Queer, Anti-Author: Self-Censoring Narration in Contemporary LGBTQ Fiction

By Alec Hoxha

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Introduction: "Anti-Author"

> Words deserted him immediately. He could only speak when he was not asked to.
> – E.M. Forster, *Maurice*

> You cannot fold a Flood—
> And put it in a Drawer—
> Because the Winds would find it out—
> And tell your Cedar Floor–
> – Emily Dickinson, no. 530

The crux of what we may call "anti-authorship" in queer narratives is born from the confines of language used to describe queer identity. Any attempt to define the queer subject must first and foremost denote the subject's distinctness from the world of heterosexuality or cissexuality. This paper will refer to such a world as either heteronormativity or cissexism; terms that specifically mark such cultures as dominating forces upon queer subjects. These terms locate the exact reasons as to why the confines of language exist: because queerness, if publicly expressed, is asked to answer to these forces of hegemony first and foremost. This is, without cause for doubt, the reason for the tradition of censorship within queer fiction, and what that tradition has left in its wake.

Current queer theory's relationship to narratology is particularly concerned as to whether queerness fits in normative standards of the literary narrative. Much of the scholarship either negates the question by pointing out that queer lives often do not fit into customary demands of a narrative, and therefore the fiction of queer lives often culminates in an "anti-narrative"–something that actively defies linearity and conformity. I would argue that a "narrative" demands neither such traits. There must be further investigation of why the queer narrator has such a tense relationship to the form of narrative. In my analysis of contemporary texts featuring queer subjects and narrators, I hold the view that the answer lies in the complicated state of authorship. Rather than analyzing these texts on how queerness impacts the

narrative itself, this paper will analyze the texts based on the narrators' complex relationship to their authorial presence as a protagonist. I have thus decided to create the term "anti-author" not as a way of describing a lack of authorship, or as a direct reference to the actual authors of the text, but as the fictional queer subject's meta-relationship to the narrative they have been endowed with. What does the word itself, "queer," do? It reflects the heteronormative world's understanding of marginalized sexualities as an Other.

Across contemporary fiction, the matter of the queer "concealment drama" continues to rear its head past the history of when censorship was necessary to discuss matters of queerness. Though centuries have passed to allow for a queer subject to be discussed explicitly, it is still within a world that designates them as an Other. In the following texts, the narrators and primary subjects must contend with how they are able to tell their stories within the world's confines. Within *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson, the protagonist's struggle with existing traditions of his subjugation is literalized through representing him as a mythical monster; in *Cleanness* by Garth Greenwell, the protagonist's narration places himself as as antithetical to the ideal image he teaches to his students; and in *Detransition, Baby*, the trans protagonist narrates the story so that she is constantly justified against the ire of cissexism. In all cases, this creates a double bind wherein a queer narrator must somehow take on the task of expressing themselves while also grappling with heteronormative exclusion.

The contemporary queer narrator constantly negotiates the terms of their existence with the narrative that they have been placed in. The narrative the actual author constructs for them forms a relationship between form and content that births an Anti-Author: one who operates under the illusion of being stripped of authorial control, yet gains sympathy through the performance of persisting in this wrestle.

What Words Do: Paradoxical Subjectivity in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*

> And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die…words, like ourselves, in order to live at their ease, need privacy. Undoubtedly they like us to think, and they like us to feel, before we use them; but they also like us to pause; to become unconscious. Our unconsciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light… That pause was made, that veil of darkness was dropped, to tempt words to come together in one of those swift marriages which are perfect images and create everlasting beauty. But no– nothing of that sort is going to happen tonight. The little wretches are out of temper; disobliging; disobedient; dumb. What is it that they are muttering? 'Time's up! Silence!'
> – Virginia Woolf, "On Craftsmanship"

Light is a substance that can blind one from reality and define it all at once. Darkness, in relation, can expand and distort reality out of proportion just as easily as it can conceal it entirely from one's view. Light embodies presence, and darkness is the absence of light: in distinct ways, both qualities affect our perception of the world, similar to the relationship between words and silence. Words are definitive, confined, and represent a presence of thought, while silence is the lack: an instrument of secrecy. Of course, silence can reveal the truth just as easily as words can, and words can obscure just as much as they tell. This much is proven well enough in *Autobiography of Red*, where the story of the red monster, its protagonist, is as embedded in the realm of silence as it is in the use of articulation. Carson gives Geryon, a resurrected figure of ancient Greek poetry, a new voice. The narrative must grapple with what subjectivity means when the subject is caught between the desire to tell and the desire to withhold. This is in part due to the tradition Geryon is steeped in: the novel explains the background to Geryon, where the narrational founder was subjected to a sudden blindness, and had to contradict his own story in order to regain his sight.

Narration is, from the very beginning of Geryon's story, positioned as something that bridges the gap between silence and articulation, by negating what was already said. Stesichoros'

blindness and Palinode are essential to understanding Geryon's story, in which themes of obscured sight and self-correction are consistently present and affect Geryon's understanding of himself. Geryon's childhood, in relation to the themes of complicated truth, consists of a series of learning, unlearning, and relearning of facts; this culminates in him rewriting the end of his own autobiography and withholding certain facts. By withholding, Geryon learns to avoid the pain of shameful exposure that can come from words, or acting through speech. Speech is a theme that becomes complicated with the introduction of Herakles. As the hero who slays the monster, Herakles embodies a key figure in Geryon's mythological history and therefore enacts mythic language upon the narrative. The mythic language, as it will be analyzed through the lens of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, is characterized by a formal intent to amplify (and therefore cheapen) reality into a narrative view that culture deems to be natural. *Autobiography of Red* creates a paradoxical relationship between subjectivity and speech by proving that a narrative voice is engaging in an inadequate relationship between meaning and form, through the metaphor of dark and light respectively. Geryon's self is one that is guided to self-censor through the principle of self-shame. This, in turn, creates a tense relationship between Geryon's identity and the narrative, the former being a state of being without justification, and the latter being a form that requires a voice.

Paratexts: Bearing Witness to Stesichoros' Blindness

Firstly, the very title *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* is a slight misnomer in the sense that the narrative does not ever show Geryon's autobiography, which lives in the visual realm and not the literary. The title, furthermore, obscures the actual subject of this autobiography, as "red" is a descriptor that only reveals one aspect of Geryon, and withholds his

name. From this oblique title, Carson creates a deliberate pattern of falsity, and it is one that is perpetuated in each section of the book.

In the first section titled "Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" we learn about Geryon, but are first given a backstory of his poet, Stesichoros, who "came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein" (1). This situates him as if he has expanded beyond Homeric tradition but falls short of Stein's (who becomes more relevant in the very last section of the novel). Stesichoros is known for an ancient tale related in Plato's *Phaedrus*: Stesichoros recited a poem about Helen of Troy's sexual promiscuity and treachery, whereupon she struck him temporarily blind for defaming her, and he corrected himself by writing a palinode against his original poem in order to regain his sight. Although such a feat is physically impossible, this impossibility is never addressed by the speaker of "Red Meat": "This is a big question, the question of the blinding of Stesichoros by Helen (see Appendixes A, B), although generally regarded as unanswerable (but see Appendix C)" (Carson 5). The appendixes in question offer little support in deciding whether Stesichoros was truly blinded or not, but elaborates upon the ambiguity of the situation enough so that they maintain the illusion of blindness, regardless of whether it is the truth or not. Thus, a theme of obscurity and opaqueness becomes foundational in Stesichoros' presence as a narrational father to *Autobiography of Red*.

Beyond obscurity, there is also a subversion of traditional expectation that is present in Geryon's history. Stesichoros' decision to write *Geryoneis* is something that extends beyond the ancient Greek standard of narrative, according to the speaker of "Red Meat."

> If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet he might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity. But instead the extant fragments of Stesichoros' poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, from Geryon's own experience (Carson 6).

The adjective "own" being used to describe Geryon's experience prioritizes him as the subject of sympathy in Stesichoros' tale. While this seems to suggest that Stesichoros has somehow opened up the latches of the myth, daring to speak on behalf of the monster, the speaker asserts that the remaining fragments of *Geryoneis* "withhold as much as they tell" (Carson 6). Installing a monster as the protagonist of the story is not just a subversive act of giving the monster a voice: it's a commentary on the trust that must be given to the protagonist to trust the story at hand. The speaker further complicates the level of transparency in the narrative, describing the fragments of *Geryoneis* seeming "as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it into pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat" (Carson 6-7). When framed as such, the main force of the drama is no longer the narrative itself but the action done to the narrative, as well as the gaps left in the wake. These gaps that distort the cohesion of his story compel our attention, and inform us that Geryon's "own" experience is fraught in both form and content.

"Red Meat" continues in its discussion of the paradox of Geryon, which seems no closer to being solved. The speaker brings attention to Gertrude Stein, a poet beyond Stesichoros' time: "'Believe me for meat and for myself,' as Gertrude Stein says. Here. Shake" (7). In quick succession, we are given three implicit commands: the first is to believe Geryon's story, the second is to receive it in our hands, and the third is to act upon it by shaking. The shaking can mean many things for the narrative: apart from merely disordering it, it's almost as if shaking it also affirms its physical existence, that it is tangible and also able to withstand us, the outside force. These commands should not overshadow what exactly it is we are commanded to react to: the meat and the self. They are kept in a dichotomy, though they seem to be aligned with the same purpose, to be the advocates of the self. Interestingly, there is no possessive pronoun

hooked to “meat” which may be an indicator of this dichotomy, that the meat must be divorced from the self. To the extent that either of these advocates for Geryon are successful in doing so is a contentious point. Monique Tscofen, in “‘First I Must Tell About Seeing: (De)Monstrations of Individuality and the Dynamics of Metaphor in Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*” brings up an insight with regards to the coupling of red meat and *Geryoneis*: “Red meat is the very stuff we are made of, where we feel our pleasures and our pains. It is what feeds us, and what we are turned into when we die” (Tscofen, 38). This observation is followed by the note that monstrosity, another aspect of Geryon’s, has an etymology related to the Latin word “monstrare: to show” (Tscofen, 39). Both are interconnected: Geryon is outwardly red because his interior matter, or flesh as Tschofen has alluded to, is subverted and turned into an exterior spectacle. This subversion creates a layer of level of duality for Geryon and the reader: not only must he experience subjectivity for himself, he must embody the image of the “monster.” Both tasks inherently dispute the other, the former being a private affirmation of selfhood, while the latter is a public expression of abnormality. One supplies him with a voice, and the other takes it away.

In the very last section titled “Interview,” an unnamed interviewer speaks to Stesichoros: “One critic speaks of a sort of concealment drama going on in your work some special interest in finding out what or how people act when they know that important information is being withheld this might have to do with an aesthetic of blindness” (Carson 147). That the interviewer chooses to call the element of blindness a “concealment drama” acknowledges the conflict that is implied in Stesichoros’ blindness. The blindness, or concealment, occurs and thus the drama comes from actors having to deal with the concealment. When elements are “withheld” from people’s view, they must act in order to make up for that lack. The interviewer then, in an almost accusatory

fashion, says that Stesichoros' work plants concealment for "aesthetic" purposes which seems to imply an admiration for blindness.

Stesichoros then takes on the voice of Gertrude Stein, and echoes her narration in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) (and perhaps it could indeed be Stein–the primary indicator for their speech is marked by "S"): "Wherever I looked it poured out my eyes I was responsible for everyone's visibility…course it had its disagreeable side I could not blink or the world went blind" (Carson 148). The suggestion here is that storytelling is inherently linked to responsibility. Through narration or poetry, the speaker becomes liable for what the reader is understanding (or "seeing"). Stesichoros says that a lapse in the storytelling, a case of withholding the world from oneself (blinking) results in disagreeability. But disagreeable to who? The obvious answer is Stesichoros himself, who is urged not to blink despite his wanting to, which creates a servile, duty-bound relationship between narrator and audience. Geryon's story is an exercise in testing narrative boundaries: the text asserts his subjectivity and limited agency, yet also denies him a completely founded authorial voice by operating under an "aesthetic of blindness" (Carson 147). The pleasure of privacy costs him the lack of being understood–and, in moments where he is not allowed privacy, burdens him with responsibility for his story.

Paratexts: The Importance of the Palinode

The power of lack is not taken lightly in this narrative. In Appendix B, Carson translates Stesichoros' Palinode in three staccato sentences starting with the word "no": "No it is not the true story. No you went on the benched ships. No you never came to the towers of Troy" (Carson 17). The introduction of this "no" creates more ambiguity in each sentence (as it eventually will in Geryon's own narrative) since it remains unclear as to what exactly is being asserted in these

declarative statements. In the first sentence, if the Palinode is meant to appease Helen's sensibility and assert that Stesichoros' previous tale of her treachery is not the true story, there should be a comma after the first "no." Instead, the sentence flows without it and instead asserts the double negative, which loops us back around to the idea that his previous story was indeed true. This logic follows for the following sentences: the first "no" is a masked rebuttal of the Palinode. A lesson in disobedience, Stesichoros teaches that a "no" can be a denial of a denial, if used properly.

