

Using the Logic of Dreams to Unpin the World

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Abstract

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“Using the Logic of Dreams” interrogates fiction through a nonfictive lens, whether that be *Angel in the Forest*, Marguerite Young’s 1945 account of two historical attempts to establish utopia in New Harmony, Indiana; Robert Dale Owen’s 1860 *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World*, a collection of prophetic dreams and dreamlike occurrences; Anaïs Nin’s *Novel of the Future*, essays in which she argues for a psychoanalytic approach to fiction; and Sigmund Freud’s “Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” wherein he endeavors to uncover the meaning of his young patient’s recurrent dreams. Interwoven with excerpts from “The Brutality of Fact,” David Sylvester’s series of interviews with artist Francis Bacon, this paper aims to uncover the elusive qualities that make a work feel alive. More specifically, I interrogate how the subconscious (that is, dreams) can creep into the conscious world, allowing reality to take on the quality of a mirage. Ultimately, my goal is to explore realities in which logic has been sacrificed—exemplified by nineteenth-century New Harmony, which abandoned all standard social mores for the sake of ‘transcendence’—and to apply these case studies to fiction, which can possess a similarly illusory boundary between the real and dreamlike.

Using the Logic of Dreams to Unpin the World

The authors I admire have a strange grip on reality. Most of them treat language as a code that can subvert other codes of being, those larger but invisible systems that underpin our notions of personhood and propriety. My favorite authors use language as a tool for simultaneous confrontation and evasion, highlighting the arbitrary strangeness of doctrines regarding assimilation and success in the English-speaking world. In other words, these authors use neat symbols to explore what lies behind our attempts to reduce existence to neat symbols. They write dialogue that feels off-kilter but lovely (lovely because finally a character is giving voice to something the reader has thought without language); they write characters who feel alone and want to wallow yet no longer have any patience for themselves. These authors have most likely experienced personal misfortune or are empathetic enough to pretend.

I would like to stop self-consciously thinking about my writing, if only because I worry that becoming conscious of something kills it. Painter Francis Bacon told interviewer David Sylvester, “The moment you know what to do, you’re making just another form of illustration” (*The Brutality of Fact*, 58). He was free to fling paint at the canvas and half-distort his portraits with a washcloth—his modes of interruption were immediate, rooted in the physical world—but I must create disturbances that follow a certain code. My sentences have to make logical sense even if their content is illogical. Perhaps this is the obsession that drives my writing: getting at something tenuous through “tense, tiny black symbols on a calm white page” (Gaitskill). Like me, my characters are obsessive, searching for a sense of

meaning in the nondescript worlds I've created for them. Ideally, I would expose my characters' unconscious drives to the reader without the characters becoming aware of those drives themselves. My protagonists' interiority often pushes them down a single track that leads to a cliff. I would like to stop following this track with them, so I can begin to write stories that go somewhere.

My only worry is that authorial self-awareness might serve as a filter that turns feeling into the idea of feeling, meaning into its pale approximation. I worry about Francis Bacon's warning that careful intention leads to mere illustration. But stories are linear, progressive; they might begin as an accident but cannot end that way. This can be hard for me to wrap my head around. My life occurs without premeditation, and sometimes I wonder at choosing an art form that requires such inward focus. Often I find out what I think as I say it, and writing is the gift and burden of being able to deliberate on these thoughts and transform them.

I create pantomimes that move quickly, jerkily, and wish to be more at ease than they are. They wish they could find a new kind of beauty in the world, so they turn to the old reliable modes of self-destruction—substances and other people. Bacon's goal as an artist was to "record one's own feelings about certain situations as closely to one's nervous system as one possibly can," and though I am still preoccupied with this goal I wonder how I will have to evolve as a person to write characters that continue to sustain my interest (43). Can I write according to my nervous system, without eventually diluting my characters because they are all a reflection of the same nervous system? I am interested in how perception can inform reality, or how a person can take bare stimuli—whatever exists outside their window—and imbue it with a feeling that unilaterally opposes their downstairs neighbor.

In *Angel in the Forest*, Marguerite Young writes a lyrical biography of two men who attempted to establish utopia in New Harmony, Indiana.

The founder of his own sect of Christianity, German preacher George Rapp relocated to North America with eight hundred of his followers in 1804, after facing decades-long scrutiny from local officials. (He called himself a prophet and was summoned for interrogation by the Württemberg police, though he was only imprisoned for a few days.) Young describes Rapp's relationship to his believers as the following:

Out of sight, he could never be out of mind. It was impossible to stand leaning on one's shovel. Fear was implicit. Father Rapp might be under the sweet-potato field or under the green corn—who knew where? Pushing his head through a strategic opening, he would seem, from a distance, to merge with the landscape, as only another rusted hay hillock or wintry thorn bush, only another rock. Impossible to say that the trees did not have eyes, and the grass did not have ears. Thus Father Rapp played on the superstitions of his people. (14)

The physical boundaries of Father Rapp's existence stopped mattering to his followers. Their fear of him had made its way into their bodies, so he followed them wherever they went. According to his doctrine, their ascension to Heaven depended on their economic utility in life. As such, their individual desires (for rest, for love, for material comfort) could not be trusted: "Man... in particular the Rappite, must wrestle with that dark adversary, his own nature, his own instinct" (14). In the fiscal sense, Rapp's expatriate commune was fruitful: an 1820 evaluation of New Harmony estimated the land and resources to be worth \$1,000,000, not adjusted for inflation (38-39). Each citizen of New Harmony worked for twelve hours a day, keeping time according to martial music played by a band on the hills (46). It was not uncommon for people to die of exhaustion. Though mourning was forbidden,

their open graves were filled with flowers before the graves became grass again, markers also being forbidden.

