premise: her authorial self-exposition is paradoxically secured within the history of novelistic technique. Even if this faith in fiction seems foreign to the current inclination to dissent from the literary on the basis that narrative privilege translates directly into political power, it describes part of an ongoing back-and-forth. As I hope now to demonstrate, the historical shift from 1970s 'metafiction' to 'autofiction' registers style at the intersection of literary and social relations as a mode of hysterical identification.

Brophy's study of Firbank is explicitly Freudian, and though she does not go so far as to diagnose him a hysteric, she exemplifies through her own identificatory practice the nature of an identification that will not resolve.³¹ Firbank's subjectivity withdraws and insists; his refusal to settle locations for his fictions – 'Ah the East ... I propose to return there some day, when I write about New York' – becomes the basis of a defence of fiction itself (174, 570). Indeed, while we might expect Brophy's biographical approach to offer a demystification of Firbank's work, rendering it a symptom of his life, her process more obviously performs an act of readerly transference: 'Firbank' is the speculative device which generates Brophy's style. But style here is not a characteristic quality that can be cited and left at that; it is rather the rumour of a life withheld from the writing which agitates a relation with fictional objects. This relation of the reader to text is determined by

shameful interest: 'The shame of enjoying literature is of old, but not venerable standing. It made it as socially awkward to be caught reading a novel as to be caught daydreaming or, if one reads through to the elements, masturbating' (17). Put differently, narcissistic pleasure is key to novelistic attachment: the shadow of another, absent subject cast over the art object she herself might, but doesn't, own. Brophy turns Firbank into a reader, specifically of Wilde, just as he transforms her shameful reading into a form of writing. She describes in detail his dense, almost plotless fictions as the work of a mosaicist whose brittle images associate in the 'zig zag' relations of dreams; and emphasises how important it is that he remains an obdurately 'minor' writer, whose relative unpopularity and recourse to self-publication intensify the indecent intimacy of engaging with his work (69, 41). The Firbank revealed by Brophy is a veritable Buddenbrook, inheriting his grandfather's wealth and arresting its deployment. His obsessional cultural interests replace the labour associated with the rags-to-riches story of his ancestor with writing – its own form of labour which necessitates a crisis of reproduction. Firbank's sexuality and geographic dislocation asperse the objects of his accomplishment with the scandal of pathology: Mrs Shamefoot (the protagonist of Firbank's novel, *Vainglory*), *c'est moi!*

There is queer inheritance to be detected: the Anglo-Irish Brophy emulating Anglo-Irish Firbank who has already emulated the Anglo-Irish Wilde, going so far as to squander his wealth collecting relics, signatures, dedications and special editions. Indeed, Brophy notes the inevitability of plagiarism in this relation. In *The Artificial Princess*, Firbank had consciously adopted Wilde's theme from *Salomé*, but 'he must have obscured from his own notice that he had borrowed also the joke of Wilde's *The Sphinx Without A Secret* and attributed it, without acknowledgement to *The Artificial Princess*'s emissary, the Baroness Rudlieb' (288). This is less an accusation than proof of creative dependency: the so-called crime against someone else's property, recast as a vital seduction which has to be restaged in order that a style can emerge. Wilde's paradoxes, which are characteristically axiomatic, 'direct point-to-point link and direct person-to-person declaration', are leaned on by Firbank, 'squashed down, and folded away in oblique angles'. Rather than vanquishing his predecessor, becoming a strong poet in the Oedipal model of influence, Firbank endorses Wilde's method, even as his writing constitutes a refolding and strategic weakening of its declarative structure. Firbank, writes Brophy, 'aerates' his books; his changes and reversals of diction create 'invisible, irregular spaces in the reader's progress, jagged areas of pure transparency through which the reader contemplates Firbank's images' (397–8) – images which are defined by the tonal, nondeclarative shifts they create.

