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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

The Essay as Pleasure-Text:Explorations Practical and Theoretical

by

Don Randall

A THESIS

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(SIGNED) Don Randall

Don Randall

PERMANENT ADDRESS:

12-10612-97 avenue

Edmonton, Alberta

T5K 0B8

DATED September 4, 1990

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Essay as Pleasure-Text: Explorations Practical and Theoretical" submitted by Don Randall in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

C. Bullock

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C. Bullock

Supervisor

.....

J. Wilbé

.....

A. Purdy

Date... September 4, 1990 .....

Abstract

This thesis examines the essay as a form of writing produced for the pleasure of its writer and its reader. The essay as pleasure-text is envisioned, theoretically, as a celebration of literate activity. It finds its genesis in the enjoyments of reading, enjoyments which are reproduced and renewed, by a reader who is now a writer, and offered to other readers. It is a convivial, recreational text which demands, for its success, a body-oriented discursive strategy. The body, site of self-engaged reading and writing, serves as the principal mediator of textual pleasure.

In the composition of the texts which make up this thesis, theory is embodied as textual practice, that is, submitted to a process by which it is tested, extended, reworked; theory is obliged to prove itself productive. In each of its instances (including introduction and conclusion) the writing strives to produce, to exemplify, the object of its analysis.

The body of the thesis begins with "Une interrogation portée à mon plaisir: The Essay as a Pleasure-Text," an investigation of the essayists whose writing informs and orients my theory. "My Moby-Dick" is a writing of the creative interaction of the reader and the text. "Of Digression" examines digression as experience and as textual practice. "Essaying Male Feminism" is a semi-autobiographical essay which interrogates the

possibility of male feminism. Considered together the essays describe a developing process of self-engaged, pleasure-seeking, critical writing.

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I. Introduction

Four essays, of diverse (even divergent) subject matter, compose this thesis. The reader should not, therefore, consider these texts as necessary, logical steps in an argumentative development. This is not to say, however, that each should be read and evaluated independently, in and of itself. These essays are all concerned with textual pleasure, of the reader and of the writer. They question, albeit indirectly and implicitly, the conception of criticism as a discipline, as an objective, dispassionate, systematic, utilitarian practice which functions under authority. They constitute, in a certain sense, a criticism of criticism, in that they focus upon an issue which criticism tends, for the most part, to ignore.

Pleasure, of course, has become recently—indeed has always been—a matter of critical concern. But I find that, too often, pleasure becomes an object, a thing to be considered apart. To put it another way, it becomes the pleasure *of someone else*: the pleasure of a writer (who is not the critic); the pleasure of a hypothetical reader (who is not the critic); the pleasure of a reader (who is *now* the critic) which inspires but *precedes* the production of criticism. Where, I ask myself, is the critic's pleasure, right now, as he writes his reading? Where is the pleasure his writing *produces* for himself and for his reader? These, I think, are questions which criticism rarely addresses. My essays speak a desire for a critic who enjoys his criticism.

Of course, there are good—no, let's say practical—reasons for leaving pleasure out of criticism. Pleasure is not logical, predictable, fully explicable and justifiable. Nor is it universal and transhistorical; it is, in all its instances, the pleasure of someone in particular at a certain moment. And it is, moreover, impossible to imagine in the absence of the body, in the absence of the historical materiality of the self. To risk a definition, pleasure is a function of an embodied self in process. It therefore raises troubling questions with regard to the production of knowledge: Who knows? By means of what (self-engaging) experiences or experiments? Is knowledge separable, distinguishable, from the individuality of its producer? To what degree does it participate in the unstable, changeful historicity of its producer? To what degree is it inflected by desire and enjoyment? Is knowledge affective? erotic?

To bring critical knowledge into confrontation with pleasure, to subject criticism to the questioning of pleasure, I choose the essay, a form of writing which is critically oriented, but which typically foregrounds the uncertain and unstable speaking subject. In describing the essay and the essayistic subject as I do, I am affiliating myself with what is sometimes known as the Montaignian tradition. I willingly accept the affiliation. But I do think I have described the *true* essay, the one that knows the meaning of its own name. The essay essays. It is not an

authoritative dissertation; it is the speech of the researcher who is still in the lab.

As Roland Barthes has said, the essay is "an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing" (457). Its ambiguity arises with the introduction of this "writing," which Barthes understands in a somewhat special way. Barthes is concerned, here, not with the fact of writing but with the act of writing. Writing is not a docile mediator, but a contentious force. It is an action of a desiring subject, an action which engages the delight and distaste, the diversions and aversions and perversions, of this subject. Analysis which takes shape in writing is the desirous pursuit of knowledge, a pursuit which involves the knower in the known. Essaying, whether as a reader or as a writer, is moreover, as Virginia Woolf suggests, a critical exercise one undertakes for pleasure (216). Pleasure characterizes the activity. It marks its successes, its attainments, however partial or momentary these may be.

As Barthes and Woolf both suggest, the essay brings critical knowledge and the art of writing together, in the same place, on the same stage. In this manner, it collapses the distance which normally stands between criticism and literature. The essay is a peculiarly auto-analytic genre, one that is "always already" criticized, analyzed, theorized by its practitioners, within the essayistic texts themselves; it is a doubled, dialectical composition in which commentary, theory, criticism—usually understood to

be the secondary and subsequent—emerge simultaneously with the production of the primary text. I have therefore chosen to explore the essay from the inside, believing that the puzzle of the genre is in the confrontation (Barthes), the magic relation (Woolf 217), of critical knowledge and writing. To be properly understood, this relation must be experienced, must be reproduced. Moreover, as one concerned with pleasure, I cannot afford to leave the writing out, cannot afford to be a critic who (paradoxically) does not write. Essayistic pleasure is in the writing of knowledge, that is, in the writing itself and in writing's relation with knowledge and knowledge production.

My first essay examines the essayistic texts which have served as models for my own writing. It is "une interrogation portée à mon plaisir," in that it is a questioning of my pleasure (what pleases? how?) and a process of questioning which pursues its course according to my pleasure. I see the text as a return which also marks a new beginning. It began as a short research paper which preceded by two or three months the first-draft attempt at "My *Moby-Dick*." It has, however, grown to more than three times its original length. In developing and expanding my ideas on textual pleasure, I have remained faithful to my original notion: pleasure is an effect of a bodily engagement with a text one is reading or writing. The essay isolates and examines the textual practices which, by engaging the reading and writing body, yield pleasure. It

orients my essaying of textual pleasure, but it is also, in itself, a pleasure-text.

"My *Moby-Dick*" began with a critical comment upon a seminar paper. I had written on *Moby-Dick*, and had produced a rather uncomfortable mixture of semiological and reader-response criticism. "Well," my teacher responded, "it's certainly enthusiastic..."—("a bit purple, but okay," a fellow student had said). "...And a semiological reading is very interesting. But you know, I really appreciate the kinesthetic element, the way Melville involves us—concretely, practically—with the business of the book." Yes, me too, I thought, and set about to stew the suggestion for a time. A few months later, when my "Modern Essay" course offered the opportunity to write "an original essay," I knew what I would do.

By then, I had already conceived my master's thesis project as an exploration of the pleasure of the text. And I had concluded, already,that this pleasure begins with a reader and an active reading. Semiology, I thought, might still serve, but only in a secondary, subordinate role. I resolved to emphasize reader response and explore kinesthetic involvement, to find the reader and take him a-whaling.

"Of Digression" is a somewhat inefficient, English rendering of a title conceived in French. "De la digression" would have been better—obvious objections aside—in that it captures a desired ambivalence: it can mean "*concerning*

digression," but also "*some* (an unspecified quantity of) digression." "My *Moby-Dick*," I had noted, is characterized by a mingling of the matter and the manner, by a mimetic urge which seeks to reproduce, to a degree, the Melvillian text. Following upon that, I wanted to analyze digression, but at the same time to write, to produce, to stage it. The essay is more loosely structured than the first. It is intended as a variation on a theme, as a text that erringly explores, returns and begins again.

As I pursued the writing, I came more and more to perceive in the digressive urge a manifestation of the desire to find the self in language, in language which is "the field of the Other." I knew that "the Other" and "the other," as they function in psychoanalytic discourse, are not the same. But I had (and still have) trouble dissociating the two. Digression, which I had been quick to associate with transgression, began to appear as a seeking of the place of the other, and —at least potentially—as a trespass.

"Of Digression" raised uncertainties and misgivings with regard to a proposed feminist essay, uncertainties and misgivings which a developing awareness of contemporary feminist issues—the issue of "male feminism" among them—did much to confirm. The project of essaying feminism was reconstrued, therefore, as an essaying of male feminism. This shift did not resolve my doubts, but did make them quite a bit more manageable, more accessible to a

constructive, generative, hopefully clarifying examination. The contemporary phenomenon of male feminism, together with the debate it inspires, provided me with a social referent. It allowed me to measure myself, to position myself, in relation to something "out there," something that, without too great a fear of trespassing, I could claim as my proper sphere. And I hoped that male feminism, and feminist criticism of it, could serve to mediate and to clarify my own relation with feminism.

But what is the role of pleasure in all of this? Quite simply, the feminist text has been for me a site of pleasure. Feminist writing challenges, disrupts me, but it also pleases. Perhaps it pleases *because* it challenges and disrupts, because it provokes that loss or collapse of consistent selfhood which is *jouissance*. In "Essaying Male Feminism," I have attempted to write my pleasure and my (not necessarily unpleasant) disruption. A question lingered in my mind: to what degree is pleasure an agent in the transformation, reconstitution and regeneration of the self? I have tried to write an affirmative response. This last essay marks the end of a writing process, but also looks forward to more writing, more pleasure.

The order of presentation of my texts is determined not simply by chronological, but also by historical, considerations. As a pleasure-text, the essay is characterized by a foregrounding of the writing subject. This subject has a particular style; he handles words in a

certain way, and does so quite continuously. Yet he changes through time, and his writing registers these changes. As a reader of my own work, I find, for example, that the writer of "My *Moby-Dick*" sees things differently, and sees different things, than the writer of "Essaying Male Feminism." The former is not at all concerned with examining Melville's text as an adventure of the "phallogocentric" imaginary; whereas, the latter (I speak with certainty) would be inclined to do just that. Of course, I do still recognize myself in "My *Moby-Dick*." But it nonetheless helps me to see how much, and in what ways, my writerly concerns have changed. In revising each of my essays, therefore, I try to produce a better version of the first writing, but try also to resist the temptation to "update." I don't want to lose the moment of the writing. I want to retain, as much as possible, the writing-right-now of that time, that situation, that writer. Essaying, as I understand it, is a process. By experiencing the essayistic process, moment by moment, as a reader or as a writer, I experience the pleasure of the text.

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II. 'Une interrogation portée à mon plaisir': The Essay as a Pleasure-Text

My interest in the essay as a pleasure-text was first aroused some time ago while I was researching a paper for a graduate course. I'll try, without too much "fictionalizing," to re-capture the makings of that moment.

Following up a professorial lead, I investigate "Hearsay Evidence and Second-Class Citizenship," an essay on the essay by Chris Anderson. I learn that "the essay is flourishing outside of academe" (301). I read on. The writer emphasizes the "amateurism and democratic character" of the genre (305), its full accessibility to "the reader of common sense" (303). He goes on to suggest that, for the professional scholar, whose writing most typically takes shape as an "academic article," the essay might provide "a place of refuge," an escape from contemporary poststructuralist preoccupations and the rigorous, highly specialist debate these engender. Interesting. In pursuing this argumentative line, Anderson concedes that Roland Barthes, specifically, together with other unnamed "pre-eminent practitioners of poststructuralist theory" write an admirably subtle, elusive and unconventional prose, but asserts that this prose is "unessayistic, perhaps because it is more ambitious than the essay can ever be" (305).

I look up from the page, recalling a passage from Barthes's inaugural lecture to the College de France:

> For though my career has been academic, I am without the usual qualifications for entrance into that career. And though it is true that I long wished to inscribe my work within the field of science—literary, lexicological, and sociological—I must admit that I have produced only essays, an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing. (457)

Barthes represents himself in a way that coincides quite nicely with Anderson's profile of the essayist. He is, by his own report, a "doubtful" (*incertain*) and "patently impure fellow" situated not quite inside and not quite outside of academe (457, 58). In his writing, he has aspired to science but produced "*only* essays." ...I hear echoes of *Julius Caesar*: *and yet he is ambitious.*

I come to Anderson's text believing, as Anderson seems to, that the essayist, the true essayist, is not an authority, that he is not the master of his material; the essayist is one who essays, tests, experiments. But, I wonder now, can he not be ambitious in his experiments? Or does he, by being ambitious, risk becoming authoritative? I wonder, too, if there is not some other aspect of the essay form which Anderson has passed over, some other aspect which would account for Barthes, "pre-eminent poststructuralist" *and essayist*?

I return to my reading. The principal essayists to whom Anderson refers, Chesterton and Emerson, are unfamiliar to me. But there is a mention of Virginia Woolf, whose work I know quite well. Yes, she is an amateur, and something of a democrat, I suppose. Yes, she does address a common-sensical

common reader. Yet Woolf, as I recall, does not discuss the essay in the same way Anderson does.

I re-read Woolf's "The Modern Essay," and find, in the second paragraph, the passage I am looking for:

> The principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with the last. (CR 216)

Essayistic amateurism, in this light, takes on an entirely different color: the amateur is, etymologically speaking, an *amator*—an erotically inspired being, an enthusiast, a lover. But how does this *amator*, playing Viviane to our Merlin, weave us willingly under a spell? "What art," asks Woolf,

> can the essayist use...to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life...? He must Know—that is the first essential—how to write. His learning may be profound..., but in an essay it must be so fused with the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture. (217)

Writing, then, is the pleasure-yielding magic. I imagine now a pen which, like a wand, transforms what it touches. Knowledge, which takes shape in essay form, must be so touched and transformed; it must be suffused with writing magic. It occurs to me that Woolf's conception of the essay is similar to Barthes's "ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing." Woolf speaks of knowledge (the thing to be produced) rather than analysis (the process of its

production). Her vision is less confrontational, less dialectical. Yet both writers allude to a struggle for synthesis. Barthes does so more explicitly. Woolf suggests, imagistically, that there is a potential violence or obstreperousness in the discourse of knowledge—facts can jut out, dogmas can tear a surface—an obstreperousness which essayistic writing must charm and subdue.

On the topic of the essay, I now conclude, Barthes and Woolf seem able to converse. Can they agree that, as Woolf has suggested, the essay is a writing which is, and must be, pleasure productive? It seems likely. Barthes's writings, which he describes as essays, examine and produce, analyze and write, textual pleasure. In speaking and in writing, he has, he confesses, "a personal inclination to escape intellectual difficulty through an interrogation of [his] own pleasure" (IL 458). What he seeks is "*sapientia*: no power, a little knowledge, a little wisdom, and as much flavor as possible" (IL 478). Perhaps then, pleasure, the textual pleasure offered by the essayist-amateur, is the aspect which Anderson's description has left out. Perhaps I can say—with pleasure!—that Barthes *is* an essayist.

An interrogative, investigative process similar to the one I've just sketched eventually led to a short research paper, "The Essay as a Pleasure-Text," concerned with isolating and examining the textual tactics of essayistic pleasure production. In this present writing, I want to essay my earlier ideas, to test them upon a broader, more

extensive selection of essayists and essays. I'm not really considering a tradition, at least not in the genealogical sense. (Pleasure, after all, makes its own moments.) My essayistic hedonists are related, each to the other, in that they all manage to find the *topos*, the topic, the place of pleasure. I do try, however, to establish and maintain a degree of chronological linearity: I have a Frenchman at either end, a few Englishmen between. And, in a place which is difficult to pinpoint, I have an Englishwoman looking into the mirror of the pleasure-text and seeing that there are several faces there.

The essay begins as do the *Essays*, with Montaigne's "I am myself the matter of my book" ("To the Reader" 2). Woolf responds to this self-textualization with a query:

> as we watch with absorbed interest the enthralling spectacle of a soul living openly beneath our eyes, the question frames itself, is pleasure the end of all? (CR 69)

As I begin to evaluate Montaigne's declaration in the context of Woolf's question, I remember, first of all, how much of Montaigne's book is the transubstantiated matter of his reading. Appropriating a key Montaignian image, that of the honey-bee, John O'Neill writes,

> Montaigne is never far away from his books, from his philosophers, historians and poets. He moves among them like a bee among the flowers, alighting here and there, a buzzing, busy presence borrowing what he needs in order to remake himself in the 'Essays'. Thus he combines work and pleasure, leaving for his readers the same bodily and spiritual recreation. (28-29)

In Montaigne's texts, a reader's pleasure re-manifests

itself in a writing which offers a reader's pleasure to another. This is not to assert, very precariously, that Montaigne's love of books and reading is unequivocal. No writer I know is more contemptuous of bookishness, nor more severely critical of a dependence on "authorities." Yet his writing is peppered with quotations, adaptations and anecdotal narratives from classical works; his claim, often reiterated, that he forgets a prodigious amount of what he reads, must be received along with the ever-present reminders of the prodigious amount that he remembers. What emerges most clearly is an ethic of reading which treats the reading act as a type of experience rather than as a substitute for experience. Montaigne reads, as he writes, "for recreation," and anticipates and answers objections thus:

> If anyone tells me that it is degrading the Muses to use them only as a plaything and a pastime, he does not know, as I do, the value of pleasure, play, and pastime. (III.3.629)

In "Montaigne," Woolf formulates her subject's reading ethic with the assertion that we should read "not to acquire knowledge, not to earn a living, but to extend our intercourse beyond our own time and province" (CR 65). Reading, for Montaigne, is a distinctly social and convivial recreation—a sharing of ideas, a conversation mediated by print. Plutarch is not an authority, but a bountiful friend, one whose ideas have become, through habitual familiarity and accord, indistinguishable from Montaigne's own:

> He is so universal and so full that on all

> occasions, and however eccentric the subject you have taken up, he makes his way into your work and offers you a liberal hand, inexhaustible in riches and embellishments. It vexes me that I am so greatly exposed to pillage by those who frequent him. (III.5.666)

Similarly, Aristotle's word is not necessarily to be preferred to that of an unnamed man encountered at a Tuscan inn. Montaigne has conversed with both, and, as he somewhat abashedly avows, "Anyone I regard with attention easily imprints on me something of himself" (III.5.667). Recreational, conversational reading is not submission to authority but rather an act of desire which seizes upon texts according to the indices of pleasure. One likens oneself to the texts one likes; one receives the imprint of a text imperfectly and idiosyncratically traced upon one's person. This reading process begins to constitute the body as a text and creates the possibility of the consubstantiality of the writer and the book.