Before the beginning of the narrative section of the novel ("Autobiography of Red: A Romance"), Carson includes Emily Dickinson's poem #1748 as an epigraph. The poem considers the difference between nature and humanity, as the former is seemingly silent and the latter is dependent upon interaction. The second stanza in particular seems to have disdain for mankind's preference for words: "If nature will not tell the tale / Jehovah told to her / Can human nature not survive / Without a listener?" (22). The stanza places us firmly in the negative to understand its argument: nature does not, human nature does not, and there is a lack of a listener. The next stanza is more affirmative in comparison: "Admonished by her buckled lips / Let every babbler be / The only secret people keep / Is Immortality" (22). These parting words before the beginning of Geryon's story are almost didactic in nature–the admonishment of us babbling humans is clear enough. What's vague is Dickinson's assertion that the one subject people do not speak of is immortality, which is more open to interpretation. Immortality, in this instance, is pure possibility, kept as such based on its being withheld. When silence is held, words are allowed a private life and exist within the consciousness of a given subject. This comes at the cost of being unrealized and stagnant. By avoiding death, life is also avoided. Geryon's story, which is based upon his being slain and recontextualized as an unrequited romance, both have to

do with the risk of life (and the possibility of advancement) and the stagnancy of death (along with the relief of privacy).

Geryon's Autobiography: The Formation of a Narrative Subject

The paratexts signify Geryon's tasks in seeing and speaking as the subject of the novel. As a child, Geryon's "eyes bore terrible holes" (Carson 24). This seems an inversion of Stesichoros' capabilities with regards to sight, where his eyes are likened to instruments of creation. Instead, for Geryon, his eyes are given the power to destroy and create negative space where there was otherwise substance. In this negative space, however, it is difficult to distinguish things from one another, especially for a child with a lack of strong identity. Geryon learns from his mother the meaning of the word "each" which asserts the distinction and distance between two subjects, and he "clothed himself in this strong word *each*" (Carson 26). The usage of "clothed" implies a barrier between the self and the outside world. Geryon, in this pre-autobiographical stage, seems to resist asserting himself onto the world.

Geryon's identity is eventually fashioned through internal strife, the result of being subjected to shame and power. Young Geryon, who is molested by his older brother, is said to have "learned about justice from his brother quite early" (Carson 23). A connection is drawn between Stesichoros' conflict with Helen, which has to do with her "sexual misconduct" (Carson 19), and Geryon's conflict with his brother, which has to do with sexual abuse. But while Stesichoros was blinded for speaking against Helen, a figure of erotic desire, Geryon is given sight by his brother, a figure of coercive intimacy, for not speaking of his abuse. After he and his brother begin "an economy of sex for cat's eye" marbles (28) where Geryon wins eyes in exchange for silence, Geryon learns that the price for "eyes" is silence: "*Don't tell Mom*, said his

brother. Voyaging into the rotten ruby of the night became a contest of freedom and bad logic" (Carson 28). This "bad logic" is a reference to the previous understanding he has had of himself, which should, by the definition of "each," mean that he would be kept separate from his brother. But he has a constructed dependence on the abuse for the cat's eye marbles, which constitutes a form of "winning." Though it's a bribe, it imbues Geryon with a false sense of agency in the transactional dynamic. In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection*, Judith Butler interrogates the paradox of being subordinated and given subjectivity all at once: "How can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?" (Butler 10). Helen's punishment of Stesichoros, and Geryon's brother's abusive nature, are both sites of power that assert their subjects as exactly that: subjects, with no distinction between the different definitions of "subject."

The subordination Geryon experiences at the hands of his brother compels him to act, which is against his private nature (and will towards blindness), but it is precisely this contradiction that gives him narrative authority. In the wake of the abuse, Geryon finds himself struggling with "the difference between outside and inside. Inside is mine, he thought" (Carson 29). Such a violation of his privacy seems to drive him further inward, drawing firm lines between the self and the external world. The molestation blurs the distinction between himself and his brother, which is the driving force behind his decision to begin an autobiography: something that would serve to make his "inside" life solid. The first mention of his autobiography comes immediately after he withholds something from his brother, though his brother attempts to bridge the gap: "Geryon's brother found an American dollar bill and gave it to Geryon. Geryon found a piece of an old war helmet and hid it. That was also the day he began

his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things" (29). It's unclear what exact form this autobiography might take, given that Geryon can't yet write. The only thing that can be assumed is that the autobiography lives in the hidden war helmet, which remains private to him. Thus, his own autobiography begins in the struggle of a paradox: the genre of autobiography is private and interior, but also demands to be explained to a public world.

Geryon's autobiography makes contact with the outside world, and it is subjected to scrutiny which demands his correction. At the very end of the glimpse into Geryon's early childhood, he writes his very first palinode based on the challenge of his mother, when she asks his teacher: "*Does he ever write anything with a happy ending?* Geryon paused…Proceeding to the back of the classroom he sat at his usual desk and took out a pencil. *New Ending: All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand in hand*" (Carson 38). This new ending, perhaps happy enough to satisfy his mother, echoes Stesichoros' original ending of *Geryoneis* and inverts it: "The red world And corresponding red breezes / Went on Geryon did not" (Carson 14). In Geryon's revised edition, his death is not mentioned, and he takes his fate into his own hands–albeit at the urging of a higher power. Butler's theory of subjection is exemplified in this instance, where agency is borne out of a crisis in identity. The solution is sought after through words, doing as they can, and avoiding the negation Carson pointed out through Stesichoros' Palinode. The last line of his original story, "Geryon did not," is notably absent in Geryon's new ending, which leaves his fate open to possibility and embodies the substance of Dickinson's Immortality, which is constituted by withholding information.

Herakles' Graciousness: What Myths Do

It is Barthes who confronts the structure of myth as a type of speech (Barthes 109). Myth, as speech, possesses a form which presumes an already understood meaning, and by doing so, attempts to deprive that meaning by amplifying the form. Barthes understands this complex dynamic as such: "the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of myth will draw its nourishment" (Barthes 118). Barthes theory helps us see the shape that this romance will take. We understand that in antiquity, Herakles travels across the plain to kill Geryon and his little red dog to steal his cattle. In Carson's romance, he reaches him, and Geryon's "death" occurs when puts distance between them once more. Geryon meeting Herakles is described as "one of those moments that is the opposite of blindness" (Carson 39). Geryon, at this point, has understood speech to be a certain type of willful blindness, something that can make a certain perspective clear while smothering another. Herakles introduces the form of speech embodied by myth: preordained, foreclosed, full of form, and operating under pretension, as well as voluntary acquiescence to the intent of those pretensions.

The opposite of blindness, the insertion of the mythic language, solicits Geryon's speech. The very first exchange between hero and monster is as follows: "*Do you have change for a dollar?* Geryon heard Geryon say. *No.* Herakles stared straight at Geryon. *But I'll give you a quarter for free*" (Carson 39). Their very first words uttered to each other not only binds them in an eternal debt, unresolved by the "free" giving of the quarter, but makes Herakles' mythical presence clear. Geryon is doubly aware of himself, both experiencing his own subjectivity and remaining distant from it: Herakles faces the experience baldly as himself. There is, indeed,

through the absence of "change," no exchange to be had: whatever he is or represents to Geryon will be offered freely. "*I believe in being gracious,*" Herakles plainly gives as his reason for his generosity (Carson 39). This echoes Barthes' argument for why myth is so difficult to place in the system of languages: "However paradoxical it may seem, myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not make disappear" (Barthes 121). Herakles does not embody myth by himself. It is Geryon's presence, as a monster, that fulfills that myth, and therefore their coupling that brings the mythic language into full force. If Geryon's position as a monster is to show, Herakles' as the mythical hero is to tell. This reduces both of them to positions of form and meaning, respectively, and a dynamic that keeps them at opposite poles.

Geryon's mother encourages his ability to speak, but their relationship suffers as a result of his romance with Herakles. She asks him questions about Herakles, meanwhile Geryon keeps "his camera in front of his face adjusting the focus. He did not answer. He had recently relinquished speech" (Carson 40). Geryon has, by this early point in the romance, learned to use the camera's dutiful light to make things "clear," to make objects out of subjects. A flash of light is not a meaningful response, but a form, and it is a form that makes speech unnecessary. Her questions are not able to be answered, because Herakles is an answer in and of himself: "*So Geryon what do you like about this guy this Herakles can you tell me?* Can I tell you, thought Geryon. Thousand things he could not tell flowed over his mind" (Carson 43). Geryon does not give his own narrative voice access to these thousand things.

To understand why, we might first give a little consideration to the assumed circumstances in which a queer subject might find reasons to conceal their desire. But in the realm of speech and narrative, Barthes can provide some more clarity: "Myth is always a language robbery" (Barthes 131). In the myth of Herakles and Geryon the sign and signifier are

made abundantly clear, and the myth replaces the need for further elaboration. Herakles kills Geryon. They are bound by this dominant force of history and presumption. On the point of myth's intentions and authority against speech, however, Barthes makes the claim that there is one language "which resists myth as much as it can: our poetic language" (Barthes 131). We are reminded, in the wake of Barthes' assertion, that this novel is a novel in verse. Carson does not merely acquiesce to the demands of myth, considering that the very nature of poetry and verse, obscuring as they are, undo the very foundation of myth.

Geryon's poetic language does not do very well with simple presumptions when held under a light. Asking about the legend of the Lava Man, and about the matter of capturing the lava reaching the man through photograph, Herakles' grandmother remarks, "*I think you are confusing subject and object,* she said. *Very likely,* said Geryon" (Carson 52). His subjectivity blurs the lines: he must attempt to see and present things for what they are through photography, but his very nature resists simplification. The lava becomes a subjective agent, the man becomes an object of action enforced upon it. This method of nuance is experienced in the absence of Herakles.

Once Herakles is present however, there is quite a different relationship to verbalizing his nuances regarding subject and object: "Geryon watched the top of Herakles' head and felt his limits returning. Nothing to say. Nothing. He looked at this fact in mild surprise. Once in childhood his ice cream had been eaten by a dog. Just an empty cone in a small dramatic red fist" (Carson 56). In contrast to his understanding of the relationship between lava and man, the subject of his fist and the object of the absent ice cream are exactly what mythic language would have them be: an image with clear meaning. The robbery of something that he might have consumed is the signified: the signifier cunningly dismisses the dog's culpability. Barthes'

Mythologies clarifies this discrepancy between the poetic and mythical: "Myth… has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system; poetry… has the pretension of contracting into an essential system" (Barthes 134). These pretensions both create an imbalance between the meaning and form, where myth attempts to create a factual relationship between the two, and poetry attempts to uncover the meaning behind the form. He asserts that these are both systems of language which have a specific motive behind them. Whereas Geryon's inner voice has the motive of getting to the thing-itself (the lava approaching the man) which was once obscured, Herakles' presence has the motive of making the meaning of the image seem self-evident through the dominance of myth. Both have the desire to justify themselves under the scrutiny of language. In the matter of justification, it would be neglectful not to remember what Geryon's brother taught him about justice: it is not freely won, and it is not without its own pretenses, forming under a demand to shape and scapegoat a monster.

Monsters, indeed, do not fare well under the mythic language. Perhaps Stesichoros' decision to write about Geryon in verse afforded him subjectivity, but the myth behind it looms over, reminding the narrative that a monster (however subjective or sympathetic he may be) must somehow be slain. A hero is usually required to fit this deed. Herakles' frequent interruptions of Geryon make the matter apparent, especially when interrupting his thoughts on his photographic autobiography: "Now that I am a man in transition, thought Geryon, using a phrase he had learned from–door hit the wall as Herakles kicked it open" (Carson 60). The transition Geryon references is almost a sort of prophecy that Herakles' presence completes in pure form. However, it interrupts his ability to reflect and understand himself in solitude. In Barthes' understanding of the myth's impact on the subject, he claims, "I am subjected to its intentional force, it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity" (Barthes 124). To be subject to a myth is far different

than any other narrative, as it requires the mind to submit to a forced clarity (or set of meanings). Geryon and Herakles enter an argument that transitions from the matter of being disturbed by photography to being disturbed by stars. Herakles dutifully reminds him that stars are visible, but mostly burnt out, a fact which Geryon refutes and receives another rebuttal: "*How can you not believe it, it's a known fact. / But I see them. / You see memories*" (Carson 65). Their distance from each other lies in the fact that they speak entirely different languages; Herakles, the hero, buys into the mythic language that acknowledges some pretense of objectivity over the world, while our monster, Geryon, subscribes to a level of interiority that takes precedence over the myth-fact's assumed authority over the matter. However it may be interpreted, Geryon and Herakles' views of reality remain apart from one another. This, in large part, is due to the distance that myth inherently places between clear, objective visibility and dubious, subjective interpretation. Barthes' understanding of myth is that "meaning is always there to present the form; the form is always there to outdistance the meaning…they are never at the same place" (Barthes 123). Geryon is eventually outdistanced from Herakles, who reminds him to return home to his mother, where he may receive questions. This time, he will be imbued with a language that is a response by virtue of residing in myth.