Brophy, in turn, is intermittently Firbankian. She nominates *The Finishing Touch* her exemplary case:

Miss Brand said:

‘Men are ... coarse’.

Judging by the voice alone, you might have thought it a man who had spoken.³²

Speech cast ironically, ‘aerated’ by an ellipsis, with a sexually enigmatic invitation to the reader to enter the scene: this is Firbankian to the point of being plagiaristic. As we shall see, however, it is *In Transit* which stages most successfully Brophy’s argument from *Prancing Novelist*, and which, despite her claim to have an ‘anti-autobiographical temperament’, illustrates how she, as much as Firbank or Wilde, allows pathology to shadow the objects of her creation – which are made, but also found.

The novel genre, as Brophy describes it in her study of Firbank, is a fantasy object, the destruction of which is never complete. And those who express a desire to be done with the novel – to be done with fantasy – preserve a lasting attachment to the object they hate because they cannot finally destroy it. The ‘compulsive production of the billowing stuff of novels is very like the compulsive production of hysterical tastes’ (45), she insists, and the novel is very much alive insofar as it is forever linked to an author who is never done dying. If Freud remains the touchstone for this insistence, it is St Teresa of Avila who achieves exemplarity: she is the reader-as-writer and original masturbating girl in *Prancing Novelist* (130, 24–5); and the best figure of excess and orgasmic expiration towards the end of *In Transit*. Both references recall the monastic refuge of Cardinal Pirelli in Firbank’s posthumous novel, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*: ‘[here] Theresa of Ávila, worn and ill, though sublime in laughter, exquisite in beatitude, had composed a part of *The Way to Perfection*’.³³ A part of the way to perfection: for Brophy, the question of sex stalks the finished object, just as Cardinal Pirelli stalks the inviolable chorister at the end of Firbank’s novel.

‘Sexcessive’ narrators

In Transit (1969) is Brophy’s airport novel. It is postmodern, in Jameson’s sense: set in non-local space, its voices fragmented through a public address system, continually replayed to and by the recently de-parented narrator as pastiche. Brophy’s airport is the ‘imaginary museum of a new global culture’.³⁴ Many of its allusions point to Joyce (the author-narrator is a self-professed ‘Re-Joycer’), carrying the implication that the author’s multilingual ‘Irish’ modernism is a catastrophic dispersal of style. ‘[A]n airport I told my interlocutor, is one of the rare places where twentieth-century design is happy with its own style [...] An airport is a free range womb’ (19). This latter throwaway captures well the airport as a hysterical space

wherein the hysteria of the individual is submerged, and (like style in Jameson's account) ostensibly disappears. Not being of the country in which it is located ('I ceased to be Irish, I did not become anything else instead' (28)), the airport is a world-literary space whose sonic and linguistic proliferation is as happy as it is de-historicising. Hence, its dominant symptom is amnesia.

Significantly, *In Transit* presents self-forgetting as a pathological symptom rather than as technical absorption in a task. Its drama begins specifically as the forgetting of national identity – the narrator's Irishness receding even as the Joycean techniques and typographies proliferate. However, the more troublesome forgetting, which fundamentally disrupts the consistency of narrative voice, is sex. The narrator begins to worry about the identity of the reader:

How can I address you, interlocutor, when the only language I so much as half command is one in which the "you" does not even reveal (stepasiding that problem of where you are) how many there are of you and of what sex. (48)

The next stage in noting the precarity of the art object which mediates the writer-reader relation concerns the narrator's own orientation:

I returned my hand to my coffee, took the teaspoon and began chasing the foam [...] It was during the scudding of the back of the spoon across the opaque liquid that I realized I could no longer remember which sex I was. (71)

A novel which begins as an elaborate defence of fiction, resorts to a moment of narrative fissure in order to ask after the terms of difference which the fantasy body of narrative covers over. Though we are not permitted to identify the first-person narrator with Brophy herself, neither are we able to separate the text entirely from the concerns of authorial biography – *who is authorising this language?* If style occupies the space between grammar and voice, it emerges here as the problem of sex.