"No pleasure," writes Montaigne,

> has any savor for me without communication. Not even a merry thought comes to my mind without my being vexed at having produced it alone without anyone to offer it to. (III.9.754)

Writing, I think, begins just here, as a response to a convivial urge. One writes as one reads, in order to converse. One forges, therefore, a conversational style. Montaigne, who chooses to write in Gascon French (although scholarly, exclusive Latin is his first language) speaks himself frankly in a "vulgar" tongue, engages his reader with lively figures, a wealth of colloquialism and the most

pungent vernacular. The choice of Gascon is, tendentially, democratic—to give Anderson his due—but it is, most pertinently, the choosing of a convivial speech, a language of community. The "common" tongue is a shared currency: it is the language of Montaigne—I am speaking now of the place, the estate, rather than of the man—the language which abounds, which passes from hand to hand, and bears witness to its busy life in the traces, the polish and the grime, its diverse handlers leave upon it. Gascon is not fully constituted; it is an evolving tongue, a language energetically engaged with the process of its becoming. In choosing it, Montaigne chooses to engage in a day-to-day social experiment, a kind of community project.

As O'Neill remarks in the passage already cited, Montaigne invites his reader to participate in the "bodily and spiritual recreation" of the essayistic process. Montaigne, himself, asserts that the continuity and integrity of his text requires an attentive, energetic, active reader:

> It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room. I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming. (III.9.761)

He adds, "perhaps I have some personal obligation to speak only by halves, to speak confusedly, to speak discordantly" (762), thus suggesting that his figurative, fragmented, digressive style is more demanding, more engaging for his

reader. The reader must supply half of the pleasure, half of the sense, must discover accord, sort through, pick and choose among the text's apparently chaotic heterogeneity; the reader must help to construct the text.

To ensure the most efficient circulation of pleasure between reader and reader, writer and reader, within the convivial textual space, some kind of currency or literary "legal tender" is required. This currency is a language minted in the body, that is, a sign system which bears the body's stamp. John O'Neill writes,

> The life of the 'Essays' lies in the joy of writing and the pleasure of reading.... Since reading and writing...are inseparable activities, we need to consider writing as a bodily art, aimed at and experiencing the same corporal integration and suffused pleasure as reading. (90-91)

Literate activity in the *Essays* is nearly always rendered in terms of enjoyable bodily activities: walking, climbing, rolling about, eating, drinking, and—the private, usually unmentionable pleasure—excreting: "Here you have...some excrements of an aged mind, now hard, now loose, and always undigested" (III.9.721). Montaigne publishes himself as a thinking body, being convinced that "the bodily and emotional frame of thought provides a transitive and intersubjective basis of understanding" (O'Neill 93).

Of Montaigne's project, Woolf concludes: "these essays are an attempt to communicate a soul" (CR 66). In speaking thus of a "soul," Woolf adopts a vocabulary that is recognizably Montaignian. What must be added, however, is

that this "soul" is always, in all its manifestations, intimately entangled with the body:

> It [the soul] has such a tight brotherly bond with the body that it abandons me at every turn to follow the body in its need. I take it aside and flatter it, I work on it, all for nothing. In vain I try to turn it aside from this bond,...if its companion has the colic, it seems to have it too. Even the activities that are peculiarly its own cannot then be aroused; they evidently smack of a cold in the head. There is no sprightliness in its productions if there is none in the body at the same time. (III.5.641)

In Woolf's own summary of Montaigne's scrupulously detailed record of himself, one finds not one instance in which the body has not taken centre stage:

> one wears silk stockings summer and winter; puts water in one's wine; has one's hair cut after dinner; must have glass to drink from; has never worn spectacles; has a loud voice; carries a switch in one's hand; bites one's tongue; fidgets with one's feet; is apt to scratch one's ears; likes meat to be high; rubs one's teeth with a napkin.... (CR 67)

The soul, it seems, *is like* the body; the body is the figure whose availability creates the possibility of the soul's construction within the space of discourse; the soul cannot make a social appearance except in bodily apparel. Montaigne, therefore, offers this body, whose experience is food and whose writing (often as not) is the well- or ill-digested excrement, this body whose beard has a peculiar tendency to absorb odors, whose penis is at times afflicted by kidney stones which block the passing of urine. This body is the "common human pattern" (III.13.857), common even in its peculiarity.

As I conceive it, the essay as a pleasure text is a Montaignian essay. In choosing the Montaignian essay as my paradigm, I am refusing an alternative, the Baconian essay. The refusal, like the choice, has its rationale. Quite simply, I find there is much instruction and, more pertinently, much authority, but very little pleasure in Lord Bacon's *Essays*. Bacon has been aptly named the father of the English essay, in that his writing has a distinctly paternalistic tone. Upon opening his book, I immediately sense that I am in the presence of an entitled public man, one who pronounces rather than converses, one who is a source of edicts rather than of opinions. The Baconian essay is, for its reader, a text to be received rather than essayed. To speak in Barthesian terms, I find that the text does not desire me. It is entire unto itself—self-sufficient, even peremptory. I am not asked to exercise myself upon it, to verify or to challenge its enunciations. My agreement is superfluous, my debate impertinent. The text is the production of one who knows more, better, already. The predicate of an authorized subject, it is truth *even before I read it*. I scratch my head, therefore, and wonder how this text can be construed as an *essay*, that is, as an attempt, a trial, an interrogation, an experiment.

"Of Truth" is, not surprisingly, the first of Bacon's texts. I read the opening lines:

> What is Truth; said jesting Pilate; And would not stay for an Answer. Certainly, there be, that delight in Giddinesse; And count it a Bondage, to fix a Beleefe;

> Affecting Free-will in Thinking, as well as in Acting.(5)

This writer will have none of Montaigne's playful scepticism. To delight in giddiness is to indulge "a naturall, though corrupt Love, of the *Lie* itself" (5). Pilate's insidious, subversive question is to be answered, and in no uncertain terms.

Bacon's last essay is entitled "Of Vicissitude of Things." I read the closing lines:

> But it is not good, to looke too long, upon these turning Wheeles of Vicissitude, lest we become Giddy. As for the Philology of them, that is but a Circle of Tales, and therefore not fit for this Writing. (238)

How utterly this writerly ethic opposes itself to that of Montaigne! For Montaigne, vicissitude is not only "of things," it is as much—or more—an attribute of the self. He therefore "seek[s] out change indiscriminately and tumultuously," gives himself, with smiling resignation, to the giddy pleasures of multitudinous distractions. His writings are, quite precisely, the "Circle of Tales" Bacon misprizes and despises. Bacon's essays begin now to appear as a correction of Montaigne's, as an attempt to contain the hedonistic and unruly essay within the rule of reason, as an attempt to re-establish the reasonable writing subject. This is not to suggest that reason and reasoning have no place in the essay of pleasure, but rather to suggest that reason should not be used to silence the appeals of appetite, imagination and desire. Privileged reason—or "right reason" as it is more commonly known—does not seek a new order so

much as it serves an Order which is already in place; "reason" and "truth" are, most commonly, the names which the voice of authority gives itself. This voice, while it may be edifying, is seldom pleasing. I hear in it the dry resonances of the *vox ex cathedra*. As a reading experience it smacks of church-going.

As one concerned with the pursuit of pleasure, I cannot help but think that the English essay gets off to a bad start. However, the writing of Joseph Addison, while it does not offer full-fledged specimens of the pleasure-text, marks a change for the better. As Woolf tells us, Addison is "attached...to certain standards of gentility, morality, and taste" (CR 102). Concerning this gentleman's essays, she concedes "that many are dull, others superficial, the allegories faded, the piety conventional, the morality trite" (107-08). And yet, Addison and his essays have some advantageous disadvantages for the pleasure-seeker. Though he has his Sir Roger, Addison himself has no title. Though he has a church and a churchman father and an Oxford education, he had no divine or secular *cathedra*—that is, no chair. His essays take their place comfortably in the pages of popular journals, and none are dedicated, as are Bacon's, to the right honorable, very good Lord, the Duke of Buckingham, his Grace, Lord High Admiral of England. For all his public concerns, Addison is essentially, irremediably, a private man, one who has a right to an opinion which can never be more than an opinion. Having, as a speaker, no

exceptional status, having ideas which must necessarily be open to debate, Addison is able to adopt a conversational style: "his essays at their best," writes Woolf, "preserve the very cadence of easy yet exquisitely modulated conversation" (105). With Addison, she adds, prose becomes prosaic, becomes "the medium which makes it possible for people of ordinary intelligence to communicate their ideas to the world" (108). Addison, the private man, has, moreover, something that Bacon disdains to have—a body. As Woolf says, in reading Addison

> We begin to take note of whims, fancies, peculiarities on the part of the essayist which light up the prim, impeccable countenance of the moralist and convince us that, however tightly he may have pursed his lips, his eyes are very bright and not so shallow after all. He is alert to his finger tips. Little muffs, silver garters, fringed gloves draw his attention.... (104)

As this passage begins to suggest, the Addison persona is predominantly visual, his "I" is for the most part an eye. Certainly, this eye is equipped with ears, but these last serve mainly as information gatherers in the service of an endless and energetic process of imaginative visualization. Addison's professed desire "to print my self out, if possible, before I die," is a desire to offer a record of "how much I have seen, read and heard" (Addison 59)—the order of these last three verbs is pertinent. Addison, as a writing body, has not the richness and variety of Montaigne, whose self possesses five fully-activated senses and a full range of minutely detailed bodily

processes. Yet, in the context of the English essay after Bacon, this scopic "I" is an important development.

The writer is the matter of Montaigne's book; similarly, a spectator produces *The Spectator*:

> I live in the world rather as a SPECTATOR of mankind, than as one of the species; by which means I have made my self a speculative Statesman, Soldier, Merchant and Artizan, without ever meddling with any practical part in life. (Addison 58)

Though I regret the essayist's claim to detachment and Enlightenment objectivity, I note that he does live *in* the world, not above it. A typical opening of an Addison paragraph offers a body, a place and a time: "As I was walking in the streets about a fortnight ago..." (67); "Going yesterday to dine with an old acquaintance..." (70). And on those occasions when the speaker is not himself present as a body in the world, there will always be another, a Sir Roger or a Sir Andrew, to fulfill the body's role. Addison's work is splendidly rich in personae which allow for that meddling with life's practicalities which the Spectator-persona is unwilling to undertake. Sir Roger de Coverly is certainly the most mobile and most physical of these: he goes everywhere, and jostles and bumps with the world wherever he goes. From his first appearance, Sir Roger manifests himself as something quite different from his Club companion, the journalistic "Looker-on"; he is

> what you call a fine Gentleman, had often supped with my Lord Rochester and Sir George Etherege, fought a Duel upon his first coming to town, and kicked Bully Dawson in a publick Coffee-house for calling him

Youngster. (61)

The Addison persona, whatever his name, is a man among men, except when he is a man among women. He is never alone, and his most common activities are smoking and listening, smoking and talking. Conviviality, whether it takes the form of conversation or controversy, is the dominant theme of Addison's essays. Many of these stage social gatherings and discussions—discussions which frequently arise in response to a reading of *The Spectator*. Each of the essays is, moreover, a portion of the on-going narration, discussion and debate which is *The Spectator*.

Perhaps the most important of Addison's personae are his reader interlocutors, the cordial or contentious readers whose responses provide very nearly half of *The Spectator*'s copy. Addison's staging of the reader emphasizes the conversational and convivial aspect of his essays. Similarly, such a practice posits an active reader, a reader who completes the writer's work, who assumes responsibility for the other half of the production and experience of the text. Most significantly, however, the reader whose response is writing confirms, I think, the notion that the act of writing originates in the act of reading, that writing, composition, the inscription of difference, is already there, at least potentially, in the reading act.

There is much of Bacon in Addison, but much too that is not Bacon. Addison's essays serve "the advancement of religion or learning," are "designed to discountenance vice

and ignorance, and support the interest of true wisdom and virtue," but they also "turn upon diverting subjects" (220). Addison presents himself as a Spectator, as an Enlightened subject who can distinguish himself from his objects. Yet he hungers for his objects. He manifests a desire to see all, show all, tell all, a desire which problematizes the unity and integrity of the writing subject. What emerges is a multifaceted selfhood, a self which is many and divided. The Spectator feels a desire for the writing of his alternate selves, while at the same time he feels the need for a certain degree of disavowal,

> because the dignity spectatorial would have suffered, had I published as from my self those several ludicrous compositions which I have ascribed to fictitious names and characters. (219)

The discourse of knowledge vies with the discourse of experience. Addison is not content with the distillations (of thought and experience), he wants to see and show a fair sampling of the mashes and the malts. Compared with Montaigne, however, Addison is very decorous, prudent and polite. He will not take upon himself and stage in his own person the hodge-podge of experience, the divisions and contradictions of his subjectivity. What he offers is a carefully managed masquerade, a gathering together of a good many peculiarities and foibles in appropriate costume and in appropriate milieux, a masquerade in which each costumed character is very much himself, and never other than himself.

Of William Hazlitt, Woolf writes, "his essays are emphatically himself. He has no reticence and he has no shame" (SCR 156). Yet she adds, "no one could read Hazlitt and maintain a simple and uncompounded idea of him" (157). He is

> ill conditioned yet high minded; mean yet noble; intensely egotistical yet inspired by the most genuine passion for the rights and liberties of mankind. (156)

Similarly,

> There is a stir and trouble, a vivacity and conflict in his essays as if the very contrariety of his gifts kept him on the stretch. He is always hating, loving, thinking, and suffering. He could never come to terms with authority or doff his own idiosyncrasy in deference to opinion. (163)

In characterizing Hazlitt as a tumultuously "twy-minded man" (157), as one who is ever at odds with himself and with the world, I believe Woolf hits the nail on the head. Yet I find that her sense of this twy-mindedness is somewhat too refined and spiritual for my tastes. For her, Hazlitt "was bitten by an abstract curiosity that would not let him rest in the contemplation of concrete beauty." He suffers, therefore, from a divided project, a divided career:

> To be a thinker and to express in the plainest and most accurate of terms "the reason of things," and to be a painter gloating over blues and crimsons, breathing fresh air and living sensually in the emotions—these were two different, perhaps incompatible ideals.... (158)

I, for my part, am inclined to envision things more basically and perhaps, more basely. As Woolf herself observes, "the body has a large share in everything Hazlitt

writes" (SCR 166). I conceive of Hazlitt as a man of appetite with digestive troubles, a description I offer both literally and metaphorically.

In "On Living to One's-Self" Hazlitt begins the writing by staging himself as a writer:

> I never was in a better place or humour than I am at present for writing on this subject. I have a partridge getting ready for my supper, my fire is blazing on the hearth, the air is mild for the season of the year, I have had but a slight fit of indigestion to-day (the only thing that makes me abhor myself), I have three hours good before me, and therefore I will attempt it. (24)

Blazing fire and mild weather figure here—bodily comforts and sensuous pleasures of any sort always merit a mention in Hazlitt—but charm of place and the resulting good humor begin with an anticipated partridge and are perturbed, though only slightly in this case, by a remembered indigestion. And it seems quite clear that the three hours set aside for writing, for recording the pleasures of "living to one's-self," represent, quite precisely, the preparation time of the partridge.