Geryon's mother does not spare him much in the way of questions, direct demands of speech. She asks him where he received his t-shirt, and he responds: "*Herakles gave it*–and here Geryon had meant to slide past the name coolly but such a cloud of agony poured up his soul he couldn't remember what he was saying" (Carson 68). Herakles' acts of graciousness rob Geryon of his typical agency over language, as per usual. In fact, it obscures memory itself, forging a new presence over previous intent. Barthes, once more, explains precisely what myth can do to speech: "in order to make it innocent, it freezes it. This is because myth is speech stolen and

restored" (Barthes 125). This specific type of theft has the clear intent of enforcing meaning, through the mere image of what the language illustrates: Herakles gave it, and there is nothing more to say because the image speaks for itself (in fact, it goes as far as to rob Geryon's memory of his initial intention.) Barthes' mention of freezing, however, brings about its own set of connotations with regards to romantic tension that must be examined. Carson, in *Eros the Bittersweet*, illustrates the frozen lover well through the myth of King Midas: "Midas' touch has a devastating effect on the things he loves. They turn to gold. They stop in time" (*Eros* 181). As Herakles bridges the distance between himself and Geryon, it is not Herakles who freezes time, but the mythology behind their relationship. Once he outdistances him, the mythic arc ends and Geryon dies: time marches on, unfreezing whatever hold the myth had. Herakles' presence and "graciousness" in Geryon's mind is a force of robbery that renders him frozen, while his absence will have far different implications.

The Monster's Exaggerated Mastery Over Disturbance

Neither the passage of time, nor Herakles' absence, frees Geryon from his binds with the mythic language. The frozen unfreezes, but does not return to its original state: it melts. In the wake of Herakles' departure from the story, Geryon waits for the clock hand to bump to the next minute, and in that minute, "years passed as [Geryon's] eyes ran water and a thousand ideas jumped his brain–*If the world ends now I am free* and *If the world ends now no one will see my autobiography*–finally it bumped. He had a flash of Herakles' sleeping house and put that away " (Carson 70). A heartbroken Geryon, eyes full of water, seems to see very well the double bind of his subjectivity. If there is no world, and therefore no possibility of pain, no expectation of the myth's completion, he is "free" in the sense that he does not owe anything to the world. But then,

of course, he would not have an identity: or at least, not any proof of it. Time, represented by the clock hand, seems to be the fragmented force that bridges the gap in this double bind and affirms Geryon's sense of being.

Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, considers the matter of "being" as such: "To persist in one's being means to be given over from the start to social terms that are never fully one's own…In this sense, interpellation[1] works by failing, that is, it institutes its subject as an agent precisely to the extent that it fails to determine such a subject exhaustively in time" (Butler 197). In the context of the structure of this novel, Geryon's autobiography itself is a representation of this convoluted sense of one's own subjectivity: it has the appearance of being entirely his own, but "given over" to the demands of mythical language (which attempts to rob language of meaning, as Barthes has keenly informed us.) This form of "interpellation" (if we may stretch the term) of Geryon's subjectivity into the form of the novel (autobiography bound by myth) also works through failing: the poetic language resists the robbery. Time is the concept that keeps this mess together, indefinitely. Time convinces one that there is always a possibility of social forces (or narrative structures) successfully creating a subject, or that there's a possibility of successfully constituting oneself as a subject. Hence, Geryon makes a connection with the possibilities/constrictions time places upon him, and the flash of Herakles' "sleeping house" in his mind: they are reminders that a world of freedom is a world in which proof of his identity cannot exist. In such a dilemma, the only thing to do is put that away.

Indeed, as the primary focus of the novel's eye, Geryon is rather adept at putting things away. One might think this is an antagonistic relationship to the form–narration seeks to provide

[1] Interpellation refers to the process in which subjects internalize a society's cultural values and ideologies, either because doing so is what constitutes their citizenship or subjectivity, or because the ideology makes itself seem natural or obvious (or both). In the matter of literary analysis, we might understand how the form of the novel itself has a relationship with interpellation: it does not replicate the process by any means, but reckons with interpellation's consequences on the subject by virtue of giving access to the narrative subject's interiority.

knowledge between reader and written–but his ability to conceal creates a privacy that illuminates more than it obscures. It is as close as we can really get to freedom within the novel's logic. Speaking, however, puts him at risk. When Herakles calls Geryon's home years later to talk about his "freedom dream" with a bird flying out of a pail of water, Geryon thinks, "Don't want to be free want to be with you. Beaten but alert Geryon organized all his inside force to suppress this remark" (Carson 74). Geryon's instincts are representative of his role in the mythic language (he shows, doesn't tell) and resistant to the mythic language (this is, after all, the monster's interiority) all at once. Barthes' clarifies why it is that poetry is as much a complex language system as myth: "the essentialist ambitions of poetry, the conviction that it alone catches the thing in itself, inasmuch, precisely, as it wants to be an anti-language" (Barthes 133). Poetry reduces a meaning down to its essence; myth creates a false inflation of an image's meaning. The meaning of freedom is therefore a representation of the double bind the narrative subject experiences: if they are free, there is no story. The poet understands this and struggles against it, the myth enacts it by creating a story in which freedom is always a dream to strive toward but never achieve.

Geryon's experiments with poetic anti-language do seem to uniquely focus on the matter of freedom. As he sits in a plane, making his way towards Argentina, he reflects on a childhood memory about a dog with rabies: "When the owner stepped up and put a gun to the dog's temple Geryon walked away. Now leaning forward to peer out the little oblong window where icy cloudlight drilled his eyes he wished he had stayed to see it go free" (Carson 78). Like a woefully optimistic physicist who mistakenly believes that Schrödinger's cat could be alive if not observed, Geryon remains blind to the inevitable fate of the dog, creating a false reality in which he can believe that the dog evaded death and went "free." This narrative also creates an

important turn in his beliefs about seeing and telling: if he remains present, as an eyewitness, he will be able to see (and be complicit in) what he hopes for: the evasion of death. Or, in another sense, the succumbing to death and the subsequent acquiring of freedom (being free from the world). In either case, the novel affords no such easy way out, exhibiting Barthes' notions of the essentialist anti-language called poetry. As Geryon travels in the plane towards Argentina, walking away from the sight of his imminent death in the hometown of his heartbreak, we are provided a parallel to his trajectory as compared to what he reads on the brochure regarding Argentina: "The gaucho acquired an exaggerated notion of mastery over his own destiny from the simple act of riding on horseback way far across the plain" (Carson 81). Just because Geryon can imitate Herakles' actions of distancing and closing gaps does not mean he can alter his fate as a monster, given that the mythic language has already made its presence known in the narrative.

Geryon's monstrosity becomes apparent in South America. Seeing his hope of mastering his destiny to its end goal makes his reality much more visible in comparison. His role in the myth is made much more clear when contrasted to his failure to control his destiny. "The red monster sat at a corner table of Cafe Mitwelt writing bits of Heidegger," is his very first description after landing in Argentina. Heidegger, known for his writing about the philosophical state of Being, gives us a window into Geryon's interiority that contrasts with his red monstrosity: a monster is at odds with the world. His monstrosity creates a war between him and that world as well as creating the grounds for his subjectivity, and subsequent motive toward forming an autobiography. Heidegger's relevance in Geryon's mind is further clarified later: "We would think ourselves continuous with the world if we did not have moods. It is state-of-mind that discloses to us (Heidegger claims) that we are beings who have been thrown into something

else" (Carson 98). Barthes says of myth: "The concept, literally, deforms, but does not abolish the meaning; a word can perfectly render this contradiction: it alienates" (Barthes 123). To expand upon Barthes' argument, the narrative/verse form itself is capable of rendering its subject alien through the mere matter of throwing him against the state of the world it constructs. Therefore, the monster of the autobiography is deformed, not abolished. Geryon fails to correct this deformity.

Disturbance with the world is what myth depends on, and what queer subjectivity depends on. As he converses with a professor on the matter of skepticism, Geryon invokes the concept of ataraxia. "*Absence of disturbance,*" as he translates it (Carson 86). Can photography disturb one–the very argument that Herakles and Geryon warred over eons ago in Herakles' home. It might be better to do away with the matter of disturbance entirely, Geryon has learned, Palinod-er that he is: He learns well from conflict and subsequent correction. His interiority has adapted to try and experiment with "absence of disturbance" as an adequate goal of human nature and the narrative itself. Suffice to say, it doesn't last long. He ends up attending the professor's lecture on the nature of skepticism, which ultimately results in the conclusion that skeptics are monstrous. When pressed on his reasoning, the professor tells Geryon, "So blank and so bizarre would be the human life that tried to live outside belief in belief" (Carson 92). By attempting to tout the absence of disturbance, Geryon falls into disturbance's very trap: there is always something to believe in despite the reality of the world, and therefore to be at war with the world. An absence is a kind of silence: it is not a perfect opposite of presence or speech, but merely a different form of it that impacts the subject in a specific manner.

Absence eventually confuses Geryon's interpretation of reality. When he encounters a tango singer in the last authentic tango bar of Buenos Aires (who is, in disguise, a

psychoanalyst), he misinterprets her suggestion of going to bed: "Geryon almost missed it–*Who can a monster blame for being red?*" (Carson 104). As with many of Carson's manipulations of language, the question is not rhetorical and demands to be examined closely, even if it is not the real statement the singer/psychoanalyst posed to Geryon. Heidegger sees Being as a state of existence rather than a mere verb. The sentence therefore takes on a different inflection. Geryon's "being red" is a presence, even when it is absent from the reality of the situation (the fact being that it really is time for him to go to bed).

His state of Being is red, a color which shows his irrefutable insides (as Tscofen tells it), is reminiscent of the monster's duty to "show" which therefore deprives him of the ability to enjoy absence: constantly at war with the matter of privacy. His being has a culprit, and it is the imposition form has upon meaning. We must therefore turn once again to analyzing the language of myth, which first acquainted us with the subject of monstrosity. Barthes reminds us that warring with myth's attempt to give an obvious state of nature "gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified" (Barthes 159). A paradox rears its head yet again in the shadow of myth. To allow Geryon an absence of disturbance is to provide him a sense of freedom but kill him: a state of being that the narrative cannot tolerate for very long in order to continue. To keep him trapped in the disturbance is to make him adherent to what the myth requires, but to obscure him further. What being in Argentina has taught Geryon, and the reader, is that it is difficult to give Geryon any privacy or secrecy in the confines of his autobiography. The poetic narrative cannot tolerate the artificial light and subsequent death that myth endows upon meaning.

The Only Secret a Subject Keeps

Access to interiority lies in the written word of the novel. *Autobiography of Red* creates fragments that leave gulfs between knowledge and unawareness. As Geryon reads up on the matter of philosophic problems, he discovers that no two people can ever truly know whether they see red the same way: "this separation of consciousness is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us" (Carson 105). What unites two people's consciousness is that convincing belief: it's similar to a novel, wherein the writer and reader both believe, all at once, that they are experiencing the same subject matter: both coming from the different motivations of wanting to dictate or understand the narrative. "Motivation is unavoidable. It is none the less very fragmentary" (Barthes 126). It is not mere passage of inevitable time that fragments Geryon and his autobiography: it is a purposeful distance between meaning and form, interiority and myth. "Autobiography" assumes some level of narrative authority, and Carson upends that authority through employing the language of myth. The false sense of unified consciousness between novel and subject is precisely the point where Herakles' reentrance is necessary to look towards Geryon's fragments instead of a false sense of unified consciousness.

When Herakles arrives once more, he brings with him the same ability to intercede Geryon's interiority. "Geryon's head went back like a poppy in a breeze as Herakles' mouth came down on his and blackness sank through him" (Carson 119). In this instance, Herakles' interrupting force is directly (and, in a way, phallically) paralleled to that mythological image of his arrow piercing Geryon's neck, which, as Stesichoros' poetically put it, went backwards like a shamed poppy. As the mythic language robs the meaning and makes its own meaning plain, we

understand that Geryon has been subject to another "death," and will be so for countless more. This is not so romantic as it first appears: "What Geryon was thinking Herakles never asked. In the space between them developed a dangerous cloud. Geryon knew he must not go back into the cloud. Desire is no light thing" (Carson 132-133). The gaps between fragments are made essential to their separate consciousnesses, both as people, and as examples of different languages. "Desire is no light thing" is not merely an idiom: desire is literally an unlighted emotion that obscures the object of desire, exactly how the poetic language strips the subject down to its essentials, and how the mythic language inflates the subject past its meaning. The subject, in order to take part in the discourse of desire, to take part in that endless dialogue between itself and the narrative, must succumb to a certain willful self-censorship: it is no wonder that Stesichoros spent no time composing his Palinode after being struck blind.