Appositely, Brophy identifies pronominal mystification as central to the problem of narrative style in her study of Firbank, noting, after Freud, how subject and object can pivot on a verb. The hysteric subject presents himself through his symptom as an object of knowledge, even as he withdraws from objectification by shifting the symptom along grammatical axes. In the historical example proffered by Brophy, 'the homosexual man' transforms the publicly scandalous proposition 'I (a man) love him' into 'I hate him' into 'I hate him because he persecutes me' into 'he hates me' (130).³⁵ The pronoun is a placeholder inadequate to the relational complexity of subject and object. Addressing the reader of *In Transit*, asking to be excused for the obligation to write 'he/she, his/her etc.', the narrator continues: 'P.S. You'll notice that I've ... trickered you off with mirror effects. For instance, if I were not an I, it could not be I who would be committed to a he/she' (72). As well as querying the sex of the impersonal narrator,

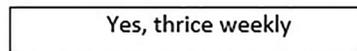
which has become conspicuous as something to be forgotten, an orientation no longer taken for granted at the moment of its disappearance, Brophy casts aspersions on the 'I': can the 'I' be deemed consistent across the breach of its forgetfulness, which insofar as it is presented as a real-life crisis remains a narrative conceit? Since the narrative 'I' is aporetic – implicit within its voice is the artifice of its production – can it ever be truly ignorant or sincerely forget? Replacing the textual 'I' with the author's personality, finding behind the edifice of narrative authority the body of a 'real' woman or man who writes, is also unsatisfactory, since we know this further biographical 'I' remains subject to unconscious identifications it has not yet experienced or learned to articulate (*c'est moi!*). Rather, subject and object are confused, the predicament of narrative authority forever 'sexcessive' to use Brophy's neologism – receptive and identificatory as well as artfully constructed, fundamentally hysterical insofar as it bodies forth an impossible demand to be on both sides of every difference, including that of sex.

Brophy's first-person narrator by forgetting their sex has also forgotten how to act (this is before the vocabulary of gender performativity was culturally dominant yet clearly anticipates and complicates Judith Butler's formulation that gender is 'instituted through a stylized repetition of acts').³⁶ Thinking of identity through action, the narrative overdetermines the sexologist's proforma, dissolving its either/or language in irony, and reproducing the disciplinary object as not only a form of self-identification, but also a body part, and something we occasionally do (or are undone by) (Figure 1).

Sex



Sex



(76)

Figure 1.

In the wake of its self-annulment, the novel re-stages a scene of thwarted identification whereby the narrator tries to classify their body but is prevented from doing so by a thickness of corduroy trousers. Their style of dress, of haircut, of manner and relation to people nearby refuses the resolution of the both/and predicament in socially realist terms. The narrator's inability to go to the public bathroom – either 'Gents' or 'Ladies' – strategically withholds a mirror scene (86). In other words, the narrative voice continues to have more than one body and comes to complicate the predicaments of relation – of how this voice is heard, read, identified with

and attached to. Thereafter it splits into two third-person presences: 'Patricia' and 'Patrick', each the protagonist of alternating chapters, or sometimes of parallel columns on the same page, marked as different, yet remaining in the shadow of Firbank and Joyce as the very same plastic 'Pat'.

The hysterical performativity of this parthogenesis, the un-identified, then duplicated body, relates to our earlier discussion of Freud's monument and Winnicott's distinction between 'object-relating' and 'object use'. If forgetting one's sex is also a conspicuous act of remembrance – remembering that one ought to have a sex and implicitly know how to use it – Brophy's narrator is akin to the neurotic weeping over a thirteenth-century Queen. The narrator's sex becomes unusable at the point it goes conspicuously missing – the basis of an interminable melancholy. And yet, this un-usability of sex is also a way of highlighting the stylised repetitions of narrative acts that endorse pre-established cultural scripts – the resolution of healthy mourning into mature object choice, 'compulsory heterosexuality' and so on. It demonstrates a persisting attachment to a missing object which agitates and potentially re-stylises the novel's negotiation between life and death.