Food, for Hazlitt, links the pleasures of eating with the turmoil of indigestion. Hazlitt's life is, more than metaphorically, an oft-renewed journey—"he lived, one gathers, mostly at inns" (SCR 157)—and one of the most delightful features of the journey is the keen anticipation of

> what one shall have for supper when we get to our inn at night.... Every mile of the road heightens the flavour of the viands we expect at the end of it. (Hazlitt 75)

Hazlitt's food for thought is very often food: it is "a delicate speculation...to sit considering what we shall have for supper—eggs and a rasher, a rabbit smothered in onions, or an excellent veal-cutlet!" (76). His reading is an exercise in *gourmandise*: the *New Eloise*—read "over a bottle of sherry and a cold chicken"—is "a *bon bouche* to crown the evening with" (78); *Tom Jones* has "a different relish with it—'sweet in the mouth,' though not 'bitter in the belly'" (43). But there it is! that bitterness in the belly which, even in the enunciation of pleasure, insinuates itself. Indigestion, the sour or bilious disruption of Hazlitt's life (and writing style) is a particularizing malady which shapes experience:

> Suppose a man to labour under an habitual indigestion. Does it not oppress the very sun in the sky, beat down all his powers of enjoyment, and imprison all his faculties in a living tomb? (282-83)

By writing, Hazlitt seeks to transform the mixed and various matter of the world into the matter of William Hazlitt. The process is at times easeful and pleasant, at times disgruntled and petulant, dyspeptic. At all times, however, the nature of the process is determined by the man more than by the world. Hazlitt encounters a peevish child:

> and I saw in its frantic screams and gestures that great baby, the world, tumbling about in its swaddling-clothes, and tormenting itself and others for the last six thousand years! (274)

There is a good deal more of Hazlitt than of the world in this, and Hazlitt knows it:

> The only faculty I do possess is that of a certain morbid interest in things, which makes me equally remember or anticipate by nervous analogy whatever touches it. (272)

Though Hazlitt quite rightly describes himself as "a species by [him]self" (119), his peculiarity makes him all the more acutely aware of the changefulness and constitutional inadequacy of the human organism. He is aware of "the short-sightedness or capriciousness of the imagination": only one place, one scene, can take shape there at any given time; new objects replace and efface those which precede; "we cannot enlarge our conceptions we only shift our point of view" (79). And because there is more of imagination and desire in us than of reason and discernment, we are ourselves the measure by which we judge our experience. Great and little things therefore "find pretty much the same level in the mind of man" (104). Too easily, little things

> tease us out of our ordinary patience by their petty, incessant, insect warfare, buzzing about us and stinging us like gnats, so that we can neither get rid of nor grapple with them. (105)

Moreover,

> We turn our brain with straining at contradictions, and striving to make things what they are not, or, in other words, to subject the course of nature to our fantastical wishes. (111)

Similarly, objects which are distant in time or space please us because

> whatever is imperfectly discerned, the fancy pieces out at its leisure; and all but the

> present moment, but the present spot, passion claims for its own, and brooding over it with wings outspread, stamps it with an image of itself. (127)

It is impossible for us to free ourselves from "the intricate folds and delicate involutions of our self-love." Even sympathy and fellow-feeling fail us due to

> a sluggishness and intractableness about the will, that does not easily put itself in the situation of others, and that consults its own bias best by giving itself no trouble about them. Human life is so far a game of cross-purposes. (279)

In reading Hazlitt we cannot fail to perceive that our business in life is to know the world. We are to gobble up experience, and to digest it into knowledge. And yet how poorly our organs do their job! Our senses and faculties eat up with relish, but promiscuously. Our desires and appetites lack discrimination. Inevitably, we encounter stubborn morsels which, whether good or bad in themselves, simply do not agree with us. We slice our meat more finely, we stew it longer, we try new combinations or new condiments, but our faculties continue to gurgle and rumble. At times we are petulant—but at least we are not bored. Perhaps there is a perverse pleasure to be discovered in the difficulties of digestion; perhaps

> there must be a spice of mischief and wilfulness thrown into the cup of our existence to give it its sharp taste and sparkling colour. (275)

It should be apparent by now that I very much enjoy Hazlitt's work. He seems to excuse all petty, personal shortcomings by displaying so many of them in such

interesting and engaging ways. As I read, my own flaws almost appear to me as distinctions: I become complexly egocentric, keenly and precisely resentful, opulently vain, peerlessly presumptuous. But I will admit that Charles Lamb has one very Montaignian virtue which Hazlitt has not: Lamb, like Hazlitt, is a crank, but he is able to celebrate, unreservedly, his own idiosyncrasy.

It is appropriate, I think, to begin a discussion of what Charles Lamb is, by saying what he is not. This is a ticklish tactic in that Lamb, characteristically, is most himself when he is not himself. (He declares himself in favor of "man as he is *not* to be" (Hazlitt 522), a declaration which initiates his friendship with Hazlitt.) He has, however, a few categorical antipathies. The most pertinent of these is his dislike of the Scotsman, a character with respect to whom he stands in perfect, diametrical opposition. Of the "true Caledonian," Lamb writes,

> You are never admitted to see his ideas in their growth—if, indeed, they do grow, and are not rather put together upon principles of clock-work. You never catch his mind in an undress. He never hints or suggests anything, but unlades his stock of ideas in perfect order and completeness.... His understanding is always at its meridian—you never see the first dawn, the early streaks. He has no falterings of self-suspicion. Surmises, guesses, misgivings, half-intuitions, semi-consciousnesses, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions, have no place in his brain, or vocabulary. The twilight of dubiety never falls upon him. (280)

Having known very few Scotsmen, I am in no position to

confirm or challenge the truth of this portrait. And yet how thoroughly it reminds me of Sir Francis Bacon! I almost resent the fact that Lamb can describe Bacon so perfectly without even trying to do so.

Lamb knows the Caledonian antithetically, being himself an "anti-Caledonian." Those of this ilk "have minds rather suggestive than comprehensive"; "they are no systematizers." Having little "clearness or precision in their ideas," or in the expression thereof, they content themselves with "fragments and scattered pieces of Truth": "hints and glimpses, germs and crude essays at a system, is the utmost they pretend to." These are the uncertain, impure and imperfect subjects: "the light that lights them is not steady and polar"—like that of the Caledonian spirit—"but mutable and shifting: waxing, and again waning." They are not the source of the steady beam of knowledge, but the place of its reflection, deflection and refraction. Capricious and impulsive,

> They seldom wait to mature a proposition, but e'en bring it to market in the green ear. They delight to impart their defective discoveries as they arise, without waiting for their full development. (279)

To be brief, the Caledonian is the one who knows; whereas, the anti-Caledonians are the many who do not. The former pronounces truths; the latter exchange ideas. The former is an authority; the latter are essayists.

To characterize oneself as an anti-Caledonian is to describe oneself negatively and reactively; one acknowledges

that a norm, category or type exists in order to assert that one is not that. Such a description suits Lamb: his essayistic persona, Elia, is a reactive being, one who takes shape, knows himself and makes himself known, moment by moment, in response to some ambient otherness—some character, some situation or circumstance which he confronts:

> I can look with no indifferent eye upon things or persons. Whatever is, is to me a matter of taste or distaste.... I am, in plainer words, a bundle of prejudices—made up of likings and disliking—the veriest thrall to sympathies, apathies, antipathies. (278)

Elia's subjectivity is changeful due to an excess rather than a lack of substance. Finding himself nowhere entire and perfect, he, like Montaigne, seeks out diversity and difference. "Out-of-the-way humours and opinions—heads with some diverting twist to them—the oddities of authorship" afford him his greatest pleasures (224). "Mo t of [his] notions and ways of feeling" come to him fr readings of "odd, out of the way, old English plays and treatises" (252). He is an avid reader precisely because reading allows him to think and feel as an other:

> I dream away my life in others' speculations. I love to lose myself in other men's minds. When I am not walking, I am reading; I cannot sit and think. Books think for me. (437)

Elia is a creature constituted in difference, and as such is at odds with both the status quo and the revolution of his time. Lamb may be friendly with the authors of the Romantic revolution, but Elia reveals his differences. He

professes no taste for solitary musing. He writes in a mannered and rather archaic style. Most importantly, he is an urbanite who vastly prefers the manifold distractions of the city to the kind solace of natural scenes:

> Where has spleen her food but in London—humour, interest, curiosity, suck at her measureless breasts without a possibility of being satiated. Nursed amid her noise, her crowds, her beloved smoke—what have I been doing all my life, if I have not lent out my heart with usury to such scenes? (319)

Elia represents the othering of the Romantic self. He is not the product of Lamb's self-expression, but rather is the written self, the self which emerges in writing, in the inscription of difference. He is the "stupid changeling of five-and-forty" (300). He is the superannuated man who discovers himself once he has lost his (professional) place, who celebrates the fact that he has outlived his own utility. He is the convalescent who regrets the passing of illness—that state of not being oneself—because illness allows him to enjoy the "monarchal prerogatives" of a self-indulgent self-awareness (501).

"To return to *myself*," writes Lamb writing Elia,

> (from whence my zeal for public good is causing me continually to digress), I will let thee, Reader, into certain more of my peculiarities. (317)

In reading these lines, I begin to get a clearer sense of the political implications of Lamb's writing practice. Implicitly, a distinction is being made between the

"subject" and the concrete individual. The Lamb persona is a "subject"—a being under authority, constructed by social forces and characterized by social concerns—his "zeal for the public good" adequately demonstrates the fact. Yet this same zeal—a very ironic zeal—is a matter of (similarly ironic) digression. The self is offered as the true matter of this writing, and yet this self is not as it ought to be, is impure and unstable, a bundle of "peculiarities." It is in part subjected, but not entirely so. It fails in its responsibilities as a subject, in so far as it is more than and different from its "subject"-ivity. Concrete, individual difference confronts the "subject" portion of this self. Idiosyncrasy and Elian irony originate in the confrontation of the two. Elia's difference can, moreover be assigned to a site: a body characterized by appetites, tastes and drives imperfectly subjected to social constraint. It is the body, for example, which leads Elia to oppose the saying of grace at "rich men's tables":

> with the savoury soup and messes steaming up the nostrils, and moistening the lips of the guests with desire and a distracted choice, I have felt the introduction of that ceremony to be unseasonable. With the ravenous orgasm upon you, it seems impertinent to interpose a religious sentiment. It is a confusion of purpose to mutter out praises from a mouth that waters. (484)

This desirous, pleasure-loving body is what the essayist seeks to discover and describe. This is the site of the pleasure-yielding peculiarities which are offered to the "Reader" Elia so frequently invokes. But this offering has

little to do with public-spirited zeal. The appeal to the reader is the appeal of one peculiar, imperfectly subjected body to another.

If Lamb is one who understands what I might call the politics of pleasure, Virginia Woolf is another. She understands, to begin with, that literate pleasures, like a good many others, require education, money and leisure. She knows it is something of a privilege to be a "daughter of an educated man who has enough to live upon and can read and write for her own pleasure" (TG 172). But she also knows that the privileges of the daughter are not those of the son. She has visited Oxbridge, has been waved off the turf and refused admittance to the library (RO 8, 11). Such experiences have taught her something about power: that those who wield it and those who serve it can tell at a glance whether or not one is a Fellow; that those who are not Fellows are excluded, disqualified. Knowing something about power—power which segregates and discriminates—makes one more appreciative of pleasure, because pleasure is erotic: it has to do with bringing things together, combining, blending, unifying. And, still more importantly, pleasure is very difficult to control. Much can be done to direct it, restrain and restrict it, but no power can ever quite command it or forbid it. The effects of pleasure, its enunciations, its productions, are within reach, but nobody can quite lay hands upon the what, where, when and why. Pleasure is elusive. It slips through the fingers, between

the fence posts, underneath the locked doors.

In a diary entry concerned with collecting and reworking the essays which will later become *The Common Reader*, Woolf expresses the desire to produce "a good book" which will stand as "a rough, but vigorous statue testifying before I die to the great fun and pleasure my habit of reading has given me" (DVW 259). For Woolf, pleasure, especially readerly pleasure, is excessive, and the writerly reflex originates with that excess. In another diary entry dated August, 1921, she declares: "Instinctively I want someone to catch my overflow of pleasure" (129). Later that same month her desire takes shape in a similarly exuberant, fluid metaphor: "Whatever book I read bubbles up in my mind as part of an article I want to write" (132-33).

Literate activity is paradoxical in that it is often pursued "silently and in solitude" (MOE 31), yet offers, to the avidly literate, the pleasures of companionship and "the divine relief of communication" (CR 110). As an essayist, Woolf therefore makes the text—her own and that of others—a convivial space, a meeting place for her community of common readers. She demands an active, critically responsive reader, the kind of reader whom she distinguishes from the mere listener (SCR 164). She believes, moreover, that when an essay is unsuccessful "the fault may well be as much on the reader's side as on the writer's" (CR 211). Woolf's literary essays offer a double invitation to participate in the recreation and re-creation of text. Being

herself a common reader, Woolf recreates the interactive process of her reading of her text-object—a Congreve play or an Austen novel or a Montaignian essay—documents her reading by enunciating readerly desires and demands, posing questions, seeking answers, testing, comparing and contrasting. Her reader is invited to remember and re-experience his own reading of the same text-object, to bring it into confrontation with the process she presents, and at the same time, to exercise himself upon a new text-object, the Woolf text itself.

The society of common readers has an educational function. Its goal, like that of the "new college" Woolf envisions in *Three Guineas*,

> should be not to segregate and specialize, but to combine. It should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to co-operate; discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life. (62)

As a reader and as a writer, Woolf seeks recombination, synthesis, integration. She looks to the body to provide the vehicle. More discreet than Montaigne and more fortunate—at least in terms of digestion—than Hazlitt, Woolf tends to focus more upon the body's sensibilities than upon its processes. She emphasizes the essential unity, the wholism, of sensuous experience. Woolf's prose reveals a predilection for skin-evoking imagery, probably because the skin is a sensuous surface which extends over the whole body. The mind, like the skin, "has different layers" (MOE 27). "When the whole being is red and brittle as sandstone in the sun,"

one is refreshed by "the spray of fresh hard words" (MDE 24-25, 28). The essay is "a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure" (CR 217). Life itself is "a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (CR 154).

For Woolf, as for Montaigne, the body is a place in common without being a commonplace. Differences between bodies have much to do with the adventure of reading. Bodily difference is the first instance of the creative challenge which cordially invites the reader to seek the new combinations in the structure of being, new combinations which for Woolf are so important. However, by being a shared quantity, the body offers a figure which is never simply alienating or indifferent in the instances of its otherness.

The common reader "differs from the critic and the scholar," in that he has little or no desire "to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others." His reading takes place "in all those rooms, too humble to be called libraries, yet full of books, where the pursuit of reading is carried on by private people." As he reads,

> he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole.... He never ceases, as he reads, to run up some rickety and rameshackle fabric which shall give him the temporary satisfaction of looking sufficiently like the real object to allow of affection, laughter, and argument. (CR 1)

This private, bodily practice of reading is of some political importance because it confirms the liberty of literate activity, confirms the fact that it is

> impossible for any body of men to corner the necessary knowledge or to refuse admittance, except on their own terms, to those who [wish] to read books or to write them. (TG 162)

As suggested here, a practice of reading can become a practice of writing—Woolf's literary essays demonstrate and celebrate the fact. Common reading is, in a sense, already a practice of writing, is already an inscription of self upon a text. Reading and writing, with the body and in a private room, the common reader enjoys—perhaps briefly, perhaps partially—a respite from institutionalized social constraint. No "body of men" can "refuse admittance" to the private place of common reading. No gowned figure guards the door. The Beadle, with his quick, precise, discriminating eye, the Beadle, who knows instantly who is a Fellow and who is not, is not present. As a common reader, Mary Beton (or Seton or Carmichael) is to some degree freed from the precise, instantaneous awareness of her relationship to the powers that be, the awareness which sends the "little fish" of a new idea "into hiding," and which obliges her—even before the explicit enunciation of prohibition or command—to abandon the pleasant, expensive turf and regain, instead, the path (RO 8).

Here (as elsewhere) my reading of Woolf reminds me of my reading of Barthes. In a way, my reading of each is underwritten by my reading of the other. They share, I think, a fairly large patch of conceptual common ground. Both think of reading and writing as peculiarly

interdependent, Siamese arts: reading involves a practice of writing; writing involves a practice of reading. For both Woolf and Barthes, the literate arts are bodily arts, in that the body is the figure which enables their interpenetration, intermingling and interweaving. Both writers seek, moreover, a place of literate activity which is "outside the bounds of power,...outside the limits of institutional sanction" (Barthes IL 458, 59).

And so, without quite leaving Woolf behind, I move on to Barthes. I find it difficult to write *about* Barthes. (I, for one, would much rather write *like* Barthes, if that were possible.) His poststructuralist essays are cluttered with Barthes's analysis of Barthes. Whatever I might want to say about him, he has said already and better; I bump into, or trip over, the very thing I had hoped to bring to the text. And it is difficult, too, to avoid Procrustean criticism. There is always more than I have good use for. In seeking material for argumentative quotations, I am often tempted to leave out a problematizing parenthesis, to lop off an adventurous afterthought—I want to seize each proposition before it becomes complex.

Although Barthes leaves little room for the critic, he does leave a lot of room for the reader. Barthes's writing stages the reader, and stages the writer as a reader. As reader, Barthes surveys his texts seeking sources of erotic enjoyment; as writer, he produces (makes a production of, stages) his readerly pleasure in order to please and seduce

other readers, his readers. The Barthesian essay is "a 'euphoric' text founded on the pleasure and bliss (*jouissance*) of reader and writer" (Benemaia 69). Can I say, then, that the text desires me? No, it would be better to say it desires a reader who could be me, desires a body which could be mine. "I must seek out this reader," writes Barthes, "(must 'cruise' him) *without knowing where he is*" (PT 4). The text *flirts*, stages its desire without being entirely precise about its object. I prove I am the desired reader by taking my pleasure with it.

As I read I offer my body, as Barthes does, to the adventure of the text. Barthes informs what he reads and writes, discovers and reveals his body within the receptive contours of the textual space. Réda Benemaia "characterizes" (rather than defines) the Barthes essay as "the inscription, in the very body (corps) of the text, of a plural body (corps) where the most diverse kinds of readers can find themselves" (62). I note the happy usage of "inscription," which means "writing into": Barthes writes himself into text. In various "postures" and "gestures," in "presentations" in "scenes of language," Barthes parades his bodily enjoyment, believing that "among the many figures presented to you, there is sure to be one that will please and gratify you, and that is all we need" (Benemaia 61). In trying to follow along with Barthes, in essaying his body with my own, I rediscover my body. Pleasure is doubly important to this process, because it is an effect of bodily

reading and it is also the signal which tells me I am reading with my body.