New prospects arrived regularly from Germany to restore this would-be depleted workforce, and George Rapp lived in the “one luxurious private dwelling,” his followers in barracks “with no door facing any other door—an architecture to discourage gossip” (43-44). Organizing these barracks by gender, Rapp separated families but allowed husbands and wives to work the fields in identical uniforms. In fact he banned marriage altogether, or rather its function of God-approved lust. The Rappite order was to be a celibate one: “If community were to be preserved,” Young writes, “the individual must be destroyed and his perceptions to sink to the level of general desire” (37). Rapp himself had two children, John and Rosina, both of whom had accompanied him to New Harmony. Upon hearing that John’s wife had given birth despite his orders, and that his son “was happy, the poor fool,” George Rapp attempted to castrate John and restore his sainthood. John died in the attempt. His wife disappeared. Father Rapp raised his granddaughter alone, and she became the “flower of [his] old age, it was said” (66).

Yet even the forcible implementation of his doctrine did not keep New Harmony in perfect order. As with most things, “there was the problem... of boredom, even of inertia” (61). Rapp could not shape his followers’ perception of the material world if it became too familiar, and his “idea of power required expression, by continual conquest... there had to be a wilderness proportionate to their objective and a feeling of nameless fears” (61-62). Rapp had to be the person carving a path out of the darkness, this path—work until you die; Heaven has a soft bed waiting for you—preferable to blind

terror because at least it was named. He had to be the only source of familiarity in order to sell his followers on a system that disavowed present-moment contentment.

Driven to the unknown, George Rapp sold New Harmony to Robert Owen in 1825, using the money to buy a plot of land in Pennsylvania he named “Economy” (64). Robert Owen was a Welsh socialist, spearheading another exodus from Europe to conjure utopia. He believed greed led to suffering, which I do not dispute, and that this ‘new’ land, unfettered by European history or tradition, aided by the soil and river and light, would become a model for existence free from selective exploitation. Owen’s prior attempt at New Lanark, a school for mill children in Scotland, was quite successful:

[The children] seemed unconscious of themselves. They exhibited no fear. They were unabashed by dukes and princes. It was as if a charm had veiled them from the savagery of nature. They, who should die young, according to an edict long ago handed down, or at least according to their present practice, were not only saved for posterity, but saved with clear eyes, round cheeks, dimples, laughter. Yet not one was insolent. They wore, at dancing, a costume of white cotton, in the style of a tunic, knee-length for boys, ankle-length for girls. They had three fresh changes a week. They were so clean, they smelled like rosebuds after a rain, according to the report which has come down. The Duke of Kent’s physician, Dr. Grey MacNab, smelled them, one by one, and turned them around and inspected them from head to foot, methodically. Never, he declared, had he witnessed so much happiness on Earth as at New Lanark, where he had found that “nature unadorned is most adorned.” (Young 121)

Owen earnestly wanted to highlight the power of care in rising above one’s lot in the world. If given the chance, mill children could smell like gentry, “like rosebuds after a rain.” He believed there was a way to restore humanity to its barest good, to live as part of “nature unadorned” and thereby “most adorned.” (Of course this is the paradox I want my fiction to achieve, to feel pared down to its richest point.)

Following his success at New Lanark, Owen hoped to establish not just a school for children but a

self-sufficient society, advertising in European newspapers and asking the “industrious and well-disposed of all nations” join him (178).

Unfortunately, a month after arriving in New Harmony, Robert Owen returned to Wales to “wind up his trans-Atlantic affairs.” He left the eight hundred people who had arrived with him—the same number who had come from Germany with George Rapp—alone, to find a happiness they had never found before. Owen’s doctrine seemed simple: “Kindness must be the one consistent mode of treatment, and courtesy the only rational species of deportment” (234). Kindness quickly turned to hunger, especially when a group of English farmers, “homesick for God,” left New Harmony two weeks in (238).

Eventually Owen returned with his family in tow, including his twenty-four-year-old son, Robert Dale Owen. He had not screened for occupation or ability (a fair point—doing so would have infringed on the unequivocal welcome of utopia), and there was not an appropriate division of labor or skills to sustain the community. People were not just hungry but personally distraught: “In this vast sea of rational human nature, every man was a drowned sailor, and the differences between one man and another were too quickly dismissed” (248). In other words, Owen’s indiscriminating love towards all man led to a blindness towards all men. His role as prophet did not extend itself towards helping people to grow corn or do their laundry. Rather he hoped the bounty would come from them, that novelty and isolation would be enough for them to conjure mass happiness. According to Young, this only gave reality the unpleasant sensation of a dream: “More and more, the present became unbearable, a nightmarish myth, a community of sleepwalkers—for by omitting all which did not come under the domain of reason, it seemed that they had omitted reason itself” (245). To turn back to fiction writing

for a moment, I am similarly afraid that my impulse to “distill narrative” is what prevents me from writing narrative in the first place, as though I’ve sketched out a single skeleton and now expect it to dance.