Geryon's complex relationship to speech and subjectivity ultimately reaches a breaking point. He breaks down in the middle of sex with Herakles, and attempts to explain himself: "I once loved you, now I don't know you at all. He does not say this. *I was thinking about time*–he gropes–*you know how apart people are in time together and apart at the same time*–stops" (Carson 141). It is not received well. Herakles asks why he can't just fuck and not think, pure subscriber to the mythic, who believes that the form of the image need not disturb the meaning. And, truthfully, if Geryon had said his initial thought–that he once loved Herakles and now does not know him–it would have made no difference in the reception based on Herakles' argument. Presentimentary shame of uttering one's true thoughts does not hold up well against myth's insistence to submit to its motivation. That motivation requires a fragmentary understanding that intimacy (or, unity) would defy. Herakles' piercing arrow should be enough, because it robs Geryon of any status. But time has somewhat augmented it beyond what it first was in the very

primary chapters of the romance: Barthes informs us that the "worn out state of a myth can be recognized by the arbitrariness of its signification" (Barthes 127). There is nothing inherent about their coupling that should suggest such a dramatic lack of pure communication, but the arbitrariness of Herakles' presence, an image held up by nothing but the past reputation of his ability to pierce Geyron, is recognized and inflated. It's an old repetition of Herakles' presence's ability to rob Geryon's language that reminds Herakles of their initial affair: "*Just like the old days. Just like the old days,* Geryon says too." (Carson 141). They are completely united in language and apart in motivation as separate subjects under the confines of a mythological ideology.

This devastation of incomplete transference between one consciousness and another is not as one-sided as it may appear. Barthes gives a little consolation regarding the domination of mythic language: "the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mystify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth…Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?" (Barthes 135) The question is rhetorical here, but Carson engages with it quite seriously. To unfreeze the myth from its perfection is to land somewhere and crash. To do so, one can shroud it in mystery and secrecy. Remember that silence or absence can expand or distort reality just as much as light or presence can: when Geryon finally uses his mythical wings, the very first sentence the narrative employs to describe it is: "a photograph he never took, no one here took it" (Carson 145). Geryon's autobiography is often concealed from the reader and only described in words. In this instance, it is also deprived of author and subject.

He flies over that fabled volcano in the High Andes, not telling anyone (and especially not us), looking down into it and describing how it is "dumping all its photons out her ancient eye and he smiles for the camera: 'The Only Secret People Keep'" (Carson 145). Despite there

being no photograph, there is a level of perception of his own flight that demands his attention for "the" assumed camera that should capture and inflate such an image: cloyingly, since he has no intention of taking such a photograph, robbing the mythological image. He also invokes Dickinson's language, who admonishes babbling lips: the fact of his flying must be withheld in order for the ecstasy of his flight to survive. The volcano emptying all the proof of her vision through her "ancient" eye (the "worn out" state of myth) is reminiscent of Barthes' claim about what happens to an image when it takes on the form of mythic signifier: "it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains" (Barthes 117). In this narrative, when the volcano takes on the mythological form, it empties itself and only Geryon in flight remains.

The privacy of Geryon's flight and the invasive presence of Herakles represent the problem of myth's enforcement upon the world. The only secret a narrator such as Geryon can hope to keep is the very crux of their own subjectivity, which defies the entire mode of narration. Geryon reverses what Stesichoros discovered about words. Death, or absolute articulation is kept dark and therefore incapable of being properly robbed; Immortality, or pure inarticulateness, is kept alight and therefore too obvious. On the gulfs between darkness and light, Barthes remarks that "either the intention of the myth is too obscure to be efficacious, or it is too clear to be believed…This is but a false dilemma…myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion" (Barthes 129). This claim is not only an observation but an excellent guide to reading *Autobiography of Red*: because of its metanarrative reversals, it employs neither lie nor confession, falsity or truth, and no sentence can be taken for granted when using common turns of phrase. It is a narrative that manipulates the forms/meanings of language by asking one to read it literally. Geryon, when taken literally as a monstrous subject, is far more revealing than what

mythic or poetic language would dare to tell us. This is perhaps best encapsulated by one of Stesichoros' last lines in the interview section: "There is no Helen" (Carson 149). This is a clean enough blow to satisfy the demands of poetic language: by erasing the myth of Helen, there is nothing for the myth to inflate and make deceitfully obvious, just as there is nothing for the poetic language to distill and essentialize. And so the novel must end. This narrative attempts to achieve Barthes' claim that, through language, we always try to make a "reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge" (Barthes 159). The fragmentary gaps must be properly displayed in order for any such reconciliation to occur: which is, in essence, a sort of anti-reconciliation that revels in the war between blindness and sight.

In *Autobiography of Red*, the confines of language creates the stakes. In order to survive and evade death, the narrative creates obscurity and censorship when myth attempts to make itself clear. This is freeing for only a time, however: it is a conduct of language that does not resolve subjectivity of its paradox, and only responds to it. Geryon, at the end of his romance, is kept with "immortality on [his] face and night at [his] back," which does reverse the initial dichotomy of immortality being kept a secret, and death being plain to see (Carson 146). But this reversal is still a dichotomy that does not absolve a subject of the demands a narrative places on them: an ending that touts possibility is still an ending. Butler, in their understanding of how the subject operates, is proven right under the eye of the narrative. There is no circumstance where the subject can articulate itself without being held under the thumb of the mythological ideology that created it in the first place. The next chapter, examining *Cleanness* by Garth Greenwell, will interrogate the idealism myth presents, and the consequences of what the queer lover must do to demand the narrative's proper attention amidst the fog of myths.

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"Beauty as Compensation": The Shameful Narrator in Garth Greenwell's *Cleanness*

> Why should I care, he said, I am isolated. And even if I were beautiful,
> who would I be beautiful for? For the darkness, for the grave.
> – Ismail Kadare, *Beauty Pageant for Men in the Accursed Mountains*

> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
> – Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

There is no direct reference in *Autobiography of Red* to Geryon's queer status as a narrator. Any cause for his silence and constructed narratives of shame could be presumed to be linked to his same-sex desire, although the presumption is not entirely necessary: *Autobiography of Red* lays out the fundamental complexities of speech and censorship that a narrator-subject labors under all on its own, without any argumentative leaps to justify that. Garth Greenwell's *Cleanness*, however, features a narrator who is a gay American man teaching in Bulgaria and frequently faces similar obstructions to his freedom of speech (if we are free to speak with American cliches) as Geryon does, but experiences the world of heteronormativity and homophobia with full explicitness.

Carson has made it clear that what is beautiful is the only adequate preparation for love and war (if those two are not redundant to place alongside each other). The queer subject therefore learns that what he finds beautiful is grounds for a certain type of ugliness in the eyes of heteronormativity, since what he loves is not necessarily allowed in that vision. The impermissible desire transforms beauty into a certain type of abject monstrosity. What is beautiful, in Greenwell's *Cleanness* by comparison to *Autobiography of Red*, is not merely the justification of love, but an active attempt to shed monstrosity–and, more specifically to this novel, to satisfy the demands of shame. Shame tends to incur a response of either expelling that which is shameful in order to become proper, or else internalizing that shame. *Cleanness* also encodes a new set of standards for the queer subject: the narrator of *Cleanness* does not only feel

the need to continuously correct and censor his experience at the behest of heteronormative standards, but also teach standards of idealism and beauty to his students, while knowing he does not measure up to those societal standards. Beauty, in this narrative landscape, is a vision that promises there can be some hope in despair. The markedly *unbeautiful* is that which is seen as improper, or not carefully constructed to comply with heteronormativity, and therefore reminds one of their "true" nature. The unbeautiful is an open challenge to the beautiful and demands to be corrected. In queer subjects specifically, these borders between what is accepted and unaccepted ("beautiful" and "dirty," respectively) become more turbulent when the very thing that causes the struggle is their own identity.

To look at *Cleanness*' narrator, and his trajectory as a queer teacher in Bulgaria (whose students call him Gospodine), requires some critical understanding of the methods in which all subjects handle that which is not clean or beautiful. Julia Kristeva's work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, provides a theoretical framework with which to understand the process of abjection: a sense of revulsion that occurs when a subject is threatened by the abject, something that is not allowed in order for the subject to be constituted by societal norms. As a primer, we may refer to what constitutes abjection in the first place: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). The disturbance stemming from the abject results in the affirming of a boundary to keep it out, and therefore the subject alienates themselves from the abject in order to maintain the integrity of their subjectivity. What, then, does the queer man do in the face of the abject source that resides within his very self? If we may borrow from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, he becomes a little more vain of his person and a little more modest of his identity. In *Cleanness*, the protagonist experiences his sense of identity being threatened by both

the abject and beautiful, creates narratives of idealism in order to cope with the state of shame, and learns to dismantle those narratives in the embrace of a new ideal that reconciles his queerness to his sense of shame.

"Un-American Disarray": Struggling Between the Abject and the Beautiful

The Gospodine's first comment about feeling his sense of identity threatened comes from his outsider status in Bulgaria. He experiences his "usual dismay when talking to gay men here, who were more excluded than I had been, growing up in the American south, where at least I had found books that, even if they were always tragic, offered a certain beauty as compensation" (Greenwell 8). He introduces the concept of how a narrative can carefully measure out what human suffering requires in exchange for its labor: beauty. This is a uniquely American phenomenon for the narrator, who seems to be robbed short of that placating sense of beauty in the gay men who suffer in Bulgaria. Meeting his queer student who is in search of his guidance, he says G. would not quite pass for an American if "he smiled too broadly (as he was careful almost never to do) and revealed a lower set of teeth in un-American disarray" (Greenwell 4). Evidently, G's habitual attempts at hiding certain imperfections such as his teeth do not carry him through as he seeks the narrator's advice, harshly blunt about the reality of his despair of living as a queer man in Bulgaria. In G.'s confession, while his face is full of "longing," the narrator finds some difficulty looking at him directly, and admits: "I was unable to keep my eyes on his face" (Greenwell 15). Because the young man is unable to offer the placation of beauty, the narrator finds himself wanting to expel him from his own vision, treating the other tragic queer subject as an abject. The narrator is fundamentally displaced from connection with other queer men, and his own reality as a queer subject as a result.

The Gospodine reassures his student that other young people in his position have struggled and made it out; the student looks back with "revulsion": the face of tragedy does not accept optimism as sufficient (Greenwell 21). Both, unable to really accept one another as truthful visions of queer masculinity, or at least as satisfactory ones, and become isolated from one another in turn. Kristeva speaks on the deject's state of revulsion as a state not belonging, due to what the invasion of the abject does to his sense of boundaries: "A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines…constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray" (Kristeva 8). If the Gospodine has anything to teach at all, it will be the ability to start anew: the lovers he encounters provide rather good lessons in the endless revolutions of queer identity-reconstruction.

Part of what impels the narrator to question his solidity is the reality that there are those deemed as "dirty" under heteronormativity who have no such desire to capitulate to shame's demand for internal struggle. In the midst of a sexual encounter with an anonymous, "unhandsome" man who seems "free of both vanity and shame," the narrator encounters another figure of abjection: "very beautiful men are eager to be admired…but he seemed to feel no concern at all for my response to him, and it was then that I felt the first stirrings of unease" (Greenwell 27-28). The Gospodine, seeking some type of sign that his opinion is valued, finds none, which leaves him in a state of anxiety about his position in the encounter. The man's presence, or perhaps lack thereof, reveals something defiled in himself. The man has a "pose of uncaring that seemed to draw all value into itself, that seemed entirely self-sufficient. He would never be called a faggot, I thought, whatever the nature of his desires" (Greenwell 28). Because the man's identity is not apparently dependent on exterior feedback, particularly a sexual

partner's, the narrator translates this into a revelation about verbal violence towards queer men: it is the consequence of a certain need for being looked upon and regarded. The man calls him faggot, or *pedal*–a violent word, and the encounter eventually explodes into pure violence once the narrator rejects the man during sex: the non-faggot doesn't respond to feedback on his appearance, but certainly does not take kindly to denial. It would be a mistake to divorce the physical fight from the verbal degradation involved in the sexual intimacy: they at once repel each other (the former being a display of genuine animosity, the second being a tool for sexual subjection) and reveal similarities in the other. The narrator fights against him for his violent dominance upon his identity–he seeks out the dominance to assert the subjection of his identity. His shame requires a beholder.

The Gospodine cannot surround himself with abjection for too long. Eventually a respite of sorts, some compensation, must be found in the beautiful. His lover, R., is described to have "a beauty stripped of self-regard" (Greenwell 89). This type of beauty is not without its own implications about the narrator's self-perception, similar to that of the men he finds abject. The lack of "self-regard" turns R.'s beauty from revealing anything about R. to revealing the Gospodine's anxiety, since his beauty requires nothing of the Gospodine. R.'s beauty is not the only type of sublimation that the narrator seems to find some anxiety in, as he describes the very sea itself: "You could lose yourself in it, that was what drew me, it was beautiful but also it was like looking at nothing" (Greenwell 155). Almost as though he corrects himself, he acknowledges another type of beauty that requires no affirmation, that of the beautiful accident of the world itself. Looking at nothing requires one to find something, some confine, that can affirm one's identity. Turning back to that delicate matter of censoring the self (which we find often in the queer subject in a hetero-dominated world) the beautiful reveals to the narrator

precisely what he must expunge in himself. Listening to a singer in an opera he adores, he considers his voice "beautiful and light-bodied and pure, embodying my every ambition; as I listened to him I imagined the life my own voice would lead me to, scrubbed of shame." (Greenwell 147). Censorship only exists with a certain motivation and limits: the abject proves the fragility of such limits, the beautiful reminds one why they must exist, specifically to deny the domination of the abject. It is not, of course, the very queerness that he feels need to expel, but the presence of his shameful self-regard.