In examining, with Barthes, the practice of reading and writing, I find that the body is there where pleasure is. As a corollary, I can say that "banality is discourse without body" (RB 137). And I discover that significance, rather than ignorance, is bliss, that significance is another word for *jouissance*, that it is meaning "*in so far as it is sensually produced*" (PT 61). I begin to catch on, to grasp the connection between Barthes the *gauchiste* intellectual and Barthes the hedonist. I perceive the exciting possibility of mounting a political meaning.

The text is the preferred site of the coupling of pleasure and the body. Barthes poses the question: "Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body?" He answers, "Yes, but of our erotic body" (PT 17). The body transfigured by pleasure is not the socially inscribed, socially constructed body, not the body known, accessed and assessed by science. Not that the erotic body is entirely other than the social or scientific body—it is something more, an excess. The body which the text reveals is

> neither the skin, nor the muscles, nor the bones, nor the nerves, but the rest: an awkward, fibrous, shaggy, raveled thing, a clown's coat. (RB 180)

Or, to state the unscientific more scientifically,

> the body is the irreducible difference, and at the same time it is the principle of all structuration (since structuration is what

> is Unique in structure). If I managed to talk politics *with my own body*, I should make out of the most banal of (discursive) structures, a structuration; with repetition, I should produce Text. (RB 175)

Structuration is embodied structure, structure in confrontation with uniqueness and difference. I may even say that the body *essays* political and discursive structures. It obliges structure to submit itself to process, to discover itself as that which emerges rather than that which precedes, governs and defines. Pleasure originates in this engagement of the body's "irreducible difference." It is therefore "something both revolutionary and asocial, and it cannot be taken over by any collectivity, any mentality, any idiolect" (PT 23). "The pleasure of the text," moreover, "does not prefer one ideology to another." It is characterized by perversity. It "overcome[s], split[s]...the *moral unity* that society demands of every human product" (PT 31). The reader, "at the moment he takes his pleasure," at the moment his erotic body embraces the text, is one "who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions,...who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible" (PT 3). This reader (especially if he is also a writer) is an agent of paradox, one who challenges and essays culture and the *doxa* with his erotic body.

But of course, one cannot challenge the social, cultural sphere without challenging the subject it constructs. "The pleasure of the text," writes Barthes, "is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body

does not have the same ideas I do" (PT 17). The body is intimately involved with selfhood or subjectivity, but the relationship is not one of congruence. The relationship is, on the contrary, that which makes of the subject an unstable entity. My body essays my self. I, the writing subject, cannot be the true, undeviating centre in a Circle of Tales; I cannot disentangle myself from the web of my enunciation.

And so,

> No "thesis" on the pleasure of the text is possible; barely an inspection (an introspection) that falls short. *Eppure si gaude*! And yet, against and in spite of everything, the text gives me bliss. (PT 34)

Bliss. The translation almost hides the word. In French it is *jouissance*. Barthes, more than any of the other essayists, reveals to me the tenuousness of my position: there is no room for *jouissance* in a master's thesis. I limit myself to the texts of pleasure, believing that pleasure, as opposed to *jouissance*, essays political structures without seeking to overturn them. Similarly, textual pleasure eludes, to some small degree, the grasp of power, without yet deconstructing the subject shaped within social structures and within language. The pleasure-text "comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* act of reading." *Jouissance*, on the other hand, "discomforts,"

> unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (PT 14)

Yet *jouissance* is not to be clearly distinguished from

pleasure. It is pleasure *in extremis*, a joyful death, a blissful loss, an energetic collapse. It waits in the wings, seeks the occasion of an entrance, whenever pleasure takes the stage.

Is this *jouissance* promise or menace? I experience menace. My project demands a degree of mastery, requires of me that self-mastery which allows me to propose certain of my "historical, cultural, psychological assumptions" in thesis form. It can endure the perturbations of pleasure, but not the unutterable evacuation of selfhood which is *jouissance*. And what of my theory? Can my theory of the pleasure-text restrain the blissful spasm?

Bacon, object of my insistent exclusion, returns. Bacon is, for Barthes, a mine of precious words: the pleasure of the text is "like Bacon's simulator" (PT 3); "Ideological systems are fictions (Bacon would have said *stage ghosts*)" (PT 27). I shudder at the notion that there is *writing* in Bacon, that his language is at times bewitched by its own charm. I remember now the "Circle of Tales" which caught hold of me. Bacon tends to bore me, but "a certain boredom," as Barthes makes clear, is not antipathetic to *jouissance* (PT 14). The Bacon essay is not a text of pleasure, but can it be—possibly, potentially—a text of *jouissance*? Is it possible that, within the Baconian text, authority occasionally collapses into joy of language, a collapse which is *jouissance*, for the reader...and for the author?

Such questions challenge my conception of the pleasure-text, but they also suggest possibilities of expansion and extension. They tempt me to include rather than exclude, to embrace rather than reject. Perhaps there is more pleasure in questions than in answers, in doubts than in certitudes. Perhaps a thesis or theory becomes more enjoyable when it is intoxicated, when it is perturbed by inebriating foreign substances. Yet, as I've suggested, *jouissance* is not other than pleasure, it is an extreme. And it is sudden, unexpected, involuntary. Pleasure, on the other hand, I have described as something one seeks, anticipates, intends. I have considered pleasure in terms of textual tactics. This *jouissance*, this French foreign matter, cannot be contained in my construction, yet it is an aspect of pleasure. Is it not an interloper, a cat-burglar who breaks into and loots textual structures? And what structure is secure then? Even Lord Bacon's house is not. Perhaps, then, no text is invulnerable.

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Where several works by a single author have been used, parenthetical citations have been coded:

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IL "Inaugural Lecture, College de France"
PT *The Pleasure of the Text*
RB *Roland Barthes*

Woolf, Virginia:

CR *The Common Reader*
DVW *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*
MOE *The Moment and Other Essays*
RO *A Room of One's Own*
SCR *The Second Common Reader*
TG *Three Guineas*

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III. My *Moby-Dick*

I am a little embarrassed to admit that I don't own a copy of *Moby-Dick* right now. At my elbow, as I write, is a piece of public property, a well-worn civil servant with his I.D. number stamped upon his flesh: PS 2384 M68. In a way though, this is as it should be. What, after all, is a *copy* but the mere corporeal husk of an imaginative reality, the lees of a book's better being? What matter, then, if I don't own this copy? What matters the paltry thing-in-hand? I am writing about the book I carry around in my head.

Yes, I'm fairly satisfied with my threadbare civil servant. He rather reminds me of Melville's Sub-Sub-Librarian, the one who supplies the "Extracts," the "mere painstaking burrower and grubworm of a poor devil" who "appears to have gone through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth" (2). Yet I do regret from time to time, the swanky Norton Critical I once owned, with its images of nineteenth-century whaling scenes at the front, the sources, letters and critical articles at the back. It was lost in one of those non-marital, out-of-court divorce settlements. On a shelf in an eighteenth-floor apartment of a high-rise monolith on Saskatchewan Drive, my erstwhile *Moby-Dick*. Has she read it? If so, did she like it? I hope so. For myself, I never steal books indifferently or inadvertently, and I expect the same consideration in return. One should steal a book as one steals a kiss. Desire should overwhelm, momentarily, one's sense of propriety and

property. Book-theft should be an act of romantic bravado. (Romantic, *roman*, a novel or romance—the right word.) Five years ago my best friend "borrowed" my *Swann's Way*. Two years ago, while house-sitting for her parents, while occupying the bedroom of her girlhood and young womanhood, I burgled her closet of *Dracula*, *Nightwood*, and *Nights at the Circus*, and fled with them, under cover of darkness, on the night which marked the end of my stay. Stealing books from *that* closet in *that* room was like stealing parcels of memory, her memory. To steal a cherished book is always to steal a piece of inner life. I can now retrace—albeit imprecisely—the movements of her mind across these lines, through these pages, and discover in these movements something of her private pleasures. It will be a long time before she sees these books again. I should add that, by some chance, my *Swann's Way* was in that same closet. (A worthy placement—that closet contains several of her favorite books, books she will certainly reclaim one day.) Of course, I left it there.

But *Moby-Dick* ... yes, I am writing about that piece of Melville's inner life, a big piece, which I at the cost of considerable time and effort have stolen. It is time, perhaps, for the full title: *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. Yes, this book is a whale, and requires a whaler-reader; to read this book properly you must undertake a whalehunt.

We sail from Nantucket, a barren little strip of sand off New England's coast, principal port of the American

whaling industry. The island is not represented on my globe. As Melville says, real places are never to be found on any map. But put your finger down in the blue water just off-shore—a little below Boston, a little above New York. That will do. Your fingertip now covers the imaginary island of Nantucket. (Yes, of course, Nantucket is a real place, but our Nantucket is imaginary.) With your free hand keep the world slowly turning, and sail your fingertip East-southeast toward Africa. Follow the track of our ship with your fingertip as you might follow a line on a page. Remember, though, that our *Pequod* is a living thing, with crinkled brow-prow and seaweed beard, with sails billowing and sagging like lungs, with a peg-leg captain—beating heart and beating brain—knock-knock-knocking on the deck and resounding in the hold. The voyage is lived experience, wild and wayward, not straightforward and logocentric like the highways of the mainland. There are no highways on the sea. The line of a voyage—evanescent, a temporary furrow dissolving in a wake—is a fiction of a line, an imposition of logic rather than a fact of experience. Oh, yes, one can draw navigational lines upon charts, but these are abstractions, myths, not experience itself. The path of a ship is, potentially, as broad as the sea she sails, not a path she follows but one she creates in passing.

I would also draw your attention to a certain epistolary fragment, dated December 11, 1849. Melville declares, "I shall write such things as the Great Publisher

of Mankind ordained ages before he published 'The World'—this planet, I mean" (Leyda 347). As we sail over the globe, you must remember that the world is a text, and that our adventure is textual, as is our work.

Turn due south now and trace the African coast at a distance, always remembering that you are out of sight of land. During this passage, on moonlit nights when the waves roll "like scrolls of silver," you may descry the "spirit-spout" (199), a great phantom jet they say belongs to Moby Dick. Yes, we shall be subject to the tantalizations of the signifier (the signifier as Kristeva describes it: a presence which precedes). The ungraspable, the ineffable leads us on. As if by witchery the object of our quest, the referent which would make meaning whole, is forever near yet forever retreating from our approach. But take heart—by daylight we shall see other spouts, closer at hand and more approachable than this phantom. How practical, then, will this business of whaling seem! Remember that while you are an initiate to the mysteries of whaling, you are also an apprentice. *Moby-Dick* is dark, suggestive, baroque, but also very roll-up-yer-sleeves-and-get-after-it methodical. Think of it—at least for the time being—as a "how-to" book in fancy duds, as a journeyman decked out in Sunday-go-to-meetin'.

Our work involves—as you might expect—a certain specific lingo. You'd do well to learn the one along with the other. To begin with, never speak of "sighting" the

whale. That's mere lubber-talk. If you are in the fishery, you "raise" (140 ff.) the whale. This is the all-important first step to which you return again and again. Man the masthead, hover over the entire scene, be attentive, be patient. (Beware of airy reveries, or you will make the entire voyage and never raise the whale.) You raise the whale much as you raise a deep-diving thought from out of the stir and swell of daily experience, as you raise an idea or memory from out of the dark of oblivion. It is not an act of will, and yet it always seems that the whale responds in some strange, unaccountable, unforeseen way to your desire to see him. That is why whales—like imaginings, like ideas—are "raised" rather than passively "sighted." Plato—in the *Meno* I think it is—suggests that the acquisition of knowledge is an act of remembering. I think of raising that way—as a remembering, as recovery rather than discovery.

A very strange experience, especially the first time, especially if he surfaces—as he just did—just off starboard. NOW, here he is! the whale! but the moment before he was not there. It is perhaps because he is so big, so very big, that you cannot believe he appeared suddenly, in one given moment. Your reason tells you it is so, but your imagination cannot believe it. Your imagination affirms against all reason that he was always there, or—at the very least—that he must have been there long before your conscious awareness of his presence.

For me personally, it seems that *The Whale* was always there, and that They were always there, the monstrous white whale and the grim old peg-leg knocking about on my quarter-deck. I can't remember when they made their entrance. "Places!" was whispered in the dark, and "lights up" revealed them. *Moby-Dick* is one of those rare books which inhabit me before I inhabit them. Yet it is not a book like, say, *Oliver Twist*, a book that was read to me by Mom or Big Sister. No, Melville's book is full of irreverence, indiscretion and down-right indecency. Suicide is offered as a legitimate option on page one; Christian and cannibal (of the same sex) bed down together shortly thereafter; God is never at any time treated with due consideration—no, no, my Baptist mother would never have read me such a book, I'm sure. Yet it found its way into the *sanctum sanctorum*, the innermost chamber of my memory.

The book chose me before I chose it, but in the final analysis, choose it I did... Or did I? *I*? No, as with so many other things, the choice is part of my inheritance from the child I once was. It is one of many choices I must live with for better or worse—in this case, I would say for better. And I do remember the first time a particular eight-year-old took the book in hand, the first time he raised *The Whale*. A chance find—or so it seemed—it was there on the shelves of that little community library in Selkirk, Manitoba: a blue volume with small print, not far from the big-print volumes of the Bobbsey Twins, and closer

still to the Adventure series—*The Island of Adventure*, *The River of Adventure*, etc.—the most recently gobbled, still not entirely digested big-prints. The kid was aware of the format: big print with pictures meant kid's stuff; small print without pictures meant Big Sister stuff. The blue volume had small print *with pictures*. It therefore answered to his modesty *and* to his ambition. Yet that was not the prime motivation of the choice—no, something else, something quite different, was at work. It was what I might hazard to call a mature decision. It marked a coming of age, an acceptance of one's duties and responsibilities. That moment's interior text (the one you read in the bubbles of thoughtful comic-strip characters) would have read something like this: "Here's a book I've known about for a fair while, maybe it's time I read it."

Step two: in whalemen's lingo you "lower" (141 ff.) for the whale once you've raised him. This is what a lubber would call "putting boats in the water and rowing around like crazy"—but we will have none of that here. Take the word from Ahab: "Come closer, Starbuck; thou requirest a little lower layer" (143); "Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer" (144). Lower yourself down layer by layer, into the depths of the book. Our little boat can only skim the surface, yet we are now in pursuit of the greatest creature of the deep.

My first lowering—too precociously undertaken—was not a great success. That is to say, the kid read the first

page, maybe a little more, glanced at the pictures and set the book aside thinking he would read the rest later. Thirteen years later, I did just that. Since then I have served, avidly though often ineptly, a whaling novitiate of some dozen years.

At this stage of my career, I have participated in only three full-scale, all-out lowerings for *The Whale*, though I have raised him innumerable times. If not an authority, I can at least speak as one who is familiar with the business. And I will say that Melville's whaling technique, however awkward and imperfect it may seem to the beginner, is the very best possible. If it is your first lowering you will be an oarsman, and therefore both usage and practicality require that you approach *The Whale* arse foremost. As a critical posture, this is embarrassing, not to say humiliating, but there is, unfortunately, no help for it. Keep your oar in the water and be attentive to the rhythm of the work. Remember that your business is to see, not where you are going, but where you have been. (Was it Forster who said that a good memory is the most important asset for the novel reader?) Watch the wake as it spreads itself out in your imagination. ("Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever" (13).) Give yourself up to the verbal pleasures, too. No leisurely landed gathering can offer "gayer sallies, more merry mirth, better jokes and brighter repartees" (240)—the straining of muscles seems to sharpen the wit. Last but not least, be attentive to the

whale-line, "the magical, sometimes horrible whale-line" (238), but remember that yours is not the management thereof, and avoid, at all costs, becoming entangled therein.

But there, I've done it. How can I touch upon the whale-line without becoming entangled? The whale-line "folds the whole boat in its complicated coils, twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction. All the oarsmen are involved in its perilous contortions" (240). I run my eye over this line, arranged in long zig-zags from stern to prow, and I see that my eye moves somewhat as it does when moving back and forth across a page. *Somewhat*, I say, because this twisting, writhing line, surrounded by an ocean-broad space for marginalia, bears a closer resemblance to the wanderlusty narrative line which takes shape in my imagination. Yes, we oarsmen cannot escape our involvement with the line. How can we escape, even for a moment, from the infinite and irresistible tantalizations of the line? What is more fascinating to the landsman, or the new initiate of seafaring life, than the sailor's knots, than the intricate dexterities of a sailor's handling of diverse ropes, cords and cables? And what a multitudinous variety of lines you'll find a-whaling: streams and rivers leading to the sea, every street in New Bedford doing the same, the ship's course or "track," the web of rigging, the masts and spars, the lines of Ahab's charts, the lines on Ahab's brow, the lines on the whale's vast brow, the strange genealogical

lines of Queequeg or Tashtego, the bonds of friendship, the bonds of obsession, Stubb's yarns, Fedallah's coiled hair and (hypothetical) coiled tail, umbilical cords of birthing whales, the whale-line, the monkey-rope, the log and line, the life-buoy line, and, ultimately, the encounter with Moby Dick during "the Season on the Line."