Robert Owen’s iteration of New Harmony failed two years after it was founded. Owen delivered a faith-filled speech to his followers in May of 1827 and departed soon after, leaving them to stay or go as they pleased. While “all agree that a battle was fought,” said one member of the community, “It still remains for time to prove whether the battle was for the good or evil of mankind” (264). This ambiguity is one of the things that fascinates me about Young’s account of New Harmony’s two failed communes, which occurred consecutively, enacting opposing visions on the same acres of land. George Rapp is an easy villain, though he understood farmwork. Driven by good intentions, with ideals I share, Robert Owen created a reality severed from capitalistic greed and ended there, before happiness or prosperity. Both men attempted to imbue the world with their particular brand of faith, and perhaps I write fiction out of a similar urge. It is easier to manipulate a written reality than to try and upend the one in front of me. Really, *Angel in the Forest* interests me because what I can imagine always pales in comparison to the strangeness of history.

It was also helpful to read a work of nonfiction from a poet, as Young prioritizes imagery even in her action-oriented writing. She visited New Harmony in 1940, rendering its inhabitants abstract cutouts with a mythic quality: “Grandpap’s old woman once was young, and she had yellow hair, and her picture taken in a Kodak, but the man did not ever send it to her—and then she was wrapped in canvas and dropped into a dusty well” (20). Here Young applies fairytale logic to reality, writing an account that feels elusive yet exact in its imagery. In the first half of the sentence, the woman has

“yellow hair” and her beauty is captured by a Kodak camera. But she never receives the photograph, and her youth becomes memory before she or the reader can acknowledge it, her body “wrapped in canvas,” sent down a “dusty well.” Young’s exact imagery justifies the sparseness of this story, and adheres to Francis Bacon’s belief that “the form should at once be very precise and very ambiguous” (Sylvester 118).

Bacon thinks about art in terms of capturing the state of his nervous system and transmitting it to the viewer, and Young also works in deference to sensation: “A wheat field, much less God, does not come to us as an entity—but is many particles, is many sensations. How should a wheat field ever be lifted above the earth, above time and fluctuation?” (41). Like Bacon, Young acknowledges the difficulty of turning a never-ending sensory experience into a work at once flattened and legible and beautiful. In “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” Leslie Marmon Silko questions the need for replication at all. She describes an Indigenous worldview in which the environment stops being naked territory for mimicry: “Ancient Pueblos took the modest view that the thing itself (the landscape) could not be improved upon. The ancients did not presume to tamper with what had already been created. Thus *realism*, as we now recognize it in painting and sculpture, did not catch the imaginations of Pueblo people until recently” (1005). The Pueblo people would not have deadened the “many sensations” of a wheat field by attempting to imitate it directly. Silko continues,

The squash blossom itself is *one thing*: itself. So the ancient Pueblo potter abstracted what she saw to be the key elements of the squash blossom—the four symmetrical petals, with four symmetrical stamens in the center. These key elements, while suggesting the squash flower, also link it with the four cardinal directions. By representing only its intrinsic form, the squash flower is released from a limited meaning or restricted identity. (1005)

Abstracting its form allowed the Pueblo potter to convey a deeper meaning for the squash blossom, even if the image itself appeared ‘simpler,’ without literal likeness to the flower. I am trying to integrate this view of art into my own work, to lesser success. I want to write about real things but in a way that can sustain my interest, seeing as I already encounter life in its purest form—that is, I already experience the beauty of sensation. So if I describe a flower I do not want to describe it in language less efficient or effective than just looking at it. The challenge, of course, is finding the “intrinsic form” of each story I write, or how the structure of my work can inform its meaning—how can I free myself from having to uphold reality, while also using fiction to consider reality?

Bacon’s interviews with David Sylvester hinge on this desire to capture the real while divorcing it from familiarity. Bacon describes his “obsession” as the following: “How *like* can I make this thing in the most irrational way? So that you’re not only remaking the look of the image, you’re remaking all the areas of feeling which you yourself have apprehensions of” (28). According to Bacon, art is a matter of making something recognizable through unrecognizable means, because simple recognition dulls perception but total estrangement does nothing for the senses either. (Bacon in fact disliked abstract art.) In fact, he believed this close-to-contradictory pursuit is all the current artist has:

I think that man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out games without reason. I think that, even when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting, in a peculiar way they were still, whatever their attitude to life, slightly conditioned by certain types of religious possibilities, which man now, you could say, has had completely cancelled out for him... You see, all art has now become completely a game by which man distracts himself; and you may say it has always been like that, but now it’s entirely a game. And I think that that is the way things have changed, and what is fascinating now is that it’s going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all. (29)

The beauty of the work, then, must now be self-contained. The environment no longer feels menacing in its unknowability, death now feels final and therefore gets further ignored, so art is limited to the mystery of emotion rather than the mystery of God. We have failed to find utopia on this earth, so my options are to interrogate that or find another means of escape. I need to have the conviction of George Rapp without becoming a failed despot, or maybe I have to reconcile myself to the idea that being a writer is very much like being a failed despot, and my subjects (characters) can both act according to my whims and their own interiority. Up until now I have adopted an attitude more like Robert Owen's: earnest in my faith that things are well-realized because I named them once. I believe I have fallen into the same trap of believing something exists without doing the work to make it so.

At the same time, however, I want my stories to feel organic, not overly meddled with. Young describes a young man, Friedrich, who visited New Harmony when Robert Owen still presided over the settlement. Young describes Friedrich's belief that the "universe was the body of the entirety of God—a huge animal without eyes, for there is nothing outside God for God to look on, not even one small, wet violet" (56). I would like to write as a "huge animal without eyes," to be so in the world I have created that I can no longer see it, because I sense and appreciate this blindness in other people's work. I want to write mundane images that somehow feel tactile, unsettling at their best—like Young's "one small, wet violet"—so that my language can travel from my nervous system to the reader's and the narrative doesn't lag under the weight of self-conscious processing on either side.

Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, grew up in New Harmony and wound up being both a congressperson and mystic. In 1860, years after his father's failed commune, he published *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World*, a nonfiction treatise on potentially otherworldly phenomena dating

back to the sixteenth century. The first third of his four-hundred pages is devoted to the portentous power of dreams. Owen believed that inexplicable events adhere to the same system of natural laws as the practical world, that ‘miraculous’ events simply abide by an unknown code. He believed that things appear impossible when their means are kept hidden. I would like to take a similar approach to writing, allowing ‘miracles’ (plot and characterization) to occur when they’ve become part of some inner logic, therefore not miraculous at all but in line with a larger system. Ideally, I could cherry-pick which parts of that system to expose to the reader.

In *Footfalls*, Owen thinks about patterns that exist beyond the individual but reveal something about the individual’s psyche. For example, one of his dream-related anecdotes is as follows: “An old story, mentioned by several Italian authors, of a merchant, travelling between Rome and Sienna, who dreamed that he was murdered on the road. His host, to whom he told his dream, advised him to pray and confess. He did so, and was afterwards assassinated on the way by the very priest to whom, in confession, he had communicated the knowledge of his wealth and his apprehensions” (Owen 99). Like Young’s story of the young woman turned old and dropped in a dusty well, this anecdote feels like a parable, where individuals are flattened to expose something about the human experience. In “Create Dangerously,” Edwidge Danticat writes, “Like most creation myths, this one too exists beyond the scope of my own life, yet it still feels present, even urgent,” and Owen’s anecdote feels like a lesson that occurs out of time, or across time: a traveler confesses his fears to a priest who brings them to fruition, the man dying only because he verbalized his desire not to (7).

Owen introduces his collection of ephemera by asking, “If it be a sacred and solemn duty to study the Scriptures in search of religious belief, is it a duty less sacred, less solemn, to study nature in

search of religious knowledge?” (32). This gets at a more difficult goal: to find and draw out the sublime from the natural. I find Owen’s perspective of the world generally heartening, and I think part of my fascination with his text comes from my feeling that modernity has replaced speculation with a very narrow understanding of what is real. Lots of the time this understanding remains a collective delusion, except rooted in the stock market instead of nature or dreams. Perhaps I just needed his permission to inhabit the macabre. He also asks, “If God has closed the way, man cannot pass thereon. But if He has left open the path, who shall forbid its entrance?” (32). For a long time, I was scared to venture into certain territory with my stories, worried the content would be deemed too dark or the reader would apply the content to their understanding of me as a person. But if “He has left open the path” and it’s something I’m interested in writing, why forbid myself preemptively? By evoking an outside authority, even one I do not believe in, Owen helped me circumvent my over-careful psyche. In *Angel in the Forest*, Marguerite Young writes, “Man, Coleridge said, must go forth to the bride who is death, there being no other way to resolve polarities, and even this might be ineffectual” (98). Death is the bride of my work, probably because it feels like a riddle, a state of being so totally removed from life though it only touches the living. Like Owen, I’m interested in what can exist between the poles. Since I am not yet a mystic, this makes fiction my primary means of exploring consciousness and its end. I especially want to explore how reality is filtered through consciousness, the fact that existence is an act of mutual engagement, where perception of the outside world becomes internal truth.

Owen later asks, “To what extent, and under what circumstances, is it reasonable to distrust the evidence of our senses?” (70). What happens when our senses are given competing evidence? How might a person’s past influence their sensory uptake and interpretation? Owen then quotes Henry

Holland's *Chapters on Mental Physiology*: "A dream put into action might become madness, in one or other of its frequent forms; and, conversely, insanity may often be called a waking and active dream" (93). I would like to write fiction that feels like a waking and active dream, in other words to investigate personhood without being tied to practicality. Citing Darwin, Owen writes: "*The essential part of sleep is the suspension of volition*" (87, emphasis in original). I might aspire to the dreamlike because my characters lack volition—they are often impulsive, disrupting their lives without a real sense of agency, following a track they cannot see that propels them towards self-destruction. I am interested in patterns of behavior that feel inescapable despite the appearance of autonomy, and what factors may have led to the formation of such patterns. I am also now interested in what would happen if my characters 'woke up,' and how this might make writing harder. My characters could no longer be self-prophesied victims of circumstance but would have to become people with clear intent. Their worlds might have to become richer to accommodate for this, and I might have to stop writing stories where suicide feels like a viable option.

In 1909, fifty years after Owen's book (which mentions the concept of hysteria as a "nervous malady of an aggravated character"), Sigmund Freud published his *Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, based on the three months he spent treating eighteen-year-old Dora, a pseudonym. Dora's father was cheating on her mother with a woman named Frau K., and Frau K. was married to a man who made repeated advances at Dora. At one point, the two families vacationed together, at which point Dora's father and Frau K. left their familial bedrooms to take up residence in isolated rooms at the end of the hall. When Dora asked her mother how she felt about her husband moving rooms in this manner, her mother told her that "her father had been so unhappy at that time that he had made up his mind to go

into the wood and kill himself, and that Frau K., suspecting as much, had gone after him and had persuaded him by her entreaties to preserve his life for the sake of his family” (48). Here the concept of suicide allows Dora’s mother to ignore her husband’s infidelity, explaining away the strangeness of his actions while also making clear that he should feel guilty enough to want to kill himself. I would like to attempt writing scenarios that feel similarly disconcerting without violence actually occurring, where the potential or rationale for something feels as rewarding as the act itself would be. Robert Dale Owen, who witnessed New Harmony firsthand, maintained that “the extraordinary usually surprises us the most,” but the “ordinary may be not only far more worthy of our attention, but far more inexplicable also” (78). I agree—I admire when writing feels surprising first and inevitable after. The only issue is that as the writer I have to dream these things up.