R. and the narrator fittingly call each other *skupi*, or "great price," which the narrator notes after describing the anxious ways in which they must avoid showing affection for each other in public (Greenwell 90). The price of secrecy is living outside the world, and therefore outside the bounds of heteronormative diction. It is a secret affection they harbor for one another, and the narrator revels in R's beauty that lacks vanity, wanting to be "smiled at like that" so that the experience is his own secret to enjoy (Greenwell 92). For the narrator, beauty is something that relieves abjection, though they walk hand in hand when both options seem to not need his approval or judgement. Just as much as the abject has no object, neither does the beautiful: the beautiful is more a combination of consequential impressions upon the Gospodine than a measurable thing in and of itself. Thus, his relation to other queer men turn back into himself: a wary Narcissus looking back into what reveals his own reflection. Of narcissism, Kristeva says, "The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed" (Kristeva 13). The Gospodine's watchman does not relax often, and it will be quite the endeavor to keep his symbolic figure of repression under control, for it represents control itself. When faced with the ideal image of the beautiful, he will turn it into a reason to control or check himself.

Beauty Sundered

When the narrator is in love, the narrative situates itself in Venice, a city of unimaginable beauty. As they take a tour of the landscape, R. is delighted by the Gospodine's knowledge and gushes, "I have a crush on a teacher, he said, whispering, and then he smiled his smile that meant happiness, his whole face beaming, turning toward the painting now though I knew the smile was for me" (Greenwell 124). The narrator, for all his preoccupation with figures of abjection, attempts to represent the beautiful; so much so that he is not only aligned with its figure but receives the admiration reserved for it. As they stand in a tourist destination constructed for the purpose of imparting beauty, the narrator looks away from the new and polished objects (in which he and R. are included) and looks toward the "old, dull" and golden monuments of time, turning his attention deliberately "so that look, there, I could almost convince myself of it, Aschenbach stepping from uncertain water to stone" (Greenwell 124). What, exactly, he is looking to "almost" convince himself of is vague: the literary allusion is a clue. Certainly, Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* could not anticipate the plague sundering him apart once the beauty of the boy Tadzio convinced him to stay in the city. He only sensed that the city's natural beauty, separated from humanity, demanded his compliance to its horrors, and thus stood his ground.

Aschenbach, however, is not a model of excellence, but rather a model of reason's eventual succumbing to madness when placed under an impossible standard for a mere human to reconcile with his faults. The Gospodine, with a certain sense of lucidity that Aschenbach did not possess, will have a different deathbed. First, however, he subscribes to a similar idealism surrounding the powers of artistry and narrative. When his students bicker over the state of Bulgaria, and how to be Bulgarian in the real world rather than the fantastical notions of Bulgaria

they are exposed to, he exclaims that poetry is the answer: “Poetry, as though it were the obvious answer to a question, the answer they already knew. That’s what poets can do, I said, poets and artists; they give us ideas to buy into, for whole countries to buy into” (Greenwell 71). This places the solution in the problem itself: if the current fantasy of Bulgaria doesn’t work, create another one. Aschenbach, too, was rather trained in bending the mind to a certain will. “Buying into” the ideal implies a certain type of transaction, similar to that constructed beauty the narrator once read in the tragic queer stories of his youth.

The narrator goes on to instruct his students on the impact of Walt Whitman’s poetry in America, and how it created a vision of America to buy into. As he does so, he finds that his students are “less interested maybe in the poem or what I was saying than in my excitement, which they observed like some freakish natural phenomenon, I thought” (Greenwell 72). The narrator’s sense of repression has, evidently, not yet ceased its tireless watch over his interactions with the outside world. No matter how idealism and beauty reign, the queer subject’s “watchman” looms, waiting to balance the scales between optimism and shame. In his view, he cannot escape from shame by merely embodying an ideal identity, because his construction is a performance that is always subject to scrutiny.

The teacher’s relationship to speech is different to, say, that of the subject who tells his story in a mimetic fashion. His speech, on the other hand, is shadowed by the didactic standard. Even while teaching, he experiences a constant state of anxiety surrounding his performance under this standard. Testament to the watchman’s prowess, the Gospodine is “grateful when the bell rang, it let me raise my voice and say So go be poets, which released them from my overheated feeling and gave them permission to laugh” (Greenwell 72). His internal shame has an equal and opposite reaction to his speech, where if he believes his performance of idealism to

be a "freakish, natural phenomenon" he must compensate with a mockery of himself, an extreme mode of speech. If they are staring, they may as well laugh. The tension of the abject must be relieved with some disfiguration. (Of course, it would be remiss not to note that the narrator's subjectivity has created the conditions of this mockery: it's very possible that the students were not staring at a freak, but admiring their teacher.) We return, then, to what words are capable of doing to the queer subject. Kristeva, when speaking of language's place in the theory of abjection, says:

> The *symptom*: a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire. Sublimation, on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the *symptom*, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being (Kristeva 11).[2]

At its heart, *Cleanness*' language is a constant rebalancing between abject and sublime, two extremes, with repression being the dominant method of control. By using the language of censorship (censoring out despair, allowing the ideal of Poetry) he creates boundaries and names for the "pre-nominal," the essence of the self before language. As a teacher, the narrator's relationship to his language is that he must feel as though it offers something of value: measure for measure.

Whitman's song of himself does not translate well into Bulgarian national identity. Whatever idealism the Bulgarians have constructed is not as seemingly eternal as it is for

[2] Properly engaging with the semiotic and symbolic analysis that Kristeva has laid out in her theory of abjection would be beyond the scope of the paper, but it's worth noting that often, when the Gospodine touts the Symbolic (and uses the *symptom*), it is not long before he regards himself to be aligned with the Semiotic: the freakish, natural phenomenon.

Americans, as the narrator learns from a cab driver: "we had so much hope, do you understand, we felt so much hope because finally we were free…we thought we would make something new but we didn't" (Greenwell 49). The reality of failure stations itself in the narrative of idealism: a rebalancing of the scales. The failure, a complete absence of sublimation, creates a motive for the cab driver's eventual tirade about the politicians of Bulgaria. His hope for idealism has something to struggle against, and he begins to use the language of the narrator's anonymous hookup: "the politicians, *vsichki sa pedali*, he said, they're all faggots" (Greenwell 51). The beauty of idealism exists because it must deal with the abject that threatens it. Thus, faggot: this ideology allows hope, does not allow faggotry, which seems to be associated with the politicians' selfishness, at least for the cab driver. This is, fundamentally, the same way in which the anonymous man used the slur: for the purpose of solidifying social notions of inferiority surrounding "faggots." Remember that the anonymous man would, in the narrator's estimations, never be considered a faggot, precisely because he is anonymous and takes no regard to how he may be perceived. The faggot fails at this: well, we've been privy to that much, as readers of the narrator's constant self-correction.

The cab driver asks the Gospodine if "people take care of each other in America" (Greenwell 52). He does not wait for a reply, saying that he believes they do. The cab driver buys into the idealist narrative, which is not in spite of his negative attitude, but the very grounds for it. The narrator considers the futility of this later, when at a protest with his student who dreads leaving for America, thinking of the cab driver and "how he had wasted his life for an idealism that had curdled, but I didn't say this, I put my arm around her and squeezed her shoulder, another breach of decorum" (Greenwell 67). The Gospodine embodies an argument for idealism and beauty: usually, for the dejected, a "breach" of sorts. It's enough to override his instinct to

put his disbelief into speech. Oftentimes, his speech consists of more sentimentality. A student's mother soberly tells him: "it's very beautiful what you say, very inspiring…maybe in America what you say is true; you try something there and if you fail it is no problem, you try something else, Americans love starting over, you say it's never too late. But for us it is always too late" (Greenwell 201). As the beauty and self-assuredness of other men reveal something anxious in the narrator, so does the endless, American hopefulness for the Bulgarian mother. She and the cab driver both specify this despair as owing itself to the inevitable passage of time: time always moves forward and cannot provide any hope in the face of failure. Regarding how time can distort the monument of the ideal, Kristeva says, "The clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame" (Kristeva 9). She later also makes the astute claim that what is sublime seems eternal but must truthfully not remain so for long: no human soul will stand the face of idealism under duress. Neither will the Gospodine.

Behind the Ideal Face

Harking back to the disruptive sexual encounter the narrator experienced in the very first acts of the novel, the narrator cries out that he wants to be "nothing" and describes his experience of giving the man oral sex as such: "I wanted to satisfy myself more than him, or rather to assuage that force or compulsion that drew me to him, that force that can make me such a stranger to myself, it is a failing to be so prone to it but I am prone to it" (Greenwell 33). The narrator thus positions himself as a figure of succumbing to the abject, negating the appropriate: a "failing." This seems to be what motivates his desire to play into the power dynamics by declaring he wants to be "nothing." His anxious perception of himself is what occurs from

attempting to make boundaries out of the abject and the ideal, which leads to the desire to be "nothing." However, this is just a construct of language that does not break down boundaries, and instead degrades him further. Once the narrator first resists their coupling, the man's violence heightens, and he strikes him, asking: "what are you to say no to me" (Greenwell 41). The narrator is no longer "nothing," such that he now enacts his agency to struggle against domination. The answer to the man's question of what the narrator is follows soon, as he strikes the narrator and calls him "faggot." The faggot, for the purposes of the narrative, is the deject who says "no" in the process of his identity being forcefully shamed and degraded.

After escaping the violence, the narrator reflects: "I felt with a new fear how little sense of myself I have, how there was no end to what I could want or to the punishment I would seek. For some moments I wrestled with these thoughts, and then I stood and turned back to the boulevard, composing as best I could my human face" (Greenwell 47). The narrator has no solidity to his being, since the struggle has ended irresolutely. The man is still anonymous, the Gospodine is still a "faggot," so his next course is to take on a face that would be deemed appropriate: one that will carry him through his teaching of the ideal. As Kristeva has said, through sublimation one keeps the abject under control.

The abject lives in all humanity, either as a possibility, reality, or reminder, but in queer subjects, it is that which resists exile. And, as we have discussed before, it is not the fact of being homosexual that constitutes abjection or dejection in the narrator, but the shame that comes from it, as well as the nurturing of that shame. Commenting upon the symbiotic relationship that Beauty and Shame have to one another, let us turn to Kristeva, who says that "as the sense of abjection is both the abject's judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the

dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality" (Kristeva 16). As queer literature depicts the subject as having both agency and a barrier to that agency which censors their later narration, the image of the narrator reckoning with the violence he just faced and the "human face" he must compose is a literal example. To take Kristeva's statement further, the shame of being queer is the queer narrator's judge and accomplice. As the Gospodine comments when R. enters his apartment: "my building was surrounded by others, someone might always be watching" (Greenwell 105). The "someone" is, in his case, not just an immediate threat but an internalized presence: a watchman waiting to release the dejection.

Towards An Embrace of Dirtiness

At the very beginning of the novel, the Gospodine tells G., his dejected student, that his story of despair is a partially constructed one: "[it's] a story you've made up that will make you unhappy. There's nothing inevitable about it, it's a choice you've made, you can choose a different story" (Greenwell 21-22). The purpose of a story for oneself is apparently what it evokes: happiness or otherwise. Whether one can accomplish such a goal of choosing a story to make oneself happy remains to be seen with the narrator of *Cleanness*, and is indeed the journey he embarks on. Time, apparently, has no meaningful effect on his narrative: only what he does. The relief of a constructed narrative upon dejection is analyzed by Kristeva, who says that it is "the most normal solution, commonplace and public at the same time, communicable, shareable, is and will be the narrative. Narrative as the recounting of suffering: fear, disgust, and abjection crying out, they quiet down, concatenated into a story" (Kristeva 145). The Gospodine often finds relief in a privacy that allows shame (as evidenced by his unnerved feelings about the

building where someone may "always be watching") but a publicity that allows beauty, or happiness, is just as preferred in his method of idealism.

His predisposition toward self-reflection (which we have seen so often of him and our winged subject in the last chapter) eventually proves to him that there is a hole in his argument for simply constructing a new narrative. He becomes a teacher yet again to R., when once his lover recounts his backstory of being sexually abused, imparts to him the standardly appropriate reason: it wasn't his fault. His own response recoils within his interiority: "none of this was right, I rejected the phrases even as they formed, not just because they were objectionable in themselves but because none of them answered his real fear, which was true, I thought: that we can never be sure of what we want, I mean of the authenticity of it, of its purity in relation to ourselves" (Greenwell 103). He wants to embed a story that dutifully deals out a beautiful victim and horrible assailant, to make sense of things, but retains the knowledge that "purity" is difficult to ascertain so cleanly. Of such a story that can handle cases of terror, Kristeva says:

> "Their only sustenance lies in the beauty of a gesture that, here, on the page, compels language to come nearest to the human enigma, to the place where it kills, thinks, and experiences jouissance all at the same time. A language of abjection of which the writer is both subject and victim, witness and topple. Toppling into what? Into nothing more than the effervescence of passion and language we call style, where any ideology, thesis, interpretation, mania, collectivity, threat, or hope become drowned" (Kristeva 206).