Slow Lerner

Hysteria is the psychopathological complement to the problem of style. They each mark the same impossible gymnastic: insistent and symptomatic self-presentation combined with a withdrawal from objectivity – a refusal to be dead enough for classification. They also describe a similar discursive trajectory intersecting with modern questions of sex, gender and sexuality. Brophy exemplifies this affinity through her fictionalising: her style is at once vital and problematically indecisive, drawing attention to the authorial personality even as that personality will not reveal itself. Though we can detect in her work the feminist imperative to interrupt the dead-end of masculinist authority, it doesn't resolve upon the figure of the empowered woman writer. Brophy's multiple identities are persistently and ironically layered, her style intermittently *l'homme même*. And while it is tempting to pass off her linguistic exuberance and internationalism as disavowed idealism typical of 1960s and 1970s metafiction, it is by no means obvious that contemporary autobiographical fictions, their 'reality hunger' notwithstanding, have answered the question any more decisively concerning where exactly (on what solid ground) the narrator stands.³⁷

For example, it has been noted as significant that the best-known contemporary auto-fictionalist, Karl Ove Knausgaard, is a man: both because it indicates his male privilege in a world of women readers, and because it demonstrates that he 'writes like a woman'.³⁸ This latter claim is not unrelated to the recent controversy surrounding the *Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction's* decision to republish *Middlemarch* as authored by Mary Ann Evans. If it is too

forgiving of historical publishing norms to suggest simply that Knausgaard writes like a woman, it is politically naïve to suggest it is liberating to erase Mary Ann Evans' imaginary identification as a man over a century after her death. There are Brophyesque confusions here: bodies posed in various states of sexual irresolution which occupy the space described by Guillory between the politics of institutional representation (legal identity) and the imaginary identifications facilitated by literature. The increasing attention given to trans discourse is especially instructive in this regard, since it suggests the fantasy identification which replenishes the precarious or missing body can become a legal identity. In other words, the grammar of self can shift in accordance with imaginary identifications in a way that for Guillory remains vanishingly unlikely within the spectacular logic of modern institutions.

We should be clear, however, that gender reassignment is not 'hysterical', as various negative, misogynist and transphobic connotations continue to attach to that word. Indeed, the decision to have one's gender legally reassigned points beyond the hysteric's characteristic withdrawal. Nonetheless, as Patricia Gherovici has argued, trans politics inevitably chart a course through hysteria, a discourse which designates a body of signifiers as well as of flesh and blood.³⁹ Not only is reassignment a decision, it can also be an incision upon the flesh which is always a breach in the fabric of language. As Gherovici, Jay Prosser, Jacqueline Rose and others have noted, there is often a compulsion to write which accompanies transgender experiences, including of mirror stages, which are less moments of finding one's true voice than inaugural scenes of writing and reading the self – the self 'aerated' as it is presented through a shifting grammar.⁴⁰ In this context, pronouns present as febrile elements of style becoming articulations of legal identity. Trans memoirists rejuvenate style's possibilities, even as they point to the limits of style's demonstrative reticence in the world of political rights.