In his *Case on Hysteria*, Freud describes how meaning can be relational, how placing objects beside each other creates associative significance that adds to the inner logic of each object. He writes, “It is a rule of psychoanalytic technique that an internal connection which is still undisclosed will announce its presence by means of a contiguity—a temporal proximity—of associations; just as in writing, if ‘a’ and ‘b’ are put side by side, it means that the syllable ‘ab’ is to be formed out of them” (55). Charles Baxter applied this concept to fiction, asserting that a story makes “intuitive sense” when its “scenes feel right when set next to each other” (“Rhyming Action” 155). Baxter defines rhyming action, or events linked beneath the surface-level action of a story, as occurring “in that curious area of writing between conscious intent and unconscious or semiconscious impulse” (156). Freud’s psychoanalytic method feels helpful for fiction writing, perhaps because he stresses unconscious impulse, searching images for latent meaning. He writes,

In a line of associations, ambiguous words (or, as we may call them, ‘switch-words’) act like points at a junction. If the points are switched across from the position in which they appear to lie in the dream, then we find ourselves upon another set of rails; and along this second track run the thoughts which we are in search of and which still lie concealed behind the dream. (82)

According to Freud’s reasoning, I could deepen my characters’ reality through re-ordering associations that are already present, finding a “second track” of meaning through said reordering. Baxter writes,

Prophecy run forward gives the prophet the power of forecasting and a habit of denunciation. Prophecy run backward, into rhyming action or *déjà vu*, gives the participant a power of understanding. A forward prophetic power is worldly and has something to do with magic and foresight; a reverse prophecy, a sense of rhymed events, is unworldly and has something to do with insight. It moves us back into ourselves. (142-3)

Where Owen was concerned with forward prophecy, with morbid and self-fulfilling dreams, Baxter and Freud highlight the power of events that make sense (or possess an uncanny aliveness) only when viewed retroactively. I would love to write a story where the beginning does not spell out the ending but is changed by the ending. Freud and Baxter make me want to play more with time in my stories, to consider how the meaning of an image changes based on its relative location. Freud was also helpful in distinguishing image from association—I would like to attach familiar emotions to images that have nothing to do with me, or vice-versa, applying strange emotions to a familiar image.

However, I’m not trying to use Freud to justify a fixation on neurosis. I would like to escape that in my writing, or to see what lies outside of it. Freud states, “We are all familiar with the delusional phantasies of paranoiacs which... occur in stereotyped forms with almost monotonous regularity,” and I am bored of the “monotonous regularity” of my own fixations (145). I never want to avoid despair or boredom completely in my work, but I am looking for a way to break out of the ritual of discontent, or the particular way I have ritualized discontent. Baxter writes, “Trauma is not a progressive narrative. It

is a loop. It begins where it can, and ends when it sees the whole thing returning,” and this may be why many of my narratives feel like a loop—they end in exactly the same place because my protagonists cannot conceive of anything else (158). “But when it is not traumatized,” Baxter continues, “the action of memory on our present life may be closest to the feeling that rhyme creates, not full rhyme, but half rhyme, assonance, slant rhyme” (158). So rhyming action is best achieved by an untraumatized memory, which goes against the notion of the tortured poet I used to hold close. Neurosis allows for circularity, but needs something else to create the more interesting half-rhyme.

Perhaps I should consider how hysteria’s cause does not have to be static, rooted in a single or fixed event. Freud believed that “every hysterical symptom involves the participation of both sides. It cannot occur without the presence of a certain degree of *somatic compliance* offered by some normal or pathological process in or connected with one of the bodily organs” (57, emphasis in original). Hysteria requires a physical response to an emotional catalyst, though with time this physical response may function independently from the original trigger: “A symptom that has been once formed shall if possible be retained, even though the unconscious thought to which it gave expression has lost its meaning” (70). As a result, a physical hysterical symptom “can express several meanings in *succession*... It is not necessary for the various meanings of a symptom to be compatible with one another, that is, to fit together into a connected whole. It is enough that the unity should be constituted by the subject-matter which has given rise to all the various phantasies” (Freud 70). Hysteria occurs without neat logic, threaded through both the memory and body, and its psychological catalyst can often yield a response that begins to act independently. Hysteria therefore follows a natural system, but a disjointed one, where parts of the system may begin to take on material beyond the original source. Coping

mechanisms (self-harm, repetitive action, hypochondria, etc.) thus attach to events that have nothing to do with the original neurosis. These inciting events would follow a dream logic over a linear one, unified by image rather than chronology.