The narrator's stories have, thus far, not been able to reconcile his models of the ideal and the reality of how shamefully the world looks upon him (and therefore, himself). They apparently do not soothe anyone in Bulgaria–so how can the displaced American choose a different story?

Towards the end of the novel, the Gospodine embarks on another hookup in which he takes the dominant role rather than the submissive one. Of his new partner, he says: "His name meant light, or that was the root of it, the root too of the word for holy, for any number of words

associated with sanctity and the church; and this was why…I called him Svetcheto, the little saint" (Greenwell 173). The Gospodine takes comfort in naming, as we have learned from Kristeva's understanding of the human desire to name beauty which is fundamentally pre-nominal. Specifically, linking the concept of light with this boy is one that rejects the obscured privacy of the narrator's shame. Regarding how one that is saintly interacts with abjection, Kristeva reminds the reader "that abjection, which modernity has learned to repress, dodge, or fake, appears fundamental once the analytic point of view is assumed. Lacan says so when he links that word to the saintliness of the analyst" (Kristeva 26-27). The language of analysis seeks to do many things: to make transparent, to expand, to complicate, to make connection–above all, it destroys. What the saint-analyst leaves in the wake of destruction, here, will be the beginning of the narrator's new path.

Svetcheto does his namesake well, bringing to light that which should be shameful, and then discounting it: a careless subversion of the requirements for being a "faggot," one who struggles against his perception, that the narrator has come to know. When talking about the boy's attitude towards STIs, he remarks, "[Svetcheto] didn't care about status, anyone was welcome, he didn't want to know. People always lie, he would say to me later, why bother to ask, why should I believe them, why should I care" (Greenwell 176). The little saint rejects not only shame, but the constructed narratives that the Gospodine has worked very hard to teach. Why should one believe in someone else? And, bringing to mind what the cab driver asked the Gospodine about Americans caring for each other, the subject of "caring" is also disregarded of any importance. Similar to the first anonymous hookup where the man did not care for how he appeared while attempting to take control of a partner, the saint does not care for the consequences of succumbing to another's control in what might be deemed a shameful position.

The subject of STIs brings some urgency to the saint's dismissive attitude. Regarding pollution and its effect on what we consider to be "abject," Kristeva says, "The potency of pollution is therefore not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it. It follows from this that pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined" (Kristeva 69). If there is no prohibition that Svetcheto succumbs to, the "pollution" (which brings to mind her choice of wording about how abjection is an absence that "invades" the subject) therefore becomes null.

Svetcheto continues to dismantle the narrator's previous notions of social narratives surrounding the queer subject. The Gospodine has learned that faggots are particularly preoccupied with struggling against a heteronormative domination over their sexual identity. On the topic of rejection, the narrator recounts that the saint says, "Why should I care who fucks me, he would say to me later, why should I say no to anybody, I don't want to say no" (Greenwell 189). This rejects the narrator's previous understanding of the "faggot" that struggles and says "no"; but embodies the "nothing" he previously wanted to be (or claimed so). To be nothing–the abject, the deject, the displaced, the *absent*–apparently requires a lack of care that the narrator has yet to learn.

During the sexual encounter, the narrator takes on the role of the one with the capacity to sling "faggot" at his submissive sexual partner, a reversal of his earlier position. Speaking the word instead of being subjected to it, predictably, changes how he views himself in regard to his shamefulness: "Maybe they had always been there, these words, maybe once you have heard such language it infects you, that was what it felt like, like something bursting free in me" (Greenwell 194). The language of the pollution permeates his revelation. To let something "infect" him, to give up the balancing act between abjection and boundary, represents a death of

sorts. He frees the languages; hope for ideal draws its final breath. When the narrator cries after the intimate encounter, Svetcheto quickly comforts him and puts a stop to his mourning: "Do you see? You don't have to be like that, he said. You can be like this" (Greenwell 196). Through the act of placing himself in the Gospodine's arms, the saint-analyst crafts a new image for them both to buy into. Embracing the symbol of the Impure will not necessarily break him free of a narrative, but will provide a different sense of the boundaries his subjectivity may rest on. For Kristeva, abjection "takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (Kristeva 15). The saint, in this regard, becomes Christ-like: a new ideal, one that subverts Kristeva's formula. In hers, the Pure is the result of abjection forcing the ego to reexamine itself. In *Cleanness*, the Impure is the result of abjection forcing the ego to reconsider what it finds to be so abject in the first place.

The Gospodine tries this new ideal out with recently graduated students of his, the recipients of his recently exorcized ideals. For all the saint's work, repression has not stopped watching, and the Impure ideal crumbles in the public place. Looking for the bathroom, one of his students "mimed a man pissing, his hand curled as if around an impossibly large cock. I laughed, both because it was funny and because it hid the other thing I felt" (Greenwell 208). Like the students previously laughing at the Gospodine's mockery of himself, he finds that mockery of the disgusting object is a relief from any action on his part: his companion has done that expulsion for him. But the performance, transparent and clear, conceals and censors the hidden thing the narrator dare not put a name to, which one might assume is related to some eroticism. They eventually do find their way to the mocked bathroom: "there was a sudden

rectangle of porcelain light as a door opened and I was in a large bright room, tiled and clean" (Greenwell 212). The shape of light brings to mind the image of saintliness Svetcheto embodies. In the logic of the narrative, there seems to be no end to what can be cleaned: even that of the Impure, a place of pure, primal abjection. For what subject can stand the sight of what he physically expels from his body?

He flirts with the student in this landscape of the scrubbed Impure: "I had leered at him, I had touched him, I had been a caricature of myself, I thought, but that isn't true; I had been myself without impediment, maybe that's the way to say it" (Greenwell 219). A boundary looms over the narrator as repression readies himself to strike. There's a price for shamelessness and lack of care that resides particularly in those who have learned the hard way that the world does not respond kindly to public "breaches of decorum." He hopes that the student was too drunk to remember, for then "the only shame would be a private shame, the shame I was accustomed to, the shame that felt like home" (Greenwell 216). The strayed deject, using Kristeva's terminology, does happen to have a home in the queer narrator: paradoxically, it is a home that alienates oneself from their identity. It can only be accessed in the quietness and obscurity of being by oneself, all at once alienated and affirmed by solitude.

Cleanness is pure artifice, performed solely because of abject's threat to the subject, and renewed solely by the subject's straying and realization–even when that cleanness takes on the clever guise of the Impure. However, the Gospodine, at the end of his journey, is confronted with what is real. A well-known stray dog in the town of his residence, Mama[3], who is unabashedly soiled by her years as an unclaimed subject, enters the drama in the very final moments of the

[3] The stray dog's name, Mama, calls attention to Kristeva's claim that the mother is the first abject one must expel from their person in order to have an identity, precisely because she threatens the boundaries between herself and her child. But the expulsion is hardly ever complete, or even worthwhile: Mama always returns. In this novel, Mama is a stray dog, an exterior element intended to mirror this queer male narrator's interiority, something for Narcissus to reflect on. In the next chapter, the state of motherhood will be a possible reality for a queer trans subject.

novel. “I pulled back, making a sound of disgust and wiping my lips clean, but then I laughed again” (Greenwell 221). The laughter that has previously been a source of relief from the mockery of the abject becomes relief from the mockery of shame. The tools of repression are turned on its head: don’t repress that, you can repress this, in the words of the saint. Particularly so if your watchman refuses to let up.

The ideal of the clean, no matter what flag of purity or impurity it tethers itself to, becomes the new source within the subject that the narrator attempts to expel, so that the abject has perhaps not disappeared but taken on a new set of conditions. Kristeva, on the matter of idealism, remarks that she would “rather conceive it as a work of disappointment, of frustration, and hollowing—probably the only counterweight to abjection” (Kristeva 210). On the flipside of this prescription, the narrator does not counter abjection by negating the ideal, but transfiguring the two altogether.

He does so through an embrace instead of dismissal (the latter of which the queer male figures he encountered did so often). “[Mama] was dirty but what was a little dirt, I thought as I turned the latch, I should have let you in a long time ago, I said, I’m sorry” (Greenwell 222). Not only does he offer an embrace to this symbolic entity, but an apology: more so for himself than anyone. His private shame may live with him, but a new standard of what constitutes his subjectivity will live alongside it: the stray dog, who had been exiled until now. Repression, of course, does not take to the new duty of repressing shame very well, so the narrator attentively remarks that Mama’s dirt might stay on him and he “would have to scrub it out in the morning, but what did it matter…why not let it stay” (Greenwell 223). His choice to embrace dirtiness, “letting” it stay, becomes a joyful submission rather than the type of violent submission that he has grown accustomed to fear. Although the morning’s light may bring back the dutiful business

of trading in dirtiness for cleanness, he has opened up a new possibility and home that can be returned to. As Kristeva aptly sums up the matter of the deject, "the more he strays, the more he is saved" (Kristeva 8). She meant this to depict how far the deject must distance himself from the abject in order to be "saved" under normative conditions, but in the Gospodine's new conditions, the abject must be rather close in order for his salvation to occur.

The ending of the novel has led the protagonist to stray away from the transaction of abjection and idealism. By not providing Beauty nor worshipping it, he wields the arms of acceptance, and takes Shame as his own dirty stray to keep. The Gospodine has seemed to master the fear of the pendulum swinging the other way: the death/resurrection involved in embracing the dirtiness and shame at once has become a merely mundane price for living life with joy: why not let it stay? The next chapter will deal with that question directly, examining how an acquiescence to the reality of shame within the queer subject unfortunately does not deter the demands of Beauty: immortal presence, she will make herself known despite all efforts.

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Abortive Measures: Trans Narrators Under "No Futurism" in Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby*

> By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule
> of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide.
> – Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"
>
> Do not mourn the dead. They know what they are doing.
> – Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*

It is not a hyperbole to assert there must be many trans lives born out of failed suicides. Often, a path only becomes necessary when all other plans are exhausted. Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* examines the nature of how trans lives come to be, and how they eventually disappear: whether through actual death or through death of viable life paths. The title itself seems as though it is a command, while describing the two primary points of contention for the trans subjects in the novel. "Detransition" is the first utterance, describing the reversal of someone's life path (and one that garners some shock value). Then, immediately following that introduction of the subject matter, the verb becomes a command with the addition of "baby," which is arguably the beginning of a new life that contrasts with the verb "detransition." The contents of the novel reveal that the somewhat jarring title reveals is not a suggestion or command, but a description of two cogs in the plot: Ames' detransition and Katrina's pregnancy.

This unborn baby holds a considerable amount of weight for existing as a potentiality, since two of the characters revolve around an aborted life path. The plot consists of the fallout of Ames' detransition, Katrina's divorce, and occasionally, there are references to suicides that minor or unnamed trans characters witness or commit. Reese is the only one whose character seems to revolve around birth rather than death, and even this becomes a "miscarriage" of sorts. Ames and Reese are the primary trans voices of the novel, and both engage in highly convoluted mazes of self-censorship and justifications as they attempt to understand the expectations that the world places on them. Both are keenly aware of the narratives that a gendered society has: if one lives as a woman, she must contend with the subjugations that the patriarchy places upon her. For

trans women in particular, this position involves a level of cissexist scrutiny upon their identity. Ames responds to this scrutiny by detransitioning, attempting to avoid it altogether, while Reese attempts to avoid scrutiny by "having" a baby and therefore subverting the expectations of what trans women are able to do under a cissexist society. By using free indirect speech to guide Ames' and Reese' narration of the novel, Peters makes it evident that both women use the power of narrative voice as a means of avoiding shame and exposure, as well as affirming the justification of their actions. By doing so, however, they capitulate to the judgment of cissexist hegemony, and thwart the passage to their desired futures.

Barthes pointed out that mythology capitalizes on presenting itself as natural: so does the mythical narrative of cissexist hegemony. While *Cleanness* presented a path that subverted expectations of heteronormativity, it was a temporary one. *Detransition, Baby* handles the lives of queer subjects in the long term. Butler, when reviewing Kristeva's theories of abjection and desire in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, says "it seems that Kristeva offers us a strategy of subversion that can never become a sustained political practice" (Butler 103). We turn to what Peters has to say, wherein she handles the prospect of motherhood for a trans woman, and the anxieties of that future being stopped in its tracks by the judgment of cissexism. In this narrative, the potential mother, Reese, is one of the primary women who the narration follows closely in free indirect discourse. As a narrator, she attempts to reconcile the demands of heteronormativity with her own desires as a trans subject attempting to create a future out of those demands. As Butler points out, "Lacan claims that we can never tell the story of our origins, precisely because language bars the speaking subject from the repressed libidinal origins of its speech" (Butler 85). In the language that Reese has to utilize to describe her experiences, there also exists a boundary which she cannot traverse, even temporarily.