But how does this example of imaginary identity joining to the reality of public institutions play out for a white male author: an author apparently endorsed by the existing grammar and institutional status quo, and one for whom the impossible demand of style – to have a voice and to organise other voices – has been genealogically folded into the authority of what Roland Barthes has called *white writing*? Although desiccation is hinted at in Barthes' formulation of this late-modern emergence (the *white* writer is excluded from having a living voice), the paradoxically generative form of sterility it describes, 'without eloquence or ornament', is rarely connected back to hysterical embodiment.⁴¹

With this in mind, I shall conclude this essay by considering Ben Lerner's third autobiographical fiction *The Topeka School* (2019).⁴² Lerner is a Programme-era 'auto-bardolator', in Mark McGurl's phrase, for whom expression of direct life experience is culturally unwarranted.⁴³ Lacking explicit ethnic, racial or working-class identity, he is compelled into

explorations of narrative technique as a means of diagnosing his own privilege – the privilege of having a body whose cultural labour has not exacted a high cost, but which lives in-relation to (at the expense of) other bodies for whom the cost has been very great indeed. This diagnosis is most self-consciously articulated through sex. For example, in his second novel *10.04*, Lerner had his narrator attempt to conceive a child in friendship – which is to say, without assuming the unwanted mantle of fatherhood. And *The Topeka School* begins by ridiculing a young Adam’s (Lerner’s alter ego) masculinity: his girlfriend, Amber, would rather jump into a lake than listen to him talk. This same novel ends with an older Adam going to protest against the policies of Donald Trump, accompanied by his daughters – it is clear that were he accompanied by sons the meaning would be entirely different. Lerner presents himself as an author in search of an alternative sexual script. But he is also damned to an inhibiting knowingness. He knows that his ambition to save his daughters from the marriage economy is neither original nor sufficient to rescue himself from privilege; similarly, he knows that the clever restraint of *white writing* cannot be disrupted without the risk of rebounding into sanctioned sincerity and suspicious time-liness: the deathly opportunism of only saying the right (already endorsed) thing. This is the dilemma announced on the novel’s final page:

One of the organizers stood on a stone bench and yelled “Mic check”, and we all yelled it back. The “human microphone”, the “people’s mic”, wherein those gathered around a speaker repeat what the speaker says in order to amplify a voice without permit-requiring equipment. It embarrassed me, it always had, but I forced myself to participate, to be a part of a tiny public speaking, a public learning slowly how to speak again, in the middle of the spread. (282)

Flaubert has been cancelled many times, most impressively by Joyce, so this ending invokes a tradition in itself. Lerner’s sentimental education apparently inverts Flaubert’s: instead of psychosexual impotence which doubles as a stylistic withdrawal from the accomplishment of narrative authority, we arrive at a moment of apparent integration of the familial and social, and the promise of a non-hysterical articulation of a political position in the world. Adam’s ‘embarrassment’ as he embarks on the work of choric sentiment recalls Frédéric’s pleasurable humiliation. But whereas Flaubert’s novel ends with dissociation from the social scene, and the genre of realism, here the suggestion is that we might enter both more fully and arrive, finally, at the *littérature engagée*. Flaubert breached the third person pronoun with the rumour of a pathological ‘I’, and, as we have seen, Brophy split the ‘I’ into a ‘he’ and ‘she’. Lerner, unusually, holds out the possibility of a ‘we’ style, yet hesitates before its accomplishment. There is a discrepancy in the object of collective ambition which remains significant to the overall predicament of style.

Specifically, Adam's family's protest is foreshadowed by a protest against Adam and his poetry, and the privileged worldview it is seen to encode. This entanglement plays out through dramas of generation and language in structurally predictable, but historically specific ways. That Adam's life is not his own is made most explicit when Lerner grants alternating chapters to Adam's parents, Jonathan and Jane. Indeed it is striking throughout his three novels how often Lerner afflicts his male protagonist with conspicuous environments of care: psychotherapist parents, psychotherapist parents' friends, school coaches, poet mentors, artist friends, teachers and prestigious grant givers, various inductors into Spanish, a literary agent. Taken together, his novels replay the great social neurosis of having missed out on experience, specifically that of the War; except, interestingly, it is Adam's parents who occupy the most familiar white-American terrain of prosperity and guilt, traumatised into pleasure by the aftereffects of European and Pacific devastation. Their friend Klaus is the Holocaust survivor who chastens them with history, even as they project into the future their schemes for social amelioration. They are baby boomers, in short, though also the cybernetic generation: their Topeka School Foundation is an academic facility for 'milieu' treatment, a seedbed for the networking of nature and culture, combining experimental behaviourism with neurophysiology.