According to Freud,

A regularly formed dream stands, as it were, upon two legs, one of which is in contact with the main and current exciting cause, and the other with some momentous occurrence in the years of childhood. The dream sets up a connection between these two factors... and it endeavors to re-shape the present upon the model of the remote past. (89)

As per his definition of dreams, I would like to use a single sequence of images to inhabit two places at once, where present action feels charged with the feelings or events of the “remote past.” Describing another patient of his, Freud writes that she “pressed her dress to her body with one hand (as the woman) while trying to tear it off with the other (as the man)” (151). I think my writing would be better if my internal battles were less conscious, if I committed to holding the dress with one hand and trying to rip it off with the other instead of agonizing over my split self and thereby not acting at all. I would like the tension of my stories to be felt through action instead of paralysis. But for this action to feel real I worry I cannot be fully aware of it, even as I write: “These actions, about which consciousness knows nothing or wishes to know nothing, in fact give expression to unconscious thoughts and impulses, and are therefore most valuable and instructive” (Freud 95). Perhaps it is a matter of wanting to write about things my consciousness “wishes to know nothing about.”

In 1968, Anaïs Nin published *The Novel of the Future*, a study of the creative process in which she emphasizes Freud’s psychoanalytical approach to dreams. Nin writes, “The dream, instead of being something apart from reality, a private world of fantasy or imagination, is actually an essential part of

our reality which can be shared and communicated by means of imagery” (23). A place where images are allowed to develop freely, through intangible logic, dreams avoid the censures we place on ourselves in waking life. These censures can be detrimental to fiction-writing and uninhibited expression as a whole. Nin continues,

I select parts of the external world which reveal the internal, the parts which are necessary to the inner drama. That is what lies behind my seemingly incomplete characters or descriptions of places. The whole house or the whole body or the entire environment may not be there, but we know from modern painting that a column can signify more than a whole house, and as in Brancusi’s sculpture, the expression of the flight of a bird was achieved by eliminating the wings. (24)

Here, Nin promotes a selective economy where invisibility is not the same thing as nonexistence. The words that do appear should suggest a whole that feels real even if it remains hidden. Absence should lead somewhere, not serve as a substitute for the author’s not-knowing. Nin believes that “to reveal the elusive inner structure one has to travel light and fast,” which makes me feel better about my tendency to move quickly, though it also highlights the “elusive inner structure” missing from some of my stories (26). Nin thinks in terms of omission or reversal, citing Brancusi’s sculpture—the removal of wings—as a way to capture the essence of flight (24). She therefore believes that an ‘incorrect’ logic can be applied to create the ‘correct’ feeling. This reminds me of Freud’s idea that switching points on a junction may create new avenues of interpretation—that some paths can be carved backwards. I am also now thinking in terms of negative space and creating an image out of focused erasure. Raymond Carver and Ernest Hemingway know how to do this.

Seeing the way editor Gordon Lish transformed Raymond Carver’s “I Could See the Smallest Things” (originally titled “Want to See Something?”) was helpful in gaining access to the process of

focused erase. In the story, middle-aged narrator Nancy has trouble falling asleep, going to the backyard where she encounters her neighbor Sam Lawton salting slugs in the middle of the night. Lish omitted whole paragraphs from the manuscript, expository lines like “I had to get up for work in a few hours. Cliff had to get up too, but he’d gone to bed hours ago and would be okay when the alarm went off. Maybe he’d have a headache. But he’d put away lots of coffee and take his time in the bathroom. Four aspirin and he’d be all right.” Lish condensed that paragraph to read only: “It was late. I didn’t want to look at the time. I drank the tea and smoked another cigarette. After a while I decided I’d go out and fasten up the gate,” keeping the story focused on tight, in-scene action. Lish trusted Nancy’s husband to feel whole via quick sentences like “Cliff’s breathing was awful to listen to. His mouth gaped open and his arms hugged his pale chest. He was taking up his side of the bed and most of mine.” The story focused on a quiet disturbance in a quiet routine, Lish kept Nancy’s encounter with her neighbor limited to Sam’s desire to eradicate the slugs, the man obsessively pouring Ajax powder on the “slimy things” following his first wife’s death and a fallout with Cliff. Lish deleted several hundred words of context, lines from Sam like, “We were good friends... I come out here nights after Laurie [his new wife] and the baby are asleep. Gives me something to do, is one thing. You folks are asleep. Everybody’s asleep. I don’t sleep good anymore.” This dialogue explores an emotional condition the reader can glean more powerfully from Sam’s action, and the reader feels the true weight of Sam’s feelings precisely because he refuses to spell out his insomnia and discontent. Lish trusts the reader in a way Carver initially does not, limiting backstory to shadowy subtext, which adds resonance to simple acts like Sam directing his flashlight “onto the dirt under the rosebush.” The story feels alive because it is

confined to the present moment. Readers have to parse the character's motives rather than being presented with neat explanation.

In *The Novel of the Future*, Nin describes the value of discerning a person's motives, albeit through a fatalistic, voyeuristic lens:

I did not find that the drama lay in tragic incidents of a person's life, but in the hidden motivations which lay behind these incidents, the 'interior fatality.' I was more curious about what prevented a personality from developing, a talent from blossoming, a love from being fulfilled... This meant finding the original wish by examining early dreams and fantasies, their progression, and their withering. (56)

Like Freud's definition of hysteria, my ideal story would tie a particular image to a physical response in the reader. I would like to somehow bypass mental processing and allow the reader to react subconsciously (though directly) to an image. To do this, I need to express the "interior fatality" of my characters in a more nuanced, emotionally realized way. I need to stop yielding to neurosis, or let neurosis be felt through the action and circumstances of the story. Thankfully, Charles Baxter imbues Nin's idea of "interior fatality" with a necessary levity:

An event becomes beautiful without reference to its ethical character. What can be beautiful about terror? Terror is not lovely when it weighs eight hundred pounds. But when, in art, it is as light as a wing-feather, and as quick, it takes on the rapid half-lost half-found aura of the glimpse, or a dream that has lost all content but its coloration. (157)