You must remember that the animated line, the line as living structure, is a serpent—mesmeric, tantalizing, and potentially dangerous. Remember, too, that it is in the nature of the serpent to be linear only in action and coiled in repose. Coiled line, moreover, is a layered structure. Let's return then, to the contemplation of our whale-line. Coiled away in a tub, the whale-line awaits the harpooning in "layers of concentric spiralizations" (239). Strike a whale, and it springs into action "like ringed lightnings" (240). In our business of whaling, the layered coil is our generative structure, and line, the thrill of action. Coiling and layering are the ordering processes, the collecting and recollecting of experience which allows us to enter upon the unraveling of new experience. Evolution and involution, action and regenerative, contemplative repose, accumulation and expenditure—there's the oscillating rhythm of our work. Nor should all of this surprise you. *The Whale*, after all, is a book, a layered, enfolded structure abounding with lines. But it is a living book, a creation of imagination, and therefore its lines and layers are characterized by a certain phantasmagoria.

Ours is a profoundly uncertain negotiation. We raise and lower, raise and lower again. The whale is chased more often than harpooned, harpooned more often than captured. Sail on for now. Round Good Hope. (Here's a ship well met: the *Albatross* of good hope.) Steer your finger east-northeast, up past the southern tip of Madagascar and across the Indian Ocean. We hopefuls await the sure dart that finds the flank, the keen searching lance that pricks the heart. But such good fortune does not mark the end of our work—only a new beginning.

As I said, the eight-year-old that I was glanced at the pictures. One of these remains with me: the broad side of a ship, some figures at the bulwarks, a dark, humped mass on the sharkfin-carved surface of the sea, a man attached to a cord, standing-dangling upon the dark mass like a marionette upon a stage. I know now that this is an image of "cutting in," our step three.

Here you are, cutting spade in hand, floundering about "half on the whale and half in the water, as the vast mass revolves like a tread-mill" (270) beneath your feet. While you are cutting-in, a myriad of sharks are jawing-in. Occasionally, when a particularly rambunctious shark gets in the way of your work, you will push him aside with your foot, a bare foot—best perhaps to use the one you value least. Sharks aside, cutting-in is rather like peeling an orange—with the difference that you don't have to stand on an orange as you peel it. That strip is long enough now; cut

it loose and those manning the blubber-hook will raise it to the deck.

These blubber strips are at once skin and flesh, surface and substance of the whale. Your work, then, is concerned with unlayering the whale. Yet all active pursuits involve a line of some sort, a line uncoiled and brought to life, and the business of cutting-in is no exception. Attached to a canvas belt about your waist is a long cord called a monkey-rope. The other end of this cord is attached to the belted waist of that man whose anxious face you see above you, at the ship's side. He is your guardian angel in this undertaking. (Though you may wish to call him Melville, call him Ishmael instead.) For the moment, you and he are like twins bound together by "an elongated Siamese ligature" (271). This lively line, now slack now taut, now undulating now vibrating, creates a union of sensibility. What is true for Ishmael is true for you: your "own individuality [is] now merged in a joint stock company of two" (271). Cutting-in of the whale is thus a co-operative, co-ordinated endeavor.

So you have been a masthead-man, an oarsman arse-foremost, and a cutter-cum-dancing-ape. (This last constitutes a promotion, for it is always a harpooneer who performs the cutting-in.) Now I offer you a priestly role, that of the mincer. See, there, between the foremast and the mainmast, that imposing structure of timber, brick and mortar, "ten feet by eight square, and five in height"

(352)? That is the try-works, and that is your altar. There, your "bible leaves" of blubber will be melted down and purified in the two great try-pots of the furnace. ("Bible leaves! Bible leaves! This is the invariable cry from the mates to the mincer. It enjoins him to be careful, and cut his work into as thin slices as possible" (351n).) Yes, truly, yours is a holy function, for the whale is word-made-flesh, and from that flesh you extract the essence, pure sperm oil, which brings light to a world in darkness.

But you must first receive your investiture, the robe of office. Did you catch a glimpse of that "very strange and enigmatical object," that "unaccountable cone," jet-black and "longer than a Kentuckian is tall" (350-51)? That is what mariners call the whale's "grandissimus" (351). We take the sheath of that grandissimus—the whale's most intimate layer—turn it inside out, cut arm-holes, and there you have it! your cassock. It's a kind of cover-all *impermeable* to protect you while you perform your offices.

In trying-out you are more intimate with the whale than ever before. You wear his vestments. The smoke of his sizzling flesh begrimes your face and fills your lungs—he is the very air you breathe. Yet for all this dirt and impurity, the process is one of refinement, of distillation. (I tend to think of trying-out as an *essaying* of *The Whale*.) You have pursued the whale, have captured him, have come to know him in the flesh. Now you are concerned with extracting

what is valuable, what is to be retained and stored "below" for future barter with the world.

Whalemen are thorough in their clean-up; shortly after trying-out is completed, the entire deck is spotless. The valuable sperm oil is casked and stored below. It may seem that our affair with *The Whale* is over and done. Not so, however. No voyage is over till the ship comes home. And the *Pequod*, it seems, is leaky in the hold; the casks are badly sealed. I 've always had this same problem of leakage in the hold. It's a messy business, finding that slippery film of sperm-oil on almost every interior object you choose to touch. Yes, it seems to work its way into every nook and cranny. You frown, you rub thumb and forefinger together—yes, yet again, some residue of *The Whale*. I've never really been able to wash my hands of it.

At this point our line of work turns back upon itself and coils: raising, lowering, cutting-in, trying-out, raising again, lowering again etc. But the ship's still at sea; the voyage is not done. Let's follow that line, the line of our voyage, through to the final recoiling.

Meet the *Jeroboam* and dire prophecies. Meet the forlorn *Virgin* seeking oil for her lamp. Make the narrow passage between Sumatra and Java and smell the stinking *Rosebud* with her rotting whale-corpses in tow. Sail North around the coast of Borneo, past the islands of the Philippines, and into the Sea of Japan. Meet the wise old *Samuel Enderby* of London (whose captain has lost an arm to Moby Dick) and the

gay and prosperous *Bachelor* (whose captain has never heard of any such fish).

Pause now for a moment. You cannot trace the course. Ahab has destroyed the quadrant, and an electrical storm has turned the compasses. Our *Pequod* is bewitched. Her frantic course is marked by tight loops and sharp about-faces, in too brief a time and too narrow a space for your fingertip to follow.

Take a breath, and head southeast into the Pacific. Moby Dick is very near, and each passing moment could bring an encounter. These ships you meet are his heralds: the *Rachel*, "weeping for her children" (436); the dejected *Delight* offering a sea-burial to the last of five dead men. Now! Look there! straight before the prow about a mile ahead, "a hump like a snow-hill" (446)!

Stop. Stop short at the apex of an imaginary equilateral triangle which has Fiji and New Guinea as its two other points. That's the nearest land, Fiji or New Guinea, both several hundred leagues distant. Your fingertip is far out in the blue now, at a point just below the Equator. (Yes, the Equator is the Line of the "Season on the Line.") You are a fair ways past what any American would call the middle of nowhere. It is a "clear steel-blue day" (442). The ship is stove, her sides battered in by a raging monster. In sinking she creates a great whirlpool which seizes ship and crew in a coiled embrace, which gathers up "each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and

inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carrie[s] the smallest chip of the *Pequod* out of sight" (469).

"And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (470). Yes, yes, you guessed it: there is always a loose thread. The line of our voyage has gathered up into a coil; our *Pequod* is the hooked fish, and the whirlpool the angler's reel. Yet Ishmael remains as the embodiment of our adventure. He carries it coiled up in his breast. He is a man with a magic ring set between his shoulder blades—a life-size, flesh and blood, brawny and manly "Chatty Cathy." Take hold of the ring and pull. Draw the long filament out to full length. Once released, the line springs to life and seeks its coil again. In this release and in this seeking, speech is created, an ever-to-be-renewed retelling: "Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely..."

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IV. Of Digression

Words are fishy. Slippery and wrigglingly alive, they elude the grasp. What is most palpable about them is their difference, their other and independent being. Even for us, speaking bodies—fishers for whom words are the most common of our common concerns, the everyday units of our dull, daily industry—even for us words retain a little of their submarine strangeness. They are always a little uncanny, or, as the Germans say, not homelike. The feel of them can never be quite ordinary. And the smell! Yes, there is always the fishy smell—pervasive, penetrating—the excessive aspect for which we have no use: etymological residue or alternate meaning, homonymous or synonymous suggestion, unwanted pun, Freudian slip, contextual contamination, or connotative play.

But of course, of course, words seem like utter ordinariness, or ordinary utterance, most of the time. Now and then, however, we find some jelly-like, betentacled, phantasmagorical thing in amongst the herring or the tuna or the cod that we are used to. "Phantasmagorical" is itself potentially such a word. Or it may be a foreign word. Or, again, a monster like *haristokrassy*—a word disfigured by the violence of writing—an eighteenth-century French revolutionary's rendering of *aristocratie* (aristocracy). (I forget the man's name, but I can't forget the word.) Such instances remind us of the enigmatic nature of language, remind us that it is only use that makes our herring or cod

appear so familiar.

Digress. It is no monster, not even an odd fish. But one needs to look more closely. I turn, therefore, to the dictionary. It may seem to some that that is the wrong place to seek the strangeness of a word. For me, however, the dictionary is the marine biologist, the man for whom a word is an object of careful scrutiny, of curious speculation, even of obsession. The dictionary strives to understand, characterize and define the word, but in so doing reveals its slippery, insubordinate complexity.

Digress. (I am looking at the entry in the 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.) Etymologically, this word has a Latin ancestor, a verb form meaning "to go aside, depart." There is a noteworthy bodily inflection in the Latin verb, a suggestion of *stepping* aside or *walking* away. As I move on to the definitions, I am reminded that these are inseparable from the use that various writers in various periods have made of this word. Among the definitions, I find two which, although obsolete, interest me a great deal: "To depart or deviate (from a course, mode of action, rule, standard, etc.); to diverge"; "To diverge from the right path, to transgress." These are accompanied by a couple of juicy instances of seventeenth-century usage: "The subjects rebelled, and digressed from their allegiance"; "So man, while he aspired to be like God in knowledge, digressed and fell."

By now, I have begun to nose the word; I am aware of its fishy smell. "Digress" is constructed upon a bodily metaphor. The body it represents is, moreover, a wayward, errant body. The word bears the taint of a less than impeccable reputation; it has been an immoral word. "Digress," in the most frequent modern sense—"To deviate from the subject in discourse or writing"—is not commonly associated with treacherous rebellion or original sin. However, the most common modern sense of the word is also the earliest. (Chaucer's usage conforms with our own.) In the course of its history, the word *digresses* into immoral meanings. And it does so, I believe, because even discursive digression is suspiciously capricious, morally dubious. Digression in discourse represents a suspension of thesis, a failure to conform to logocentric linearity: "I dygresse from my mater and talke of a thyng that nothynge belongeth therunto." Digression is suspect precisely because it is *non sequitur*, because it does not follow.

Transgression and the body. I am tempted to think that the association of the two is more than simply accidental or arbitrary. As a reader and as a writer, I experience digression as a manifestation of desire for words, as an instance of the body's erotic engagement with language. It is that anxious and exciting moment when language reveals that it has an independent spirit, a mind of its own. I look at a word, and it seems to be looking back. I have designs upon it, but it also has designs upon me. I am susceptible

to its charms. It leads me astray.

The digressive movement begins with a certain gesture of reading, a gesture which marks a *diverting* (distracting and entertaining) interruption:

> Has it never happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven't you ever happened *to read while looking up from your book*? (Barthes 29)

Ravished by what we read, we are often led away from what we are reading; we lift our eyes away from the page and pursue our own path. We recompose. We are concerned now with "the text which we write in our head *when we look up*" (Barthes 30). If we catch ourselves and look back at the page, we will almost certainly find some whispering serpent responsible for our lapse: a word, a turn of phrase, an image—who knows? The whisper speaks to us of another text whose trace we pursue.

The digressive writer is one who reads his own writing in the very act of composition. He is attentive to the insinuations, temptations, and seductions of his own words, allowing his intention to be diverted by the unexpected charms of his own voice. And he takes it upon himself to scribble out the text which better behaved readers and writers write only in their head. But to explore these ideas most fully we must be prepared to treat reading and writing somewhat metaphorically. We must be prepared to consider both as interiorized functions which allow us to *construct*

experience.

I am walking away from the 106th Street liquor store. A john approaches one of the prostitutes on the sidewalk. I hear her ask, "Do you want to go out?" An errant piece of language—the verb phrase "to go out"—catches hold of me. I am made to follow where it leads. For the prostitute, for the john, this phrasing has a transactional value: it is and must be subjugated to convention. But I am *reading* the scene; I *construct* it as a *scene*, as a text with characters, dialogue, a specific setting, narrative possibilities. The vagrant phrase, however, refuses to stay in place, refuses to be contained. Questions arise. Where does it come from? Where is it going? For me, it belongs elsewhere, in another scene of language: for me, it is the language of dating. I attempt to mend the breach. I imagine a scene in which a prostitute initiates a novice:

> No, no, never ask them that. They don't want to get lucky. They want to get what's coming to them—that's the way they see it. Ask them, "Do you want to go out?" They know what you mean, believe me. Some of the older ones will think it's cute; they like the idea of having a date with a young chick. And if it's a cop, or a solid-citizen-type, he'll be less likely to get on your case.

But is this something a real prostitute might say? I have no way of knowing. I build this speech from bits and pieces of certain gritty urban films I've seen—film noir, cinéma vérité, made-for-TV docu-drama. I strive to find a place which will accommodate the words I hear.

"One day a Malay knocked at my door. What business a Malay could have to transact amongst English mountains, I cannot conjecture; but possibly he was on his road to a sea-port..." (De Quincey 178). My digressive text is *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. As before (in my own example) an element of experience is out of place; a "Malay" is wandering "amongst English mountains." (Questions arise. Where did he come from? Where is he going?) A servant-girl admits the stranger, and provocatively announces "a sort of demon below" (179). Upon his arrival on the scene, the autobiographer (for whom life is text) seeks to weave the wayfarer into a textual pattern, one that takes shape, in this case, as a tableau:

> In a cottage kitchen...stood the Malay—his turban and loose trousers of dingy white relieved upon the dark paneling: he had placed himself nearer to the girl than she seemed to relish... A more striking picture there could not be imagined than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite fairness, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, enameled or veneered with mahogany, by marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. (179-80)

The digressive movement of the text is now very clearly oriented: it is seeking out that place of discourse which Edward Said has described as the orientalized Orient, "what V. G. Kiernan has aptly called 'Europe's collective day-dream of the Orient'" (Said 52). "Orientalism," as Said conceives of it, "is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between

'the Orient' and...'the Occident'" (2). Its discourse is an attempt "to *stage* the Orient and Europe together in some coherent way" (61). (De Quincey, in offering his tableau, avers that it "took hold of [his] fancy and eye more powerfully than any of the statuesque attitudes or groups exhibited in the ballets at the opera house" (179).) The "striking picture" contrasts the fair, "erect and independent," English woman with the dark, slavish Oriental. Both figures are schematized: the woman represents the essentials of Englishness; the Malay is a metonym of all things Oriental.

A tableau is not drama, but rather its interruption. A tableau is a meaningful stasis; it transfixes, characterizes, elucidates, summarizes, defines. De Quincey's Malay is, quite clearly, a force to be mastered, controlled and contained. He is rendered not merely as a figure, but as a figurine, an Oriental artifact "enameled or veneered with mahogany." This literary "freeze-framing" fails, however. The Oriental "demon," "the fearful Asiatic," "the ferocious-looking Malay" enthralls his viewer. The tableau, intended to pacify imaginative fears, only serves to enliven them.

De Quincey attempts a conciliatory offering: "On his departure, I presented him, *inter alia*, with a piece of opium" (180). The gift binds rather than releases. It creates a bond between this English writer and that fearful Asiatic: the English opium-eater has, by means of a substitution, given up a piece of his own flesh, an aromatic

excrescence of his own body. An unfortunate gesture:

> I was struck with some little consternation when I saw him suddenly raise his hand to his mouth, and bolt the whole, divided into three pieces, at one mouthful. The quantity was enough to kill some half-dozen dragoons, together with their horses...I felt some alarm for the poor creature; but what could be done? (180)

The question now: who is the poor creature, the giver or the receiver? This piece of opium, gobbled as Satan might gobble a soul, is not an end but a beginning. It is the ring, the kerchief, the button, or strap from one's shoe which, by a half-willing inadvertence, is allowed to fall into the hands of a sorcerer—a token which gives him the power of command; it is the *potlatch*, the poisonous gift, which serves to provoke (rather than to intimidate or conciliate) a powerful and dangerous peer[1]:

> This incident I have digressed to mention, because this Malay.. fastened afterward upon my fancy, and through *that* upon my dreams, bringing with him other Malays worse than himself, that ran "amuck" at me and led me into a world of nocturnal troubles. (181)

The digression is interrupted (but not ended) here. The Malay is submerged. He becomes the stuff that (bad) dreams are made on. De Quincey returns to his subject, which (I should digress to mention) is happiness. He confesses: "I...have taken happiness bx h in a solid and a liquid shape, both boiled and unboiled, both East Indian and

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[1]My understanding of *potlatch* may be somewhat unconventional. I take it from George Bataille who, in "The Notion of Expenditure," distinguishes *potlatch* from primitive barter, by emphasizing that the *potlatch*-gift is an excessive expenditure intended to defy, humiliate and oblige its receiver.

Turkish" (181). But if happiness is opium then De Quincey has most certainly squandered it upon the Malay. As the writer suggests in a foreboding footnote, he will be subjected to "the frantic excesses committed by Malays who have taken opium" (181).