The Face of No Futurism

Reese, in the very beginning of the novel, puts pressure on the notion of free will and identity, especially as it relates to transness. Reese makes the claim that, because trans women have not been accepted in public life for very long, "trans women defaulted into a kind of No Futurism" (Peters 10) when it comes to their life paths. The term brings to mind the modern art movement of Futurism, well known for its rejection of the past and glorification of war and disruption for the sake of paving way for the future. In Reese's negation of Futurism, which is not entirely a result of agency on trans women's parts but apparently mere circumstance, there is no other path forward except for a negation of viable paths. She explains how other queer people around her readily adhere to No Future in order to gain a semblance of agency: "that rush into No Future looked a lot more glamorous when the beautiful corpse left behind was a wild and willful choice rather than a statistical probability" (Peters 10). The vagueness of what "No Future" entails is thus spelled out plainly as a matter of death, whether metaphorical or literal. She recognizes that one can control the narrative of their death to be a "willful choice," but it is a mere construction that attempts to replace the very real societal chains of oppression with a shinier set of self-inflicted manacles.

Reese's assertion calls into question how Reese's own narrative will play out as a trans subject, and what path she will inevitably have to take as the protagonist of the novel. The subject of "future" is addressed once more when she and her cis lover (who is married to a cis woman) begin to make a fetish out of the idea of her getting pregnant due to her PrEP pills resembling birth control pills. Reese claims that "Futurelessness had crept back into view. Now Reese made other women's prizes her own bliss, and made babies out of viruses" (Peters 10). By conflating birth and HIV infection, Reese creates a new code of heteronormativity that she

believes can include her. But her phrasing includes a level of self-incredulity that complicates such an endeavor: giving life to a baby is juxtaposed to an infection that creates an invasive life within the host. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler refers to the media's understanding of HIV in particular: "there is a tactical construction of a continuity between the polluted status of the homosexual by virtue of the boundary-trespass that is homosexuality and the disease as a specific modality of homosexual pollution" (Butler 167). With framing it as a "boundary-trespass," Reese's phrasing aligns her transgender identity with that of the potential virus: something that can negate and infect her future. But, to use Butler's words, this is a tactical construction that places her in the position of a trespasser and diminishes the reality of her disenfranchised position as a trans woman in the cissexist system.

Reese's precarious position of being a trans woman hinges on the danger that she may be scrutinized and devalued by others, which results in her deliberately framing and obscuring her appearance. She describes the rationale as such: "Many people think a trans woman's deepest desire is to live in her true gender, but actually it is to always stand in good lighting" (Peters 92). While a witty comment, the importance of lighting as a motif becomes clearer when she describes how, growing up, cities made a shift away from blue light in street lamps toward orange light, which due to "a trick of the human eye" is perceived as more revealing. The drive toward a more revealing light is apparently rooted in wanting to deter criminals, so that they feel more publicized by the warmer lamps: "In the pictures of Reese's early childhood, cities shone as stars, but now they burned a combustion-orange glow heavenward" (Peters 92). In Reese's description, the blue and dimmer light exists in the same manner that stars are pristine and untouchable, whereas the orange trick-of-the-eye exists like a fire: destructive and active all at once, reaching toward the sky where the stars appear. In terms of the narrative, this means she

has learned to obscure certain angles of herself for the sake of self-defense: the prospect of being revealed, or what the eye convinces humans to be "revealing", is a fate that designates one as a potential criminal.

The crime in question might be presumed to exist as a trans woman at all, trespassing the boundaries of gender difference and therefore existing as something beyond what cissexism determines to be the "natural" world. Serano, in *Whipping Girl*, interrogates the idea that transness is inherently unnatural or deceptive: "The truth is that the myth of transsexual deception is merely a ruse, a smoke screen designed to hide societal complicity in this tragedy" (Serano 249). The tragedy she refers to is that of the murder of a young trans woman: in this sense, she shifts blame away from the trans woman's "deception" and toward society's inability to accommodate or protect those on the margins of gender and sexuality. Thus, when interpreting Reese's tendency to conceal or defend herself, it's important to note that it is not an inclination rooted in concealing her "true" sex or identity, but in presenting an affable enough face to the cis world.

While Reese's conflicted notions about transness and criminality are rooted in perception of the self, she recognizes that she cannot evade scrutiny by merely destructing the self altogether. The death that Serano refers to is, indeed, the ultimate act of judgment upon a trans woman, not the erasure of a trans woman. While attending the funeral of a trans friend, Reese remarks:

> Funerals remind Reese not to kill herself. Not because she so badly wants to live, but because suicide as a trans girl leads to a mortifying posthumous stripping of all that you cherished by friends and strangers alike. If you are not there to stop them, the loudest, brashest, and clumsiest of your semi-acquaintances will scoop up all that was once you and simmer it down to a single mawkish narrative, plucking out all that is inconveniently irreducible, and inserting in its place all that is trite and politically

> serviceable. The word 'mortifying'—as in existentially embarrassing—has as its root the Latin for 'death,' so if Reese seeks to avoid mortification, she cannot kill herself: She simply must not die (Peters 210).

This is precisely the formula that occurs when, at the trans girl' funeral, her probable suicide is re-narrativised into a car accident to negate the possibility of it being a suicide, so that her friends don't feel as if they've failed her. In her friends' posthumous analysis that denies suicide as a possibility, the girl is stripped of her agency in the very event of her death–not to mention the funeral speeches about the kind of person she was, which is the "mawkish narrative" Reese speaks of. To be known is to be seen, which is to be distorted by perspective: since Reese cannot avoid being seen if she is to exist, her best course of action is to meticulously reexamine her own image to keep it up to par. The matter of death complicates such calculations, in more ways than literal.

On The "Detransition" Before "Baby"

To fully understand Reese's hypothesis about No Futurism, her ex-lover's detransition must be examined. It's a tricky one: in this paper, we'll comply with Ames' decision and refer to him as "he" in the novel's narrative present, and "she" in Ames' flashbacks to his trans self (though, in Reese's chapters, she often disregards Ames' decision and calls him Amy). Ames' use of language as a process to avoid shame in *Detransition, Baby* can be essentialized in one of Ames' many apologies to Katrina: "I talk obliquely when I'm scared" (Peters 104). Ames' first encounter with shame happens as a teenager experimenting with cross-dressing, wherein two cis women mistakenly entered the store: "She would do almost anything to never again be looked at the way those women had looked at her…Seen a true thing in her that she had spent her life making sure never to show to anyone" (Peters 147). Whereas Reese explained her desire to

always "be seen in good lighting" (framed as a generalization about the nature of trans women as a whole), Ames' desire is to not be seen at all. Rather than focusing on the anxiety about being found out as non-cis, Ames focuses on the anxiety about being seen for her true gender. Serano comments on a similar anxiety: "whenever our class split into groups of boys and girls, I always had a sneaking suspicion that at any moment someone might tap me on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, what are you doing here? You're not a boy'" (Serano 78). The innate feeling of wrongness is not necessarily due to a disparity between assigned sex and subconscious gender/sex[4], but due to an anxiety about how the public may demand her to behave once that "true thing" is fully realized.

In understanding Ames' sense of shame, it's tempting to frame her gender as "inner" and appearance as "outer," and indeed this is a common motif in many attempts to understand transness, though this does not necessarily reflect the whole of the situation. As Butler suggests, "regardless of the compelling metaphors of the spatial distinctions of inner and outer, they remain linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of fantasies, feared and desired. 'Inner' and 'outer' make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability" (Butler 170). We have seen narrators strive for stability within their boundaries, certainly–their very natures disrupt the dominating sphere of heteronormativity and cis hegemony, creating a desire for a sense of stability. Ames' desire to keep her inner experience apart from her external appearance, though they eventually combine in her transition, make it so that her transition is eventually unsustainable–she sees her identity as a burden upon her appearance. Her shame causes her to despair under the eventual scrutiny of transphobia, because the very language she uses to describe her gender identity is clouded by anticipatory compliance with cissexism.

[4] In *Whipping Girl*, Serano criticizes the common notion that trans people are "born in the wrong body" and instead refers to their innate sense of gender as a "subconscious sex" that precedes and launches the process of transitioning.

Serano says it more plainly: “Trying to translate these subconscious experiences into conscious thought is a messy business” (Serano 80). Taking “messy” literally, it’s evident that in an attempt to achieve stability with an identity that defies heteronormativity results in a mess: a disordering of the subject.

When Ames is under the full force of cis hegemony, she’s beaten by Reese’s cis male lover, Stanley, and embodies the image of a forcefully degraded subject. This ultimate act of violence and ensuing shame is enough to lead to her detransition, and comply with the violence rather than continue to live in her constructed, dangerous territory of shame and concealment. Lying on the public street in the aftermath, she physically conceals her sex in “a ridiculous pinup pose, but one that kept her legs tightly together. She sobbed a great loud honker from deep in her diaphragm that she heard further reveal her as a man. None of the gawkers made a move to help” (Peters 255). Ames’ own description of the event demotes her from trans womanhood into what she believes the world sees her as: a “man.” Rather than prioritizing her subjectivity and subconscious knowledge of her gender, she defers to the “gawkers” who do not help her physically, and paralyze her mentally as she struggles under their gaze. Ames’ understanding of her inner self as something to be kept separate from the eye of the world has therefore been no help to her transition. Butler’s understanding of the subject, indeed, seems to support the notion that a mere setting of “inner” and “outer” boundaries fails to hold up under its own rules: “The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules” (Butler 185). Because she cannot entirely conceal herself, she cannot enforce the rules that have been placed upon her, and so she ends the process altogether by detransitioning and pursuing a metaphorical death of the trans self.

To make a comparison to previous narratives of concealment, Helen blinded Stesichoros, motivating him to take back his words and construct a Palinode: complying with shame to achieve visibility. Ames detransitions after being violated in the street, and instead hides in that treacherous space of invisibility to avoid shame. As Ames tells us earlier in the novel: "The first year of transition, Amy discovered, was about learning how much you've lied to yourself" (Peters 120). If transition brings about truth and uncovers the "inner" self, detransition brings the return of a comforting lie. Nothing, however, is the same as how one has left it previously: the least of which being one's previous life. Ames describes her ensuing return to masculinity as "a pocket of space to separate herself from the bright emotions of shame and fear, a veil between herself and the curious eyes on the subway and at work…a sheath over that awful longing for Reese as she had so innocently seen her before Stanley" (Peters 258). Ames has reached that level of mortification that Reese had decried during the funeral, and creates a reality where he does not die, but attempts to return to a state of innocence before the confines of subjectivity under heteronormativity.

Later, living as a man, Ames and his cis lover, Katrina, mistakenly begin the process of having a baby. He decides to ask Reese to join their potential parenthood, as he does not want to be a father: "Ames's child will know him. It is inevitable. And finally, there, an answer: He does not want his child to know him as he is" (Peters 318). Thus, his detransition has not truly allowed him to return to a state of innocence prior to shame, as it follows him wherever he goes. Ames' hypothetical child is not merely a hypothetical person, but exists as a personification of the future that awaits. A horrifying thing, to have his future know him in advance, and even exist under that scrutiny prematurely. However, Ames' interiority presents a deliberate thought process in which he makes a realization and works an answer out of that realization to justify his own fear: "there,

an answer" is an exclamation that attempts to find stability where there simply is none. His narration of his own consciousness, therefore, places him in a position of negation where he does not want to be known, although boundaries require precisely to know things clearly. He still trespasses those boundaries, even past the point of detransition where he has supposedly returned to a state of comprehensible sex under cis hegemony. In pursuing a return to a lie, he has fundamentally dislocated himself and constructed a No Future that Reese has predicted as the default for all trans women. However, once the prospect of a baby comes to Reese's life, the fate of No Futurism is intercepted by her more willful narration.

Futurism: Reese's Relationship to Cis Privilege

In some sense, Ames' detransition informs Reese's ability to move through the world of heteronormativity and reach out for what she says is her goal: being a mother. Where he has "given up," she will pursue beyond what cissexism has laid out for trans women. Once propositioned by Ames and Katrina, Reese takes on the role of a prospective mother, though her chance is thwarted once Katrina finds out that Reese has sex with married men. To understand why Reese pursues married cis men, her beliefs about sex as a trans woman should be explored: "Reese had one firm maxim: You don't get to choose who you fuck, you get to choose from among those who want to fuck you" (Peters 51). Reese, through a didactic formula, reduces her own agency and leaves herself in the hands of apparently sparse suitors. This constructed narrative eventually leads to the stripping of her future wherein she's deemed unfit to raise a child. In her sexual encounters with these men, she attempts to adhere to a vision of womanhood that she hopes will gain her cissexual privilege, unwittingly blocking the path that she truly desires from motherhood.

Stanley, the figure of a dominating cis male force, is one of her primary affairs. He and Reese engage in power plays that seem to affirm each other's genders, though each attempt leaves them at an imbalance that seeks to correct itself. There's no end in sight. After recounting a flashback where Stanley slapped Reese, she reflects on her immediate response at the time: "Somewhere distant from her traitorous body, a covert part of her mind slipped away to calculate her advantage" (Peters 47). Similar to Ames, Reese instates a boundary between body and mind, two forces that seem to feed off of one another: her body has been put through subjugation and pain, while her mind reacts by seeking an opportunity to dispel her subjugation. This, indeed, is how much of Reese's interiority operates: she handles oppression and violence through a perceptible amount of calculated responses.