One obvious consequence of Lerner-Adam narrating his parents' sex lives is that it exemplifies the parthogenetic fantasy. The author gives birth to his own parents; he is before and after them, expressing a narrative power which withdraws from life and at the same time demands to organise it. It may be assumed that he wants to separate himself from their legacy by exposing their fallibility. But this wish is underwritten by a further complicity. The figure of the parents' professional failure, Darren, the adoptee who does not integrate into the Foundation's experimental scene, survives to haunt Adam's literary accomplishment. Darren is one of those who protest Adam's poetry reading:

Now I am going to show you a picture of one of the protesters. Darren is heavier than the last time you saw him, bearded, almost certainly armed, although no printing is visible in the photograph; he is wearing the red baseball cap, holding his sign in silence. If your eyes were to meet, only the little mimic spasms would indicate recognition. What is happening in this moment? What are the characters thinking and feeling? Tell me what led up to this scene? (275)

Of course, we have never seen Darren, except as filled-in by our imaginations. And the prospect of photographic objectivity seems intended to mock the dream of narrative omniscience just as those successive questions gesture at a privacy we cannot, and perhaps are not entitled to, survey. What is first presented as an irony of plot – Darren, a figure from childhood, suddenly returned – becomes linguistically and stylistically significant when

Adam, having become a first-person narrator in this final section of the novel, recycles the bio-materialist language of his parents' Foundation: 'only the little mimic spasms would indicate recognition'. This is how we see when objects are broken down elementally, understood physiologically in terms of interactive intensities and registrations of biological quanta.

Ruth Leys has usefully traced the transplantation of affect theory from psychological and neurological disciplines into the Humanities. According to Leys, this has led in recent years to an increased willingness to do away with meaningful objects of cognition, including the fantasy objects of psychoanalysis beloved of Brophy, in favour of a neuropathic literalism: an anti-Cartesian materialism which refutes the relational complexity of subject and object in the name of affirmative feedback rituals.⁴⁴ When eclipsed in this fashion by a science that prefers brain states to psychopathological scenes, style is rendered suspiciously dualistic – its insistence on the linguistic displacement of reticent objects a hindrance to the registering of autonomic affects. The apposite motif in *The Topeka School* is 'the spread': an 'interscholastic debating technique of marshaling more evidence that the other team can respond to within the allotted time ...' Described by Lerner as 'a glossolalic ritual', the spread operates according to pre-conscious transmissions, a series of physiological endorsements which bypass human-subject level intention and relation. It is not a matter of conveying knowledge with distorting speed, but of conveying speed itself as a performance of power. The semiotics of speech and language are reduced to the effects of neurological stimulation. Adam recognises this power in the timing of Darren's 'little mimic spasms' as well as in his dying grandfather's 'little linguistic phosphenes' (22–3, 236).

This is not simply the self-conscious powerplay of a high-school debater, it is the condition of all America: 'even before the twenty-four-hour news cycle, twitter storms, algorithms, trading, spreadsheets, the DDoS attack, Americans were getting "spread" in their daily lives; meanwhile their politicians went on speaking slowly, slowly about values utterly disconnected from their policies' (24). Lerner is a theory-literate writer, recycling ideas from Jonathan Crary on the relative autonomy of vision from what is seen, and Brian Massumi on the affective paradox of Ronald Reagan as the 'great communicator' (126).⁴⁵ Most importantly, however, Adam's parents' Foundation stands at the heart of this discursive ascendancy: their failure with Darren the significant oversight replayed throughout the novel, including in the final scene.