So the terrible can be lovely, which is a relief. Like Nin, Baxter emphasizes the necessity of quickness to achieve this. I believe terror should be examined from an indirect or limited angle so it can take on an essential elusiveness—as Baxter writes, the quality of a "dream that has lost all content but its coloration." Viewing fiction in terms of dreams and the unconscious has allowed me to consider image without the burden of context, and I am drawn to what Baxter describes as the "hypnotic and

mesmerizing” stories poets tell (141). Poetry feels like the closest approximation to Robert Dale Owen’s definition of insanity as a “waking and active dream” (93). Dreams are mesmeric because they allow for the dissolution of time—a momentary reversal of death—which can also be achieved through language. Indeed, Baxter believes poets attend to “narrative echo effects” which serve as “an almost subvocal denial of historical progression” (142). He believes that this “denial of... progression” occurs via pattern:

I don’t think the pattern has to explain itself to be beautiful. It doesn’t even have to announce itself. In fact, I think it’s often more effective if the echo effects, the rhyming action, are allowed to happen without the reader being quite aware of them. If the subconscious or the unconscious gets us into these time tricks, these repetitions, then it’s in the subconscious or the unconscious where they should be felt. (Baxter 146)

I would like to stop mistaking overt patterning for plot, instead allowing the ritualistic nature of my stories to sink below events, to the level of the subconscious or unconscious. In line with Bacon’s view of the artistic process, Baxter believes that rhyming action requires the author’s unconscious cooperation—“The more we talk about patterning, the more we reduce spontaneity, and the more we increase the impression of heavy-handedness, a kind of artistic overcontrol” (147). Lish omitted sentences that revealed Carver’s “artistic overcontrol,” paring the story down to the “rapid half-lost half-found aura of the glimpse.” The context had to exist for Carver to write the story, for the interaction between Sam and Nancy to feel meaningful, but Lish knew that it had steeped into the bones of the story and no longer had to announce itself. Many of my stories have proven unsuccessful because I did not realize I have to burden myself with context before I can relieve that burden for the reader.

The oblique nature of Baxter's "narrative echo effects" allows successful stories to take on a shifting, mesmeric quality. Unsuccessful stories feel like a failure to dream, or like the author's attempt to force the reader's entry into a world that does not exist. Owen's endeavor to record mysterious events, the respect he gives prophecies and apparitions, seems to be an obsession with rhyming action. His work serves as a denial of historical progression—a turn back to the ether—during a 'pragmatic' era of rapid industrialization. He does not label his anecdotes ghost stories, but real accounts that occurred in unassuming houses, to families with quiet routines like ours. This gives material fact a sense of permeability. I already recounted his story of the Italian merchant killed by the priest to whom he confessed his fears of being killed, and the following is another example of death looping back on itself:

Mrs. Cl——, of S——, in the country of S——, had a beloved daughter, who had been a long time ill and received no benefit from her physicians. She dreamed that a friend of hers, deceased, told her that if she gave her daughter a drench of yew pounded she would recover. She gave her the drench, and it killed her. Whereupon she grew almost distracted: her chambermaid, to compliment her and mitigate her grief, said, surely that could not kill her;—she would adventure to take the same herself. She did so, and died also. This was about the year 1670 or 1671. I knew the family.—*Aubrey's Miscellanies, Chapter on Dreams*, p. 64 of Russell Smith's reprint. (Owen 94)

The story is tragic because the woman had faith in a ghost who looked like her friend. Taking the misguided advice of her subconscious, she instigated the deaths of two people through no ill will of her own. The woman mistook the particularity of her friend's advice ("a drench of yew branch pounded") for reliability. Accessing centuries-old anecdotes through Owen makes me feel like I have evaded time, with access to the strange details of a life far removed from mine. The above account possesses a grim irony, a neatness that doesn't feel too looping, characters at once flat and sympathetic.

Regarding the end of James Joyce's "The Dead," Baxter writes, "By this time... the entire landscape has been transformed, so that we have entered the region of the past made manifest—the return, not of the repressed, but of the missing and lost" (149-50). Owen and Young's historical accounts are works of nonfiction (regarding Owen, his subjects had faith in the stories they told), but they feel divorced from reality because they evoke a "missing and lost" world. I believe rhyming action can occur between stories, and I hope reading these historical accounts is enough to make them a latent presence in my own work. I would like to engage with ghosts without destroying the ephemeral quality that drew me to them in the first place, and believe fiction and sleep are the places this can happen.

In an attempt to highlight the role of rhyming action in a single work of fiction, I want to consider Barbara Comyn's 1959 novel *The Vet's Daughter*, which opens with the following paragraph:

A man with small eyes and a ginger moustache came and spoke to me when I was thinking of something else. Together we walked down a street that was lined with privet hedges. He told me his wife belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, and I said I was sorry because that is what he seemed to need me to say and I saw he was a poor broken-down sort of creature. If he had been a horse, he would have most likely worn kneecaps. We came to a great red railway arch that crossed the road like a heavy rainbow; and near this arch there was a vet's house with a lamp outside. I said, "You must excuse me," and left this poor man among the privet hedges. (1)

Alice, the novel's protagonist and daughter of a veterinarian, encounters a stranger while walking home, thinking of "something else." She describes the man with pity—"if he had been a horse, he would have most likely worn kneecaps"—though when she arrives home the reader discovers that Alice, by virtue of her violent father, is also someone to be pitied. Her mother too: "her teeth were not straight either; so, if she had been a dog, my father would have destroyed her" (1-2). As with the ginger man, Alice compares her mother to a worn-down creature, adding that her father would have destroyed her. By likening the ginger man to a horse and her mother to a dog, Alice implicitly links their suffering

to her father, a man who subjugates animals for a living. She projects her misery onto the ginger man, pities him so she can have an outlet for emotions that would otherwise feel self-serving and annihilatory.