The Oriental wanderer returns to De Quincey's text in a digressive fragment dated May, 1818: "The Malay has been a fearful enemy for months. Every night, through his means, I have been transported into Asiatic scenery" (216). De Quincey now stages *himself* upon the Orientalist stage, amidst Orientalist scenery. Following his Malay, he undertakes a metonymic pilgrimage which leads him first to "Southern Asia...seat of awful images and associations." He speaks of "the ancient, monumental, cruel and elaborate religions of Hindustan," of the "antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories—above all—of their mythologies etc." He moves on to "the mystic sublimity of *castes* that have flowed apart...through such immemorial tracts of time." This fluvial image invokes "the sanctity of the Ganges," which in turn invokes the awe-inspiring "name of the Euphrates" (216). In a climactic flourish, De Quincey flees, metonymically, across Asia to Egypt:

> I fled from the wrath of Brahma through all the forests of Asia; Vishnu hated me; Seeva lay in wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at.(217)

It is by this progression that De Quincey discovers his own specific bodily relation to the Orientalist universe. He

follows the Malay from England to Southern Asia, then from time to the river, from Ganges to Euphrates, from Vishnu and Seeva to Isis and Osiris, and finds at last the crocodile. This crocodile, which covers him "with cancerous kisses...among reeds and Nilotic mud," is the "physical horror" (as opposed to the "moral and spiritual terrors") of the opium dream, and of the text the dream engenders:

> I was compelled to live with him; and (as was always the case in my dreams) for centuries. Sometimes I escaped and found myself in Chinese houses. All the feet of the tables, sofas etc., soon became instinct with life; the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes, looked out at me, multiplied into ten thousand repetitions.... (217)

The image pursues. It presses upon the dreamer. It looks back at him, meets his gaze. In the figure of the crocodile, the writer's body engages fully with culturally determined, imaginative productions; his text characterizes itself, marks its specificity, with respect to the much larger cultural text of Orientalism. The autobiographer's image-repertoire takes shape in culture's confrontation with the particularities, the differences, of his body.

De Quincey wanders through worlds engendered by the potency of words, of words *qui font rêver*, of words like Marvell's ball into which a whole world is compressed: "Malay," "Euphrates," "crocodile" and the rest. I recall, in this regard, a phrase I have not yet cited: Southern Asia is "the cradle of the human race" (216). This metaphor,

evocative and affecting, is also strangely formulaic: it sounds bookish; it has the ring of a commonplace. It reminds me that De Quincey's dream world originates as a reading. The writer has never (in waking life) travelled to China, to Indostan. His experience of Asia is inseparable from his books. His is a mind entirely saturated with texts, written texts predominantly, but also those of the pictorial, theatrical and musical arts. For De Quincey—is he alone in this?—experience is textual experience; he *reads* everything.

Opium itself is a textual element, a figure. But it is of special importance because—as an Oriental drug, as *the* Oriental drug—it enables a bodily access to the Orientalist stage; it allows the body to make an entrance. Only in terms of the "cult of opium" does De Quincey's extreme bodily and imaginative bondage become comprehensible. As an Oriental, the Malay is associated with opium and with the textuality he shares with the drug: exotica, enslavement, nightmare. The drug is not to be understood within an economy of productivity, but within an economy of orgy—pure expenditure, pure prodigality: "But what caused the dreams? Opium used in unexampled excess" (188). The dreams are the non-utilitarian productions, the luxuries, which De Quincey spends—squanders—in writing. Opium liberates the accumulated interior texts, allowing them to assert themselves insubordinately, to surge, to swarm, to run "amuck." The opium-eater errs within this tumultuous

landscape, buffeted, deflected, diverted by magic words, tantalizing imagery, alluring or frightful scenes. The text of this errancy, which De Quincey writes, is not, however, simply a chaotic repetition of cultural tropes, because the dreamer *errs as a body*. The writing spends not only cultural accumulations, but the stuff, the very substance of the self; the embodied self discovers its particular obsessions, and wastes itself upon them.

De Quincey's Malay text provides an illuminating, even paradigmatic figure of digressive movement precisely because it goes the full distance, goes whole hog. It exemplifies digressive lubricity; it abandons itself to the slippery and dangerous, wanton word. But digression need not be—indeed, typically is not—so spectacular and extreme. It has to do, most commonly, with whimsy rather than obsession; it is modest transgression which stops short of vice, self-indulgence which stops short of reckless abandon, pleasure which stops short of *jouissance*.

Digression, of this more moderate sort, is the stock-in-trade of the essayist—at least, the kind of essayist who, like the autobiographer, is concerned with writing the self, but who, unlike the autobiographer, writes it discontinuously, in bits and pieces. Content to present himself as the sum of his moments and movements, the essayist has no real need for an over-arching narrative structure. Moreover, the essayist always has, at least ostensibly, a subject which is other than his own

subjectivity, other than himself. He is challenged, therefore, to find himself in his subject matter.

"I have," writes Charles Lamb, "an almost feminine partiality for old china" (291). Funny that it should be old china: it seems that, for the Western mind, any and all things Oriental are tendentially digressive. (*I* respond much more to a Malay than to old china, perhaps because Malays take a prominent place in *Moby-Dick*.) "I cannot defend the order of preference, but by saying, that we have all some taste or other, of too ancient a date to admit of our remembering distinctly that it was an acquired one" (291). Indeed we do: Lamb has his china and I, my Moby Dick. These tastes, these inscriptions upon the individual body, will often lead us to digress, for our body is the text in terms of which we read all others. (I think here of Queequeg, who carries (and consults) a complete cosmogony cryptically tattoed upon his person.) As he reads, as he writes, the essayist seeks the traces which he can recognise as his own. I've spoken before of magic words. I find one here, in the opening line of Lamb's "Old China," with which I began this paragraph. One? Well, no, there are two, but I've already mentioned "china." I am thinking now of "feminine." Speaking ostensibly of china, Lamb writes, "I love the men with women's faces, and the women, if possible, with still more womanish expressions" (292). He speaks then of the china-image of a lady taking tea, and of "the same lady, or another—for likeness is identity on teacups—...stepping

into a little fairy boat" (292). This fairy boat marks the beginning of a digressive excursion during which the writer seeks himself in the feminine, the feminine in himself. He turns his attention from the tea-taking teacup-lady to the woman with whom he is taking tea, his constant companion Bridget (Mary). She embodies the feminine for Lamb. In her he seeks the traces of his own femininity. Pursuing the suggestion that likeness is identity, he even presumes to speak in *her* voice, which he does throughout the long digression which makes up the bulk of the essay (292 ff.). (Here again we see an interesting instance of wedded elements: even as the allure of the Malay is confirmed by association with opium, so old china becomes alluring by association with the feminine.)

Absinth. This is one of my own magic words, a wistful and nostalgic word. I find I can't resist it—written or spoken, in English or *à la francaise*. It leads me first to that Degas which bears its name—to that man and woman, each utterly lost in what the French call *l'incommunicabilité*. Their faces are so delicately and yet so entirely ravaged by the wormwood liquor they consume. Their absent gazes return me to the word. Absinth. Doesn't it sound like "absence" or "absent" pronounced with the drunken slur this liquor might induce? Doesn't it name, quite precisely, the loss or lack which is so evident in the empty eyes of the absinth-drinkers? From here my thoughts have many possible destinations. Absence, my own and that of those I care for,

has become for me an important consideration in recent years. I used to travel a fair amount and for unusually long periods—a year, a year and a half, two years. Not a very wise choice in some ways: absent from my home, I formed attachments much stronger than those one associates with vacation-acquaintanceships. In Quebec, in Italy, in New York City, I have friends of the sort that one should never have except in one's hometown. These are among my absent ones, and "absinth" may conjure up any one of them. Lately, however, it is more likely that my thoughts will turn to my best friend, whom I met eleven years ago, here in Edmonton. For five years now, she and I have not shared a city of residence. She's been living in Toronto for the last two years, and will (it seems) continue so for some time more. For now, and for some time to come, she, more than any other, embodies absence for me.

From a letter to my absent one:

> You say femaleness should be "reveried rather than diminished." "Reveried" was supposed to be "revered," right? Your word does not exist, but it should: *reveried*—dreamt upon, freely re-imagined, subjected to a process of reverie.

My friend is an indolent proofreader. Her letters abound with misspellings which are, however, never (or almost never) simply, barrenly incorrect. She creates new words, and recreates old ones, and in so doing deflects my reading. "Reveried" is my favorite. Her passage (to which mine responds) looks like this:

I am now reading a non-fiction work:

> *Monument and Maidens—The Allegory of the Female Form*. I'm reading this for several reasons, one of which I am hoping to come to a clearer understanding of why I paint women just larger than life, why I often draw myself huge dwarfing my environment and in general, why it makes more "sense" to me to paint large to huge paintings. [...] + I know that I love femaleness so thoroughly that I believe it is a force that should be reveried not diminished and so I seek to un-do (but it is an unconscious, intuitive choice *not* political first) by making my representation of women "just larger than life."

Here, now, I find that I digress even as I copy this passage. My mind wanders from my original intention. First of all, it occurs to me that I am copying "hand to hand," and I am charmed by the implicit friendliness of the gesture. (I always write my originals in longhand and then re-type. The difference here is that I am not copying from a printed text, but from one that is handwritten.) Just as I finish re-copying, however, I notice that her text does not look right in my hand—her words do not look right—(she is after all, a left-hander)—in my (right) hand. She, being a painter, has a professional interest in calligraphy. It is hardly surprising that her personal script should be so peculiar and original: she print-writes, all in pleasantly full-bodied, well-formed capitals. Her words are not well represented by my clumsy, but highly legible, school-boy hand. The words themselves are not mine. I notice the "huge" which appears twice, a marvelous, frightful, (upper-case) word which she loves. It is just too big, too cumbersome, for me; there are few spaces in my texts which will accommodate it. (I recall that I describe the whale, which

might properly be called huge, as "big, so very big.") And how can my scribble do justice to these women, "just larger than life," whom she aptly apparels in her upper-case?

The sentence structure and punctuation are hers not mine. The period which concludes a typical sentence of mine, is like a spindle which reels in my preconceived line of thought. Certainly, there will be snags—parenthesis, interjection, subordinate clause—but I will tug through. My friend builds her sentences letter by letter, word by word, accumulating thoughts as she goes along. I see that "one of which" is followed by three instances. I remark the use of the plus sign (+), an arithmetic symbol, an adding rather than an "anding." I note the sudden and surprising blossoming of words beneath her pen: "myself huge dwarfing." This thing we call "style," is it not in fact the traces of the hand—the hand which holds the *stylus*—traces that remain even after the text is subjugated to the rigors of typeset?

As I consider the immediacy of my friend's script, and my own immediate digression, I begin to understand the *I*, not as a pre-established, pre-existing, psychological entity, a (Romantic) "self," but rather as the designation of the speaking subject at the moment of enunciation: "*I* is the one who says *I* in the present instance of discourse" (Barthes 16-17). Digression now appears to me as a gesture which emphasizes the simultaneity of the subject and the text he writes. In the act of digression one is not "writing

it down" (documentation of a pre-existing phenomenalism of self), nor "writing it out" (expression or spontaneous overflow of the self), but simply "writing right now," shaping and transforming selfhood in confrontation with language.

Simply "writing right now"? Well, perhaps not so simply. When language and the subject come together, there is joy but also disruption. Language beckons, and I lose myself in pursuit:

> The reciprocal integration of language and the body, from which the imaginary originates, decenters man in relation to himself and marks the beginning of his errancy. (Irigaray 15, my translation)

Following Irigaray's argumentative path, I find that I err in quest of a return, an "impossible return to the body as the secure place of my own identity" (15). This return is impossible because my embodied selfhood "is no more than mediated by language, and its trace can only be recovered in the speech of the other" (15). In the speech of the other I seek myself; my desire for this speech is self-seeking. I want to speak the other by whom I am spoken. The mediating structures of language seem, moreover, to serve my turn (my return). I take up the *I*, an imposing person:

> the polarity of persons, a basic condition of language,...involves neither equality nor symmetry: *ego* always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you*, *I* being interior to *what is stated* [*l'énoncé*] and *you* remaining exterior to it.... (Barthes 16)

While I do not control the matter of my discourse, yet I inhabit it. I take place and precedence in what I speak. My

pursuit of myself in the place of the other, of *my* speech in the other's, is therefore susceptible to what Irigaray calls "the imperialism of an *I*" (9), an imperialism which, I see now, is very evident in all my preceding digressive configurations. In each of these the digresser seeks to find and appropriate the place and the message of the other.

I err, I digress, toward the feminine. As does Lamb. It is interesting, too, that De Quincey's tableau stages the Malay side by side with an English woman. I begin to wonder if the Malay, like old china, has not a feminine association? I wonder if the orientalized Orient is not an imagined feminine space? But these are questions for another writing. For the present, I can say that I digress in search of a "place of origin" I have lost. I seek to recapture "the initiatory integration of body and language" (Irigaray 15). The trace—the trail, the spoor of an absent presence—which I follow is not mine but that of an other. Yet the other voice which I, in digression, produce, is of my own making; it is a product of my imaginary, which is itself the product of my body's involvement with language. In digression, I seek the other but produce myself, with all my imaginative investments and *partis pris*.

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V. Essaying Male Feminism

I wanted to write a feminist essay. I thought of the project as an extending of the hand, as a writing that would extend my reach, as a writing that would offer itself, in a friendly manner, to feminism. I began research and discovered that my desire, which is somewhat representative, in that it is shared by some other men, has become recently a matter of debate. I discovered, too, that I tended to agree with, to be convinced by, those voices which describe my desire as impossible.

Even as a phrase, as a verbal construct, "male feminism" doesn't inspire much trust. It sounds rather like our own only-in-Canader-eh? Progressive Conservative party, or, again, like the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party) of Mexico. Paradoxical impossibility, for the "male feminist," is real and obvious enough. As Stephen Heath acknowledges,

> Women are the subjects of feminism, its initiators, its makers, its force; the move and the join from being a woman to being a feminist is the grasp of that subjecthood. Men are the objects, part of the analysis, agents of the structure to be transformed, representatives in, carriers of the patriarchal mode; and my desire to be a subject there too in feminism—to be a feminist—is then only also the last feint in the long history of *their* colonization. (1)

Heath has a great deal more to say about men and feminism, but the above passage is as good a summary as any other. What is most interesting, I suppose, is that Heath does have such a great deal to say, such a multiplicity of "angles,"

with regard to the problem of male-feminist impossibility. And yet, in a peculiar way, the impossibility of male feminism is just one, perhaps the One. Heath's is the impossibility of a man's occupying the impossible place of feminist writing, the impossibility of "getting at" the impossibility of feminist women writers.

Feminists like Alice Jardine write, write of, an impossible feminist discourse, a discourse which is not authorized, which has no master in the house. Risking a paradox, I am tempted to speak, here, of an enabling impossibility, one that challenges the writer to remain in impossibility, to write from the position of the other subject (another paradox), to forge a writing which is other than patriarchal and, at the same time, other than that of other women, other feminists. (It is interesting, in this regard, to note that Jardine's primary contribution to *Men in Feminism* includes an exchange of letters and then a dialogue: two feminists converse, each attends to and responds to the other, yet neither speaks for—speaks in the place of—the other.) This discourse, other than the Same and the One, is impossible and plural, claims respect for its own otherness and respects the otherness of other women. Such writing represents an otherness which is shared and yet not uniform, not of one form, not of the form of the One. It is thoroughly paradoxal, in that it is self-consciously against the *doxa* and yet refuses to constitute itself as a new *doxa*.

The male feminist, like Plato's artist, can produce only representations of representations. "We do not want you to *mimic* us," writes Jardine (60), and the emphasis (which is hers not mine) of the verb 'mimic' is pertinent. Male feminism has been, is, to a great extent a mimesis, and one that takes place in full knowledge, and not quite so full acknowledgement, that the Ideas are elsewhere and inaccessible. The Ideas—I am becoming more and more convinced—are in the female writing body, are in that body's confrontation with discourse, with politics and history. Male attempts to *forge* a feminist discourse appear, in this light, to be an attempt to access, and to lay claim to, the female body—an old rather than new tactic. Male feminist writing can be seen as the act of colonization to which Heath alludes. Or, to use Irigaray's terms, it can be seen as an attempt to make feminism the same as the One.

Although feminist writing is not a thing to be taken in hand, it seems that men can lend a hand. In "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route," Jardine writes, "What we want, I would even say what we need, is your work"(60). Well, Stephen Heath has done some work, and it is good work. "Male Feminism" is, I think, a valuable examination of the question, the problem, it addresses. It offers a service to feminism, without striving to master its discourse. Jardine, while she stops short of awarding "an honorary degree in feminist criticism" (60), still seems to find that Heath is less pungently male-odorous than most

other male feminists. And so, I suppose I might speak now of a third order of impossibility, that of a fledgling scholar whose experience of feminism is characterized by perplexity rather than familiarity and a degree of confidence.

Impossibility? Well, no, I can't really dignify my position to that degree. It would be absurdly grandiose for me to speak of my impossibility. Difficulty would be a more suitable, modest term. I am faced with the difficulty of achieving that intelligent, informed, engaged awareness which would allow me to begin to negotiate the impossibility, for the male feminist, of finding a place in the impossible discourse of feminism.