Darren is objector to – not object of – Adam's artistic career on account of his expulsion from a teenage party. This is where Adam boldly transfers 'the spread' from his debating career into his performance poetry, concocting a sound art without object, which is then dangerously identified with by Darren. The outsider Darren is momentarily assimilated to the corporate

speech of the event, but his ‘little mimic spasms’ do not adjust themselves within acceptable forms of social interaction. What Adam views as pushing the idiosyncrasy of style to its linguistic limit (‘in its abstract capacity [...] a grammar of pure possibility’ (256)), becomes, in the shape of Darren’s inaccessible experience, a-symbolic violence. The corporate social body, as the autonomic system of physiological stimulations with no agreed object, explodes; the experimental ‘milieu’ fissures at the point of its exemplary functioning.

Because the ‘human microphone’ at the end of the novel also insists on the power of social mimicry, it recalls this earlier disaster, and raises the prospect of an articulation and amplification of identity in significant autonomy from any meaningful political object. Is this a purely technocratic event in other words, a ‘glossolalic ritual’, the sacrificial matter of which is Darren’s body? Or does ‘learning slowly how to speak again’ promise a stay against the over-articulation of the age? But ‘human’ slowness has already been demeaned elsewhere in the novel as a deception infiltrated by conservatives who nonetheless avail of the spread – who exist, like Ronald Reagan, as figures of dissonant stupidity.

I suggest that this unresolvable question concerning the potential restitution of a meaningful object to the terms of human relation stands as an encumbrance upon the novel’s finished form. Tellingly, Lerner doesn’t know what to do formally with Darren. He is held apart in separate inter-chapters, his voice italicised, and his language forced into a generic outsider idiom: ‘*he believed he felt the presence of other gazes on his face*’ (3). What does it mean to *believe one feels*? Elsewhere we are told that Darren remembers ‘*in the first and third person simultaneously*’ (186). The suggestion is psychopathological (is Darren paranoid?), but also literary, insinuating the novelistic accomplishment of free indirect discourse while also marking its impossibility at the very edge of the novel’s authority. Lerner does not use the term hysteria except as a throwaway, yet his reticent ‘I’ at the end of the novel protests the symbolic resolution it hopes to announce. Holding out the possibility that Adam’s privileged body might affirmatively dissolve within a collective voice, the failure exemplified by Darren’s apartness returns the author, and us, to style’s interminable predicament.

Notes

1. Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* [1869 edition], trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2004).
2. Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974) quoted in Hayden White, ‘The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation: Marx and Flaubert’, in Leonard B. Meyer and Berel Lang (eds), *The Concept of Style* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), pp. 279–98; 284.

3. Hayden White, 'The Problem of Style in Realistic Representation: Marx and Flaubert', pp. 296–7.
4. Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, selected, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller (Oxford: Picador, 2001), p. 97.
5. 'Hysteria! Why should this physiological mystery not form the base and foundation of a literary work ... expressed in women ... manifested in nervous men by every kind of impotence and also by the aptitude for every kind of excess'. Charles Baudelaire on *Madame Bovary*, quoted in Michael Comenetz, 'Necessity and Hysteria: Ancient Light on Baudelaire', 2015. <https://michaelcomenetz.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/necessity-and-hysteria-ancient-light-on-baudelaire/> [Date accessed 1 March 2021]. Margaret Gilman makes the claim that Flaubert admitted his identification with Emma only after reading Baudelaire's review. *Baudelaire the Critic* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), p. 99.
6. Brigid Brophy, *In Transit: A Trans-sexual Adventure* (London: Penguin, 1969). Subsequent editions alter the subtitle. See, for example, *In Transit: An Heroi-Cyclic Novel* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2002).
7. While the term 'autofiction' is a currently popular import from the French of Serge Doubrovsky (see 'Autobiographie/verité/psychanalyse', in S. Doubrovsky (ed.), *Autobiographiques: De Corneille à Sartre* (Paris: PU de France, (1988), pp. 61–79), I am using the term less specifically to nominate fictions which expose, albeit with some dissimulation, the authorial personality.
8. After Bakhtin, we can say that the stylistic unity of the work cannot be singly identified with any of the subordinate unities within the work, including the 'direct authorial narration', or the presumed authorial voice. Michael Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 262.
9. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 15.
10. On the history of hysteria: Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965). On hysteria's persistence within psychoanalysis: Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition* (London: Penguin, 2000) and Patricia Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (New York: Routledge, 2010). On its aesthetic uses: Elaine Showalter, *Histories* (New York: Picador, 1997).
11. See Sianne Ngai for a recent characterization of 'cultural work' and the feminization of modern labour. Ngai associates this history to the aesthetic mode of 'zaniness' rather than hysteria, though a genealogical relation between the two terms is quite discernible. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 206–9.
12. John Guillory, 'Monuments and Documents: Panofsky on the Object of Study in the Humanities', *History of the Humanities*, 1 (2016), pp. 9–30, 25.
13. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 6–7.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
16. Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 19.