Alice continues to introduce the reader to her home life: “She looked scared and scuttled towards the kitchen,” she adds about her mother, “holding up her little hands like kitten’s paws. I went to the dining-room intending to lay the table, but Mother had been before me, and, although the silver was quite bright, there were brown gravy marks on the table-cloth—even when I arranged salt-cellar over them they were not covered” (2). Again Alice compares her mother to an animal, this time a kitten—her mother has all the helplessness of childhood—before describing the dining room, taking note of the stains on the table cloth she and her mother cannot cover despite the “quite bright” silver. Here Alice places details about her mother next to details about the house, creating the impression that something is terribly wrong though she has not yet introduced her father. I admire how Comyns is able to write description with such implication, conveying a palpable and poorly concealed sorrow before anything actually happens.

The plot hinges on Alice’s father, though it explores his abuse through a fantastical premise. When he finds out that Alice can levitate (a fact she discovers midway through the novel), he plans a demonstration in a busy London square. “I knew no good would ever come of this,” Alice tells her father before the demonstration, her use of past tense making it sound as though the tragedy has already occurred (Comyns 177). Her father feeds her sherry beaten with eggs and milk, dresses her in white, and forces her to lie in the grass—“My dress... it won’t be white anymore,” she murmurs (186). Then he orders Alice to rise above the gathering crowd. She complies, and pandemonium breaks out:

The people from behind pushed and shoved and the feet came nearer. Suddenly I saw a man with a ginger moustache staring at me with a terrified expression on his face. I tried to smile at him because I felt he needed pity, poor man—and I'd seen him before. But in a moment he was pushed to the ground, the advancing crowd falling over his body. (188)

This is the second and last time Alice mentions the man with the ginger mustache. Again she directs her pity towards him, because her self-pity would be too overwhelming to confront directly. Through his character, Comyns almost evades the limitations of a first-person voice: we see the “terrified expression” on his face, an expression Alice must mirror, and the “advancing crowd falling over his body,” an image portending what Alice experiences a few moments later. Both she and the man get crushed to death in the crowd. Though they begin and end the novel together, the man with a ginger moustache remains a stranger.

In her 1980 introduction to the book, Barbara Comyns writes:

I was born in Warwickshire in a house on the banks of the Avon and was one of six children. Our father was a semi-retired managing director of a Midland chemical firm. He was an impatient, violent man, alternatively spoiling and frightening us. Our mother was many years younger and lived the life of an invalid most of the time.

After reading about Alice's father, also an “impatient, violent man,” and her mother, “who lived the life of an invalid,” it is clear that Comyns turned aspects of her childhood into fiction. It is interesting that she calls attention to this link herself, prefacing *The Vet's Daughter* by offering the reader a brief overview of her life. She writes also,

I discovered public libraries at this time and read until I was almost drunk on books; but my own writing suffered and became imitative and self-conscious. In the end, with great strength of mind, I destroyed all the stories and half-written novels I'd written over the years when I left my dank bed-sitting room to get married.

I believe I am right in the middle of this process. I am almost drunk on books and trying to get away from being imitative and self-conscious. I admire Comyns for being able to destroy her work, and hope that if I write things that feel false, destroy them, and do other things for a while, I can ultimately write stories in which vestigial images from my childhood or adolescence latch onto new experiences. Initially, Comyns wrote a “faint framework” for *The Vet’s Daughter* from the perspective of Alice’s mother. She forgot the idea and wrote another novel before finding her old notes. The story “ran through my head all day and at night I dreamt about it, which often meant altering whole chapters of the book the following morning.” Comyns ran with this gift, changing the story to suit the content of her dreams. This might be why the novel feels so ‘correct’ and grounded despite its surreality: it is rooted in real emotional experience (Comyn’s childhood), but driven by instinct or a half-sleeping logic—the logic that Comyn’s morning self took from her dreams.

In his endorsement of the novel, Graham Greene describes “that innocent eye which observes with childlike simplicity the most fantastic or the most ominous occurrence.” By pairing childlike clarity with the “most ominous occurrence,” Comyns details her characters’ suffering without ever making them feel self-consciously tragic. In fact the story is tragic because Alice describes her life so plainly: trampled by the crowd, she only thinks, “This is it; this is how one dies” (189). Comyns has written emotion without exploiting it, placing weight on image and action over rumination.

Francis Bacon aimed to “set a trap in which one would be able to catch the fact at its most living point,” an attempt to create something that does not have to be explained to be felt (54). Writing fiction currently feels like a matter of learning these traps, how to set them and how they might vary, so that I might retire mechanisms that already feel overly familiar. To better figure out my traps, I have to

clarify what facts I hope to pin down and why. David Sylvester frames Bacon's approach as "trying to make an image of appearance that is conditioned as little as possible by accepted standards of what appearance is," a disorienting logic that gets at my own goals and frustrations as a writer (105). I want to write things that feel recognizable, but use unrecognizable means to get there. Because I have to abide by a medium with strict rules (grammar, syntax, spelling), and would like to write stories that ostensibly occur in reality, I have to figure out how these factors can evade the same meaning they instill.

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