Where did it begin—this difficulty in the face of a redoubled impossibility? I feel inclined to return to Alice Jardine here. It seems an appropriate move, in that I have been using her as a kind of touchstone—well, yes, as an authority—up to this point. She visited my university last year. I didn't know anything at all about her, not even her name. I glanced at the announcement, which appeared in my mail box. A pair of lectures. The titles, unmistakably feminist. Alice Jardine. From Harvard. A feminist *from Harvard*. Not educated at Harvard, mind you, *working* at Harvard. It all made me rather curious.

For me, Harvard represented the pinnacle of the North American academy, a kind of City of God, but with real, solid, stone buildings. And trees, big, spreading, many-years-old trees. Are there such trees at Harvard? I

didn't know then, and don't know now, but that is how I imagined it: the City of God, the Garden of Academe. That, I thought, is where male knowledge looks upon itself, and sees that it is good.

I looked again at the name. Alice, for any student of English, is an allusive name. Jardine, the patronym, suggests garden, doesn't it? Alice in the Garden. Alice and the looking-glass, perhaps—in the Garden? There arose the question that piqued my curiosity: how would this Alice take place within the Garden? A pair of lectures, as I said. One of the titles now caught my eye: "D'apres Gynesis." Alice and the Garden. Genesis and Gynesis...

I attended. I won't speak here of the texts of the lectures, unless to say that they were, well, very difficult. Jardine was speaking within a post-Derridian, post-Lacanian, feminist context. I, unfortunately, was listening within a pre-Derridian, pre-Lacanian, male-academic context. And yet it was an enjoyment—both times—an enjoyment arising from a factor I had not considered: the bodily presence of the subject of discourse. That's the big difference between a lecture and a private, readerly confrontation with a text: in a lecture situation the speaker is present, in the flesh. This presence affects we-the-listeners, we who are also present— in the flesh—and in the lecture *theatre*. Although in the lecture theatre, as in the Brechtian theatre, the house lights are kept up, one can't quite escape the possibility of a degree

of mob response. With so many bodies pressed close together, attending to and responding to a speaking body, there is always—lights or no lights—a certain danger of contagion, a contagion of boredom, or again, a contagion of pleasure.

Speaking of contagion, and more especially, of a contagion of pleasure, I am not far from speaking of seduction. In each case, one finds oneself feeling rather feverish, and one doesn't know just why. Certainly, at the first lecture, and again at the second, I was seduced. (In this I'm sure that I was not alone, that I was accompanied by women and by other men. I don't wish to privilege my own seduction, except to say that it was and is of importance to me, being mine.) It's hard to say just how it happened. In "French Theory and the Seduction of Feminism," Jane Gallop suggests that, in order to think French theory, the feminist must accept "the necessity for entanglement, contradiction, and loss of mastery" (113). Is this not, very precisely, a description of the experience of seduction? At Jardine's lectures, I experienced entanglement, contradiction, loss of mastery—a necessity which a man must accept in order to try to think contemporary feminism. I was pleasantly confused, and therefore subject to seduction. The speaker was not interested in seducing me—I know that. But is there anything more seductive than a seducer who is not trying to seduce?

No, I can't deny my complicity. As a first year graduate student, one who had been several years away from

the academic world, one who had been working during those years as a bartender—working, that is, within a sexist industry of predominantly male bartenders and exclusively female cocktail waitresses—I was acutely and rather anxiously aware of changes in the composition of the academy. The academy which had educated me as an undergraduate was not the same as that in which, as a graduate student, I was endeavoring to claim a place. And I knew that the changes I was witnessing were only a beginning. Sympathetic accommodation—an ugly but accurate phrase—my sympathetic accommodation of feminists and feminism would not be nearly enough. An intellectual conviction about the justice of feminist claims would not suffice. Although I had not then the vocabulary to describe it, I was beginning to recognize the easy treachery of my socially inscribed, male body, to notice the changes of tone, of posture, that marked my dealings with women, to notice the significant differences in the form and content of my speech, when speaking "man-to-man," when speaking "in mixed company." I was working, at that time, within the relatively familiar, relatively secure sphere of graduate courses headed by senior male professors, but I knew that would have to change. I knew *I* would have to change. Therefore, I wanted to desire the change; I wanted to be seduced.

Seduction, however, is very different from engagement. The former is typically a transitory experience, a pleasure

without a pledging of troth. If seduction is to lead, with time, to engagement, the initial experience must leave one with an insoluble residue of desire, a remainder and a reminder. I'm not sure if my experience of seduction has the potential to engage me, but I know that I have not been able to put it aside. I am unable to do so because it pleased me and also disturbed me.

After the first lecture, during the discussion period, I maintained a timid silence. During the second, I took heart. Certainly, this speaker might be dangerous, but she was not at all uncongenial or forbidding. Speak therefore! I thought. Speak your pleasure! Yes, I spoke, but my embarrassment at what I spoke, at how I spoke, is still too acute for me to record it here. Let me say, by way of analogy, that it represented an instance of the country bumpkin struggling to speak his admiration to a sophisticated cosmopolite. Each new sentence was a new blunder added to the preceding ones it was intended to correct. It occurred to me, upon reflection, that I did not know how to speak to this woman. How, I wondered, can I learn to speak with this woman?

But there is more. The pleasure of the lectures made me aware of an absence. No sooner did I think, "I like this woman, enjoy this woman," than it occurred to me that T---- (my best friend) would have liked and enjoyed her too. I felt her absence, regretted that she was not there to share the pleasure.

My problem then is one of separation and distance. My friend is a felt absence during my experience of pleasure. She lives in Toronto, and her absence therefore seems to me inevitable and necessary. Separation and distance seem, moreover, to figure our gendered relationship; geographical fact becomes metaphor for the politics of gender. Similarly, Alice Jardine, even while fully present, is distant, separate in discourse; I am unable to speak with her. In each case, I feel a desire to arrive where they are.

As it happened, I was at that time constructing a master's thesis proposal concerned with pleasure and essayistic writing. I had already decided that I would propose, as part of the thesis, three "original" essays. "I will write," I therefore decided, "a feminist essay." It seemed like the natural solution: I would write an essay which would mediate the pleasures and confusions of my confrontation with feminism to my absent best friend; in the process, I would learn, hopefully, to speak with women like Alice Jardine. The idea seemed a bit preposterous even then, seemed to put the cart before the horse, to conflate and confuse that which is *prae* with that which is *posterus*. How can one write what one does not yet know how to speak? Although this question bothered me, it did not put me off the project. I conceived of writing as a stable, carefully controlled experiment having none of the impulsive, inflammatory immediacy of speech. For me, speech was an often dangerous delirium, writing an arduous but fairly

exact science. Writing, a deferred communication which allows for editing and revision, appeared to offer the possibility of an initiation. I hoped that writing (and the attendant reading) would prepare me for speech, as the rigors of the studio prepare the dancer for the transports of performance.

I put the proposed project before a professor of mine. Yes, he confessed, he too had felt attracted to what he called "the peculiar, exciting energy of feminism." And he had experienced the difficulties of that attraction. Like me, he sensed that feminism is "where it's at," that there is life in feminism. Unlike me, he had already learned that feminist writing is more than a style and rhetoric which can be examined and adopted, and that the most well-intentioned attempt at co-operation and co-ordination can easily become an attempted co-option. I was more attentive to the shared excitement than to the unshared circumspection. How might I make a start, I wondered. He recommended *Men in Feminism*, a collection of MLA papers concerning men's relation with feminism.

I started. And my beginning was the beginning of the end, at least in terms of the project as it was originally conceived. I had wanted to treat feminism as a "topic," to find its place and to locate my writing in that place. I encountered feminism which is not one, but plural, feminism made up of various, dynamic *topoi*. Psychoanalytic feminism (to risk a generic term) interested me most. But the

psychoanalytic feminist project of "writing the body" served more than anything to shake the solid ground under my feet. I began to realize that "writing the body" is, must be, something very different from the safe, systematic practice which I considered (and desired) writing to be. What, moreover, did it mean to "risk essentialism" (G. C. Spivak, qtd. in Jardine 59)? Did it mean that "writing the body" as a feminist is also, necessarily, doing so as a female? If so, how could I hope to write a feminist essay? I still wanted to write, however. I still wanted to learn how to speak, how to address feminists and feminism. Following Heath's lead, I thought I might try to place myself in relation to feminism. But as I continued my reading of *Men in Feminism*, I experienced an increasing unease as I began to discern the ways I *am* implicated in the various male discourses of the text.

As I begin to read Paul Smith's "Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory," I am embarrassed by an introductory paragraph which figures men's relation to feminism as an active penetration, perhaps unwanted, as "a more or less illegal act of breaking and entering, entering and breaking" (33). Yet my embarrassment reveals an unwanted identification with the speaker. And a question is raised, here, as to the violence, the violence of patriarchal re-inscription, which may—perhaps inadvertently, perhaps unintentionally, perhaps ironically, but also perhaps necessarily—mark men's relation with feminism. (To what

degree is my own figure, the seduction of a man by a feminist, a re-inscription in reverse, an abandonment of dominance and mastery which allows me to remain securely and comfortably placed in heterosexuality?) I recall an earlier question, posed by Heath: "Is it possible to wonder whether there is not in male feminism, men's relation to feminism, always potentially a pornographic effect?" (4)

I read Cary Nelson's "Men, Feminism: The Materiality of Discourse," and again I begin to feel squirmy. He asserts, "I cannot therefore easily place myself *in* feminism in any unitary way" (156). That sounds modest and sober-minded enough. Yet this avowal follows upon an introduction which repeatedly, insistently, places its speaker in feminist contexts: at "a National Women's Studies Association meeting"; "at a feminist session at the Modern Language Association"; "at a Feminist Scholarship Interest Group meeting" (153). In such contexts, he is, at times "the only man...awkward, unwelcome...invisible...superfluous," or again, "too generously welcomed" (153-54). At other times, he is "simply a member of a mixed audience" (153). Yet I can't help but suspect that this lonely man, welcome or unwelcome, feels special, that this member of a mixed audience—(Ah! here we all are, men and women, free and equal!)—feels an all-too-reassuring sense of belonging. And my suspicions are, of course, grounded in my recollection of analogical, if not identical, feelings and experiences. "More importantly," Nelson continues, "the women I live with

has been involved with feminist organizing and feminist scholarship for many years" (156). And yes, I too, having my best friend, a woman and a feminist, know how such a bond can make a man feel—well—absolved, legitimate, almost authorized.

The instances of uneasiness which arise from my reading of men's texts in *Men in Feminism* are not limited to those I have discussed here. Yet all such instances have this in common: they make me aware of a desire-investment which I share with the writers, a desire-investment which takes many forms. If this awareness is uncomfortable, it is also, for me, enlightening. It tells me that, when men confront feminism, male desire is not the thing that is put aside, but the very thing that is most in play. This is not to deny the role of political consciousness or political conscience, but rather to suggest that such consciousness and such conscience are bound up with desire. It is to suggest that, at least within the North American academy, feminism has become a site of desire for men: for me, for my professor, for the men in *Men in Feminism*.

Stephen Heath wonders, "Do I write from desire-fear, to say simply in the last analysis 'love me' ...?" (6). As I consider the implications of this question, I recall Rosi Braidotti's assertion that male feminist writing "bears witness to the historical significance of the emergence of women as speaking, writing, desiring subjects" (qtd. in Jardine 56). Women, feminist women, are desiring subjects

speaking and writing their desire, and we men—at least some of us, at least some of the time—desire their desire. We may even try to be what they desire. To be what they desire?! Don't feminists desire a woman, a new woman? Not surprisingly, then, the male feminist at times falls into what Elaine Showalter calls "critical cross-dressing," and offers his male-inscribed body, with its tell-tale *odor di uomo*, modestly, coyly, and often rather clumsily apparelled in feminist rhetoric. It is a performance which offends the eyes and the nose of those he seeks to please. And yet feminist desire *is* exciting for men. (That, if nothing else, is what a book like *Men in Feminism* makes abundantly clear.) We want to be desirable and desired. Moreover, we experience feminist analysis and enunciation as a demand: we must change, must learn to respond adequately—at least adequately—to the generative and transformative historical force which is feminism. It is to be acknowledged, certainly, that male interventions in feminist process may be, often are, opportunistic, conciliatory, intrusive or even violent. And it is becoming clear that mimicry is inefficient and more than a little absurd. The question then: is there, at this historical juncture, something men can offer which would coincide with feminist desire and demand?

"And what do feminists want?" (60), Jardine asks. It is a rhetorical question; she has an answer which I touched on earlier. Your work, she says, we want your work. Work about

feminism? Work on the topic of women? No. Citing Cixous, Jardine writes, "*You still have everything to say about your own sexuality*: that's a challenge, if it helps you to think of it that way" (60). And she goes on to say,

> It is much easier to speak about women than to speak as a body-coded male—to imagine a new man ... I do not agree with Smith or Heath that to work through your male sexuality would only reproduce what's come before, reproduce the phallocentric imaginary. Not if you've really read and lived feminist work, which I think some of you have. (60)

I would tend to—would have tended to—agree with the men on this issue, but Jardine's last sentence is unsettling. If, as a man, I have really been perturbed, unbalanced or (as now) unsettled by my experience of feminism, then I could not, in writing my desiring body, "reproduce what's come before." Feminist writing has changed my experience of my body and my sexuality. I remember, in this context, my reading of Irigaray, especially her evocation of female auto-eroticism, of the lips—no not *labia*—the lips which endlessly embrace each other, which are not one, nor two, which are plural, yet divisible only by means of violence. I remember experiencing a kind of void in the region of my crotch, sensing that I had not the organs that the text required. Such experience upsets the phallocentric imaginary of which I am a bearer. In trying to write my body and speak my sexuality, I could and would produce a great deal of that imaginary, but not just that and not in just the same predictable, redundant form. There would be something

different, something else, perhaps not a great deal, but, well, a little bit of new man. I am not *in* feminism, but I am, I think, "after feminism" (Jardine 59). As a man after feminism—that is, a man coming after, coming later, but also a man *after* feminism, that is, desirously in pursuit—I feel I must take Jardine's challenge seriously, even though I may not be able to meet it at present, even though it may oblige me to undertake a long initiation of serious reading, serious listening, serious writing.

It must be admitted that one is disrupted by Jardine's challenge. It exerts pressure upon a site of male resistance, the site of the massive male investment in the disembodied voice, in the "one" which is the voice of the One. As Irigaray notes in *Parler n'est jamais neutre*, the "I" reveals its sources (2), and that is what one doesn't want to do. One, a hovering presence, does not wish to be embodied, historically situated in relation with other historically situated bodies. Being nowhere in particular, one can be—or at least wants to be—anywhere and everywhere. One is not obliged to be here and not there, this and not that, subject which is not and cannot be other as well. One resists being I, this body, here and now.

As I consider the discourse of the one in the context of my present concerns, I see that it is the voice of dissertation. One speaks of what one knows, impersonally and objectively. One's knowledge is universal. Its relation to history is incidental, because it is true for all time. It

is not the process but the data of experience, which new experience can only confirm. I, on the other hand, am the voice of essay. I am subject to the perturbations of the body, am troubled by its often opaque density and by its vicissitudes. Yet I accept the body as a means of experimenting knowledge. Indeed, I take knowledge production to be, in large part, a bodily process, fraught with uncertainty, subject to changes both personal and historical. Therefore, if I am to give a generic name to the writing Jardine requests, I would call it essay—not the feminist essay I had originally conceived, but one that seriously considers the implications of my "I," of my embodied voice.

In the 1990 Broadus lectures at the University of Alberta, Shirley Neuman describes the body as a site of social inscription, but also as a site of resistance. In considering this description, I begin to realize that a man's relation, my relation, to this body politic of inscription and resistance cannot be that of a feminist. Feminism is very precisely what my male-inscribed, "phallogocentric" body resists. My body is the noisy, fractious thing that disrupts my attempts to learn a new way of writing and speaking. I think of it as that which must be silenced. And yet, if I am to discover the bodily resistance Neuman speaks of, the radical resistance *to* inscription rather than the resistance *of* my pre-existing inscription, I must learn to write the peevish, rude, bumpy, halting,

embarrassing thing hidden beneath the neat folds of what Neuman calls "the canonical male body"—the body of the One—the body which, being assumed, need never be specified. The choice, it seems, for men as for women, is between a body which accepts itself as written and a body which writes—and perhaps rights—itself.

Examples of the male body-in-writing are not abundant, but Roland Barthes, I think, provides a good one. This body is not "after feminism," nor certainly is it a body *d'apres*—coming after and emerging from—feminism. But the writing of this body exemplifies, I think, a process which might serve as a means of making the body—the male body, my body—available to new meanings, new meanings which are "after feminism."

Barthes's body is one of his floating signifiers, it is *the* floating signifier, the one in which all the others meet. As Levi-Strauss defines it, the floating signifier is "a value of indeterminate significance, which is itself empty of meaning and therefore able to receive any meaning" (qtd. in Hill 113). The conception of the body as a floating signifier, when contrasted with the body Neuman describes, must appear utopian. Yet I think it deserves consideration, in that it obliges Barthes to follow a certain ethic of writing. Because the body's status as a floating signifier is always to be renewed, Barthes, in writing his body, must spend meanings rather than accumulate them—or at least, spend as rapidly as he accumulates. Writing is the

expenditure which empties the body—as much as possible—of socially-inscribed meanings and makes it available, receptive, to new meanings. Remembering Neuman once again, I suspect that these new meanings are also social, and that the receptive body will be susceptible to re-inscription by the dominant discourses of patriarchy. The new meanings, however, together with the body which receives them, will have more historicity, more contemporaneity than their predecessors. By the process of writing itself, by spending its acquisitions, the body continually renews its relationship with history. And I think this is an important point, in so far as feminism and feminist process constitute a significant portion of here-and-now history.