17. D. W. Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 48 (1966), pp. 368–72, 369.
18. D. W. Winnicott, 'The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification', in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), pp. 86–95, 97, 89.
19. Juliet Mitchell, 'Theory as an Object', *October*, 113 (2005), pp. 27–38, 33.
20. *Ibid.*, p.36.
21. Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, p. 326.
22. Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège de France 1973-4*, trans. G. Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 254.
23. The idea that style itself is an 'almost nothing' pathology is traceable to Flaubert's ambition to write a novel with 'almost no subject'. Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, p. 213. See also the Introduction to this special issue.
24. Sigmund Freud, 'First Lecture', *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Standard Edition*, Vol. 11, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1909), pp. 1–56.
25. Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 13.
26. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Idiot in the Family: Gustave Flaubert 1821-1857*, Vol. 1, trans. C. Cosman (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 13, 18; *L'Idiot de la famille*, Vol. 2, (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 1739.
27. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016).
28. Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist: In Praise of Ronald Firbank* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000 [1973]).
29. The most influential text joining social critique to critique of emerging literary modes in the American 1970s was probably Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979). Other similar works included Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Jim Houghan, *Decadence: Radical Nostalgia, Narcissism and Decline* (New York: Morrow, 1975); and Tom Wolfe, 'The "Me" Decade and the Third Awakening', *New York Magazine*, 23 August (1976), pp. 26–40. For a discussion of this 1970s trend see Imogen Tyler, 'From "The Me Decade" to "The Me Millennium": The Cultural History of Narcissism', *The International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.3 (2007), pp 342–62; and Julie Walsh, *Narcissism and Its Discontents* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).
30. Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1979), pp. 3, 7, 20.
31. Firbank, however, does make mention of a 'Fraulein Pappenheim' in his novel *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, a personage bearing the same name as Ur-hysterical, 'Anna O', which suggests his own archly hysterical mode. Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 217.
32. Brigid Brophy, *The Finishing Touch* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013) p. 15.
33. Ronald Firbank, *Three Novels* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 222.
34. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 18.
35. For a discussion of Freud's thoughts on pronouns and pivoting on verbs, which Brophy indirectly cites, including 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' and 'A Child is Being Beaten', see John Forrester, *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980), pp. 142–6.

36. Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), pp. 519–31.
37. I refer to David Shields's popular *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).
38. Siri Hustvedt, 'Knausgaard Writes Like a Woman', 2015. <https://lithub.com/knausgaard-writes-like-a-woman/> [Date accessed 28 February 2021].
39. Patricia Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, p. 53.
40. Patricia Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender*, p. 242. See also Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Jacqueline Rose, 'Who Do You Think You Are? Jacqueline Rose on Trans', *London Review of Books*, 38.9 (2016), pp. 3–13.
41. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 86.
42. Ben Lerner, *The Topeka School* (London: Granta, 2019).
43. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 77–127.
44. Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
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