Is it possible to reveal the body's *resistance* to inscription, its irreducible difference, by means of a writing process which engages the body in the transition of its meanings? I wonder if this other-body might be glimpsed, like the body of an actor in the midst of an on-stage costume change. But no, this provocative possibility is too much to hope for. The body-in-writing's *déshabille* can never be more than a relative state of undress. This body must stage itself appareled in language; it cannot write itself out of language (where socially-constituted meanings are "always already" inscribed). Yet it does fill out the clothes. It gives each new costume something of its own shape. It is the linkage, the element of difference which, by means of this very difference, gives integrity and shape

to each change; it is that which links, in Barthes's case, the text of *A Lover's Discourse* with the text of *Roland Barthes* or *The Pleasure of the Text* or, for that matter, *Mythologies*. Precisely because meanings are kept in a state of flux, it becomes possible to distinguish them from the body. Meanings begin to lose their natural appearance, begin to reveal themselves as constructs which appear, and which are altered or abandoned, within an historical process. Issues such as gender and bodily uniqueness or individuality may, thereby, be clarified.

"The word's justification," writes Barthes, "is less its meaning than its placement. The word lives only as a function of its context..." (*The Rustle of Language* 205). He is concerned, here, specifically with the *mana*-word (a floating signifier). As Barthes writes his body, it becomes indistinguishable from its textual instances; "body" becomes the *mana*-word, a word that is justified in terms of its situations. Contextual relation renders it more *juste* (more exact, more correct, more legitimate, more just). Given that "body" is, for Barthes, the *mana*-word, I am tempted to consider the body-in-writing in the light of these propositions, and to suggest that it too is justified by placement and relation. Like the word, this body must engage with its history, a history which "encumbers and constrains," but "sometimes, on the contrary,...serves to revivify" (Barthes 204). Similarly, it must discover and define itself in relation to its others—other bodies, and

more importantly perhaps, other bodies-in-writing. By placing itself in confrontation with a history it embodies and with its others (others which embody a different history, a different relation with history), the body may be able to assume its own becoming. A writing which is the body's paradoxical production-as-expenditure could prove to be, for men as for women, an enlivening, regenerative process. And it may begin to "justify" the body's relations, by making the writing body a site of historical change, by making it available not simply to the scrutiny, but also the message of the other.

So, I find myself now at the end of a writing which is, in a certain sense, not yet a proper beginning. At best, this writing is a preface. Yet it does begin to situate its subject. It serves, however inefficiently, as a speech lesson, and provides, hopefully, a point of contact. Who is it for? For me, and for men who are in a similar situation, for men, that is, who are "not too far along." And for women who might be interested in knowing where such men might be, if for no other reason than the fact that such men are, I believe, quite numerous. And for my best friend.

I've thought of her often while I composed this text. She is its preferred reader, the desired *you* in terms of which the written *I* takes shape. I am thinking of her now in relation to a small painting which, at the end of a visit, she gave me to take away. Just briefly, I should describe it.

Not a very cheery picture. In the centre, a figure shaped like a human body, but entirely bound up, bandaged, mummified—a creature of indiscernible identity. By its "feet," an assortment of hats—party hats? Not sure. Gay designs cover their surface, but their shape, in every case, is the tall, pointed cone of the dunce-cap. The bound figure is wearing one, but inappropriately—(appropriately?)—upon its face, like a muzzle or like a mute beak. A human figure, as I said before, and yet a strangely songless and immobile bird.

I have an ambivalent relation with this picture. Like other gifts and keepsakes, it stands in for a presence but confirms an absence. It affirms a bond of friendship, but recalls separation and distance; it is a meeting place and a barrier. Yet as I begin to consider it in the context of my present concerns, I begin to think of it as an invitation (or perhaps a challenge). It suggests a project. I remember that writing is, metaphorically, an unraveling. (Barthes describes the word as a tangle, the body as a raveled thing.) I see that the mummified figure offers a few loose strands, a few stray ends that might be tugged on. Perhaps this figure is a skein to be unraveled and woven, unraveled and woven again. And perhaps the core, the essential spool or spindle is never quite revealed. My friend's painting poses the problem of the body bound. She might, I might, take up its unbinding, the unbinding and the weaving of its words.

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VI. Conclusion

Once again, I find myself yearning for a French title, "Des essais du plaisir": concerning essays concerned with pleasure; concerning essays whose substance is pleasure; some essays concerned with, and made up of, pleasure; concerning (some) attempts undertaken for, and characterized by, pleasure; concerning (some) trials.... My thesis is a writing, in essay form, on the essay form. I seek to understand textual pleasure by experiencing and producing it. There is, in all of this, an obvious failure to establish and maintain "critical distance." Yet there are, I think, reasons to recommend such a "failure," reasons that I touched on in my introduction, and which I'd like to expand on here.

The essay is a particularly pertinent area of study, for one positioned as I am within the academic institution. I aspire to the master's degree, a degree above the bachelor's and below the doctor's. I think of it, therefore, not as the degree of the master, but as the degree of a degree of mastery, the degree of limited mastery. It is assumed that I have achieved a certain level of competence within my field of study, but I am still very much a student. I have the status of the bachelor (the knight-aspirant or squire), but what I speak is not *doctrina*: the knowledge I produce and put forward is still to be examined, verified, confirmed. The present phase of my career offers me, in a certain sense, the essayist's subject

position: I am authorized to speak a knowledge which is not entire and self-sufficient, which requires the voice (the vote) of another.

The essay as a pleasure-text begins there, with the writer's need for a reader who confirms or challenges his discourse. The authority of the writer and his text is not constituted in advance. The writing requires a reader's contribution. It is not fast food; nor is it the boss's Christmas banquet—a gorgeous spectacle offered to avid but empty-handed subordinates, an opulent display designed to overwhelm and intimidate. The essay is potluck *à deux*: I bring what I got, you bring what you got, and we see if we can make a meal of it.

Authority is becoming an issue here, so I'll be explicit: authority is what you relinquish when you decide to seek and find textual pleasure; textual pleasure begins with loss of mastery. (I suppose these statements must sound suspiciously axiomatic. But they do speak my experience, and, well, even the essayist feels sure from time to time.) I feel inclined to Frenchify yet again: for the essayist "le *je* est enjeu." The *I*, disseminated throughout the essayistic text, is in play. It is a contingency. It is a wager in a textual gambol involving subject, object and other. The game begins as I constitute myself in my speech-act, in my enunciation. My selfhood, whatever it was or may have been before, is now contemporary with this writing:

> the subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted yesterday: the

> *I* of the discourse can no longer be the site where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored (Barthes 17).

I, subject, have an object. I can distinguish myself from my object in so far as I speak and it does not. But I am in discourse. To speak or write the object is not to stop speaking or writing the subject. I become involved with the object: it intrigues, it pleases, it charms me. It becomes *my* object; it becomes subject(ive) matter. I may strive to disengage or disentangle myself, but, like the silent-screen clown, I only become more engaged, more entangled. Quite soon, I am utterly lost in the activity; no longer just *in* the writing, I *am* the writing. I am now a function of this discourse, by which you know me, by which I know myself. Yes, it is just here that you, playing Ollie to my Stanley, come in. Perhaps you watch me for a bit. You frown, you shrug. But then you become interested in the matter I'm mixed up with; or you become interested in helping me disentangle—I, after all, am clearly not master of my material. You decide to lend a hand.... But it *is* a sticky business, a very sticky business.

The silent clown is for me a particularly useful figure because he speaks only with the body. The body, for reader and writer, for you and me, constitutes our susceptibility to textual entanglement. The moment you or I touch the text, we become involved; with touch we become contingent. We begin to seek that bodily knowledge which might be called grasp. I may even say that, for the essayist and his reader,

the verb "to know" has always a somewhat Biblical inflection. Both desire an intimate confrontation with a body of knowledge.

A question arises from all I have said: to what degree do my own texts conform to my description of the essay? I must say I re-read them with satisfaction and dissatisfaction. I consider my address, my appeal to the reader, and I remember something I once read on the jacket of a Sinatra album: "What makes Sinatra so special? He sings for you, just for you." Montaigne, I think, achieves the "Frank-effect," and does so by means of candor. I may become lost in the intricacies of his arguments; I may begin to feel inadequate, to feel that I am not the reader he desires. But then he offers me some intimate confidence, tells me, for instance, that he is a premature ejaculator: "I have the failing of being too sudden" (III.5.671). Now I know I *am* his reader, simply because I feel certain he would not tell anyone else what he has told me. Woolf, too, knows how to address one particular person. She has the persuasive touch. There is something in her tone which says, "It's just you and me, you know. We can do as we like." When she tells me what we do, what we desire, what we feel, I acquiesce. Although I knew of no such doings, desirings and feelings a moment before, I know them now.

But my question has to do with *my* writing. I don't find the "Frank-effect" there. I am, by nature, too cantankerous and disputatious to do things Woolf's way. As for Montaigne,

his method attracts me more, but I have that distrust of the personal which makes me prefer talk of things to talk of self. And I cannot use the figure—most pertinently, the figure of the body—as he does. I have, I suspect, a lingering Protestant distrust of the graven image: it embarrasses the disembodied purity of my abstract conceptions.

I do hope, however, that my essays offer an implicit pledge: "Come along with me, and I'll try to make it fun." That is not the best an essayist can do, but it is adequate. There is a skinny man on this side of the text. I don't offer a great deal of my body, but I don't have much of it I can spare. Yet I do find that my prose becomes more fully self-engaged as I progress from text to text.

As I examine "Une interrogation portée à mon plaisir: The Essay as a Pleasure-Text," I note that a foregrounding of the speaking subject marks its beginning. I stage myself struggling with my material, troubled by doubts, speculations, questionings. Once I am on track, the textual *I* becomes a rather discreet, largely unobtrusive presence. It reasserts itself toward the end of the essay, an uncertain figure once again, an insecure yet insistent integer unsettled by *jouissance*. Here, too, I stage myself, but not with a director's confident control. The introductory "scene," while it is written in present tenses, represents a situation which is in fact *passé composé*. The concluding confrontation with Barthes is more immediate. I

know, in advance, that I cannot discuss Barthes without touching on *jouissance*, but it is not until the real writing moment that I discover the entanglement of the touch.

In "My *Moby-Dick*" the embodied self is much more in evidence, and much more entangled in the textual weave. It is interesting, however, that the foregrounded body of the reader belongs to you more than to me. I am there with you, as a companion and a guide. I am not a master, but I know more. You are subject to surprises. You are to be initiated to experiences—like cutting-in or trying-out—which I know already. Yet I am troubled by unresolved uncertainties; the residue of oil is still on my hands. Moreover—this is quite disconcerting—I feel obliged to bring a child along with me, and to sort out his experience in order to sort out my own.

This desire for the figure of the child manifests, I suppose, my—our—Romantic heritage. Yet it is, more pertinently, a troubled and troubling desire of the post-Freudian age. My phrasing at certain moments may disavow—I refer to "the kid," or to "the child I once was" (a phrase which implies "the child I no longer am")—but I am nonetheless unable to distance myself effectively from my childhood. (Interestingly, in my late teens I developed the habit, which still endures, of referring to myself as "the kid," a fact which begins to reveal the duplicity of my textual construct.) "The most crucial aspect of psychoanalysis," writes Jacqueline Rose,

> is its insistence that childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind. Childhood persists.... It persists as something which we endlessly rework in our attempt to build an image of our own history. (12)

The child, Rose's and my own, is never dutifully and obediently on the road to adulthood; the figure of the child cannot be subordinated to the journey metaphor. This metaphor is, of course, very much in evidence in all aspects of my whaling essay, but it fails to capture, control and contain my childhood experience: the child is on the voyage, my voyage. His insistent and independent presence recalls "that there are aspects of our psychic life which *escape* our conscious control." The child-shipmate challenges "the very notions of identity, development and subjective cohesion" (Rose 13). I am not one, nor is the text I read. (And need I recall that I read the book he chose, for reasons of his own.) As for the text I write—to what degree is the child produced also a producer? Such a question perturbs my (supposedly) stable relationship with language: I no longer have a sure handle on the integral *I*, the dependable locus where language is received and reproduced. I remember now, the Chatty Cathy doll (an object of fascination in my childish days) which Ishmael becomes. I see that language is a site to which we return, endlessly, seeking the reassuring repetition which we never find. Ishmael's tale is always the same, but my experience of it never is. My adventure ends, again and again, but it is never resolved. Each time I am

left adrift, lost at sea, awaiting yet another return.

"Of Digression" begins, not surprisingly, with an invocation of the strangeness of words. Language, evidently, has become a problem. But I try to let it play upon me while I struggle to discern its intentions. The subject of this essay has no child—at least not in the foreground. He has, however, a body. And because this body is engaged with language, the imaginary asserts itself. Like the Barthesian *jouissance* of the first essay, the imaginary is something which, in an essay on digression, I feel I must touch on. Like *jouissance*, like the child of the whaling adventure, it is a textual element I am unable to master. Yet I want to believe that my imaginary is mine. I imagine it to be a peevish piece of private property: I may not control it, given its extreme susceptibility to the tantalizations of language, but it belongs to me. I imagine it to be individual, idiosyncratic, even a bit naughty—digressive and transegressive.

My reading of Said's *Orientalism* challenges my proprietary notions. I have previously envisioned De Quincey's Malay digression as the very bookish fantasy of a very bookish, idiosyncratic individual. Upon reading Said, however, I begin to see it as an individual experience of a cultural fantasy. Lamb's experience of old china seems, moreover, to confirm this re-envisioning. I reconsider, therefore, my own docu-drama prostitution scene. I re-examine my digressive pursuit of the feminine trace.

Luce Irigaray, whose work I have read in anticipation of a planned "feminist essay," comes to mind. From her I have learned that the imaginary originates with "the reciprocal integration of language and the body" (15, my translation), a reciprocal integration which I have lost. Language has become strange to me; I speak and write in the Symbolic. My imaginary is no longer mine: it has become the place where culture writes itself upon me and marks me as its own. In digression, I seek the language of my body but find the language of culture, seek the Imaginary but find the Symbolic.

My essay stages a quest for embodied language, for a Word which is flesh. I err in a language maze seeking Ariadne's thread. As Irigaray tells me, my "trace can only be recovered in the speech of the other" (15). My best friend, an object of digressive desire in "My *Moby-Dick*," has moved into the foreground in "Of Digression." I am on the trail of the feminine. I find, however, that my friend retreats before my advances. My writing seeks her writing. My writing seeks to rediscover or recuperate her presence, but only serves to emphasize her absence.

In "Essaying Male Feminism" my desire for feminine writing is rediscovered and modified. I experience Alice Jardine as a speaking presence rather than a written absence. I am moved to desire feminist speech. Yet I am unable to produce even a reasonable male-inflected facsimile of this speech. I fail to find my trace in her speech. In

search of a writing which will prepare me for speech, I turn to the papers of male-feminist lecturers collected in *Men in Feminism*. I read the feminist commentary and criticism of male-feminist discourse. I seek to discover my friend in the embodied, present speech of feminists like Alice Jardine and Shirley Neuman, and in feminist writing. I try to find myself in the discourse of male feminists like Stephen Heath and Cary Nelson. By staging dialogue and debate, I endeavor to discover (and recover) a sense of immediate relation.

The essaying of male feminism explores a proposition: I am a subject only in relation with an other. The proposition is not new to me, but seems now more complex and problematic than ever before. I see myself now as a gendered subject looking toward a gendered other. The web of language spans the space between us. We are both already entangled, but we are both web-spinners—at least potentially. "Essaying Male Feminism" does not teach me how to write the body, but it does teach me the desire to do so.

Having reconsidered my writing, having reread my texts and rewrestled with them, I am most struck by my persistent invocation of the feminine. My project begins with Woolf's description of the essay as a pleasure-productive text. With Woolf as my guide, I choose my essayists of pleasure: Montaigne, Addison, Hazlitt, Lamb. She also mediates Roland Barthes's relation with the earlier writers. Having examined my pleasure-text "tradition," I move on to my whaling essay. "My *Moby-Dick*" is, admittedly, a male-oriented essaying of a

very male-oriented book. Yet even as I begin the essay, I digress toward the feminine, toward the ex-girlfriend who has custody of "my erstwhile *Moby-Dick*," toward my best friend whose books I steal. Before I am through, Mom and Big Sister must make their appearances. In "Of Digression" my friend begins to haunt my text. "You surround yourself with women," was one reader's response to "Essaying Male Feminism."

Have I, I ask myself, constructed the essay of pleasure as a female-inflected form of writing? I began my project with a desire to critique conventional, authoritative criticism, by bringing pleasure to the critical text. The pleasure I bring is intimately associated with my experience of femininity. Similarly, I have proposed to offer an alternative to the critical stance which represents the critical subject outside and apart, exerting a penetrating gaze upon his object. My alternative orientation, a criticism "from the inside," seems now to be peculiarly feminine: knowledge is to be generated from within. Certainly, I am not trying to say I have written as a woman. Yet I have attempted to discover and develop a subjective, self-engaged relation with the pleasure-text. This relation has involved pleasure, desire, the active body, the loss of mastery, the loss of self-mastery. My experience of the pleasure-text is like my experience of the feminine; my confrontation with the text affects me as my confrontation with femininity does. In a sense, my writing has taken shape

as a preliminary response to the challenge Alice Jardine offers the contemporary male writer: I have begun to write myself as a gendered, desiring subject, begun to say something about my own sexuality.

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