The violence incurred on her by Stanley is also, apparently, unlike the violence Ames was subjected to in the street. "The reason Stanley hit Reese reversed everything both of them wanted to be true: Stanley hit Reese because she wanted him to hit her" (Peters 59). Rather than Ames, who seeks to avoid shame, Reese has a relationship to cis violence that is founded on her desire to affirm her own womanhood. Of course, Reese's retelling of the events are not without just cause for skepticism: she did not guide Stanley's hand to her own face. She did set up a chain of events that incurred Stanley's wrath, but whether she deserves such a reaction should never have been in her hands at all. Her narration places her as a false perpetrator in order to conceal the reality of domestic violence and heteropatriarchy at large, so that she may seem in control of the narrative.

Reese's tendency to detach from the events of her life in order to explain them and blame herself are not without cause. As a trans woman, she is hyper-aware of what the heteropatriarchy demands of its constituents–as Serano puts it, "people at the margins must understand life at the

center in order to survive" (Serano 290). To guide her understanding of proper performativity, Reese refers to a friend who was pushed into a bush by a man and fought back, causing their peers to mock that friend: "A good woman, she heard in the subtext, would have stayed in the bush and cried. If only some man would push Reese into a bush, she'd know what to do" (Peters 60). Reese, in this manner, learns the correct display of womanhood based on other women's failures, and based on the reactions to those failures in particular. Though, even in her analysis of the subtext, there is no situation in which she can create her own formula of gender–only one in which she can react and be adherent to, a subject that can exist within the boundaries that heteronormativity has placed upon her. Serano subverts the notion that trans women perpetuate sexual stereotypes[5], and says, "MTF spectrum trans sexualities make far more sense once we recognize them as being on the receiving end of cultural messages that sexualize femaleness and femininity, rather than being the perpetrators of such sexualization themselves" (Serano 270). Reese's perception of herself as a woman is determined by how well she responds to such cultural messages, and her self-placement as a complicit-perpetrator of male violence is an attempt to assuage helplessness in a system marked against her.

Reese's perception of herself as a trans woman is not only compared to her perceptions of cis women, but other trans women as well. In narrating her relationship to Stanley, Reese predicts the audience's judgement of her choice to be with him and counters it: "Consider for a moment Reese's own damage: She met Stanley on a fetish site with the word 'tranny' in its name" (Peters 49). The defense comes as a command, or suggestion, and appeals to the reader's

[5] The idea that trans people somehow perpetuate sexism by transitioning has historical precedent. For a while in the psychiatric field, trans identities have existed under the dichotomies of "homosexual transsexual" and "autogynephile." In this framework, "homosexual transsexuals" are trans women who are feminine and attracted to men, while autogynephiles fetishize the submission of women by embodying it. Both seem to suggest that trans women enact and perpetuate sexist roles of womanhood, which is a false explanation that obscures the patriarchy's demands for them to behave in these roles. Though Ray Blanchard's dichotomy is no longer accepted in the current understanding of transgender identity, the current cultural conception of transgender people is still reeling from the effects: leading to a domineering mythology that robs both trans and cis people from fully understanding transness.

sympathy for a trans woman who, in matters of love, is supposedly confined to men who objectify her existence. Later, her opinions on these men are heightened by how other trans women have reacted in her place: "She disdained the trans girls who disdained tranny chasers" (Peters 49). The responsibility is placed solely on the shoulders of other trans women, who are positioned as active players as opposed to the chasers who are presented as only doing what their desires bid them to do. This triangulated position leads Reese into the chasing of these chasers–if other trans girls do not value the desire of fetishizers, then Reese sets herself apart by playing into their fantasies that are ultimately based in lies about what it actually means to be a trans woman. This, however, bars her from the freedom cis women seem to have more of, at least in comparison. Reese makes a rhetorical point about sleeping with married chasers: "Who needs your public bathrooms? We're already in your bedrooms, fucking your husbands, and we'll use the master bath, thanks very much" (Peters 168). In framing the matter as though she has successfully completed a subterfuge of trespassing into the domestic sphere, she also recognizes her lack of acceptance into the public sphere. The private master bath is, ultimately, what she must consolidate herself to.

When Katrina eventually denies Reese's role in raising the baby, Reese's affairs with married men and chasers is explicitly linked to Katrina's reasoning. Making "viruses" out of babies has excluded Reese from what can be seen as the ultimate act of performing womanhood in the heteronormative sphere (arguably motherhood). Thus, she too becomes trapped in No Futurism by attempting to achieve privilege by linking herself to married cis men who apparently wield the power of Futurism. This complicates the authenticity of her narrative voice, where she believes that she can hold both poles that contradict each other at once–that she can somehow comply with cis fetishizers and also achieve the cissexual privilege that comes with motherhood.

The paradox, however, is one that is handed to her by No Futurism–not one of her own design. As Butler says, "There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains 'integrity' prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there" (Butler 185). In a world designed to prevent her from success, Reese is forced to compensate by presenting herself as a nimble and knowledgeable trespasser of the territory. She, however, is not a virus, and cannot achieve an infection that gives way to her future.

Miscarriage Blues: No Babyism

In one instance while speaking to Ames, Katrina brings up a blind spot that exists in both Ames' and Reese's points of view as trans women: "Maybe the way you're seeing things isn't working. You're so sure how things are, how to do things. But the way you do things ends in funerals" (Peters 232). People on the margins are encumbered with having to know how the system operates, but unfortunately, with that knowledge, they also censor themselves from being able to live within the framework. After Reese is excluded from motherhood, she sees this as a thwarting of her potential future that is represented by the baby, and takes a cold plunge to dilute her pain. The truth of the matter, however, is that there is nothing necessarily stopping her from continuing to live life and pursue another path towards motherhood–but her entitlement towards Ames and Katrina's specific baby blinds her to that reality. Of entitlement, Serano says: "Recognizing our own blind spots…is an important first step toward eliminating all of the gender entitlement that exists in the world…gender entitlement can affect anyone. It is best described as the arrogant conviction that one's own beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions regarding gender and sexuality are more valid than those of other people" (Serano 89). While it would not be

fruitful to attempt to describe Reese as arrogant, she has certainly created an image of herself that is more deserving of cissexual privilege than other trans women (those who disdain chasers and fly into No Futurism as beautiful corpses). This not only prevents her from becoming a mother to Katrina's baby, but prevents her from saving herself from the narrative she has constructed.

Before being excommunicated from the order of motherhood, Katrina asks why precisely Reese is so bent on becoming a mother. Reese has prepared herself well for such a test: "Reese swivels on the bench…nearly trembling, a runner taking her mark. 'I can tell you exactly why I want to be a mom…[S]o that when I have and love a child, no one ever asks me that question again'" (176). In doing so, Reese reveals that motherhood–the role that can allow her a future–is something that is contingent upon not having to justify herself, or construct a narrative for that matter. Motherhood exists as proof of her worth in the heteronormative system, and the child represents the promise of a future and legacy that exists for the purpose of avoiding scrutiny. In the act of doing so, however, she still plays a part: "a runner taking her mark" which, in itself, anticipates and reacts to the scrutiny she so fears, going so far as to compete with the scrutiny's endurance. Katrina's questioning is something that demands Reese to set up apparent boundaries that maintain herself as a subject, but her reasoning is something that affirms the questionability in the first place. As Serano says of trans people existing within dominantly cis structures, "The unceasing search to uncover the cause of transsexuality is designed to keep transsexual gender identities in a perpetually questionable state, thereby ensuring that cissexual gender identities continue to be unquestionable" (Serano 188). In evading questionability, Reese attempts to set herself aside from it, but does not defy the very circumstance of being questioned as a result of

heteronormativity. She wants a reality in which she adheres to heteronormativity, loves a child, creates a future, and can fly under the radar of questionability.

Reese is eventually deemed insufficient by Katrina's estimations of what constitutes a mother. She grieves the loss of this opportunity and walks into the unfathomable sea to cleanse herself in a cold plunge. The section begins as such:

> Among the queers of Brooklyn, it will become a generally agreed-upon story that the first truly beautiful beach day of the season was ruined when a certain pale, aging, once-popular, still-haughty trans woman traumatized an entire community by throwing herself into the freezing waters of the Atlantic Ocean to drown a la Virginia Woolf in full sight of everyone who had just come for a good time (Peters 326).

Because we have been in such close third person with each of the women, it might be assumed that this account is not genuinely reflected in the minds of "the queers of Brooklyn" but is rather what Reese thinks the public must have experienced when she embarked on her not-suicide. "Generally agreed-upon" becomes a generous rendition of the tale, given that Reese has consulted no one but herself in order to make the conclusion. Based on her own understanding of the events, she comes to the conclusion that through merely being observed by the public (and reasonably becoming the subject of concern), the nature of her own narrative has shifted against her. No longer does she cunningly evade mortification; she is now the subject of mortification through a failed suicide, even though she is well aware that she never intended to commit such suicide. In continuing with the symbolism of the sea, Serano says that after she became comfortable living as a woman, "I felt more like I was floating in a little dinghy that had been recently released from the dock I had been anchored to my whole life; and now I was being tossed about on an ocean of other people's perceptions of me" (Serano 219). In this ocean, Reese attempts to balance her self-perception against others', which proves to be unfruitful in the case

against No Futurism. If her self-perceived future is at odds with what others deem to be permissible, the path forward can either be to stay stagnant or to create new boundaries of what is permissible.

In the sea of other people's perception, Reese has a sturdy boat. In her own defense against the public's imaginary interpretation of her cold plunge, Reese asks a rhetorical question: "Can you imagine Virginia Woolf being so undignified as to put on a bathing costume to walk her intolerable despair into the river? If she wants to be taken seriously when she walks tragically into the sea, she needs a big skirt weighed down with stones, not a polyester one-piece" (328). Reese's defense is rooted in her ability as a performer, not necessarily as a person who wants to live: if she did want to die as Virginia Woolf did, she would be much better at assimilating into the generally agreed-upon story of her suicide. Interestingly, the quality of this performance is rooted in costume: a thicker, more concealing dress creates mystery that lends itself to believability, while a thin bathing suit reveals her as she is. And, as a result, when the paramedics inquire about her reasons for walking into the ocean, they ask about the rumors of her losing a baby: to which she refers to her genitals untucked in the one-piece and explains that it's impossible for her to have lost a baby. And yet, she did: her depiction of her failed suicide reveals something more truthful behind what cissexist sees in the revealing one-piece.Whether or not she is physically capable of bearing a child, she can experience the grief of losing a future all the same.

Eventually she reaches the height of anxiety regarding her perceived image as a trans woman narrating her own story. She finds herself in the company of imaginary ghosts, and informs them that she has lost a baby via miscarriage, but becomes concerned that the ghosts will not believe her:

> "Is this a lie? Can she lie to ghosts? Won't they know the truth? Anyway, is it really a lie? She had planned for a baby, and now she had lost a baby, before it was even born. What else is that but a miscarriage? Perhaps it was a trans version of a miscarriage, but she doubted that ghosts required gender to be explained to them. They had moved beyond all that. 'Miscarriage,' she says again" (Peters 325).

Imaginary ghosts are an interesting presence to include, symbolically: after all, the corpse left behind by No Futurism is not necessarily present, but a looming figure in Reese's mind. Similarly, a ghost is the extension of a corpse that begs for more life in the world it has been forced to leave. Can she, literally, lie to the ghosts she has invented? She cannot, and does not, because they are representations of the internalized judgement in her mind. After all, Ames was not necessarily lying to the gawkers staring at her in the street: in that moment, she believed herself to be an unveiled man, and did not have the narrative tools to denounce otherwise. Both women, through their perceptions of themselves, have created realities in which their futures are unreachable: but still maintain the blind spot surrounding the circumstances in which they are not entirely responsible for those realities. Reese is not concerned with the cissexist assumptions that exclude her from motherhood and a future with cissexual privilege: only if her story is believable.

Later, still during the wake of Katrina's discovery that Reese has been exposed to HIV through sleeping with a married man, Reese types up a narrative within the extant narrative of *Detransition, Baby*. She writes Katrina a letter explaining herself, a culmination of the self-defining and self-censorship that had occurred thus far–only, this time, she directly reckons with her transgender identity being something that was placed upon her by a cis, hegemonic society. She explains to Katrina that HIV and transgender identity are coupled in the medical sphere: "they assigned a name to this population: the umbrella term 'transgender'—and since

transgender women wanted access to resources, that's what we ended up calling ourselves. But make no mistake, HIV and the invention of transgender women are inextricable. Transgender is the name selected to recognize a vector of disease" (Peters 307). All narratives are deliberately crafted towards certain needs to be recognized as a subject. In queer subjects, these narratives contend with active subjugation from heteronormativity and cissexism. Out of necessity is the birth of a trans identity, one that grips its way through the manacles that oppression has set in place: if cis culture has deemed those on the gender margins to be an infection, that is exactly the identity one must align oneself with in order to be perceived as a real subject.

This "infectious" identity that Reese must align herself with is that of someone who trespasses into cissexual privilege to gain recognizability. It is an idea that colors her self-perception drastically: "Maybe she just always wanted what she wanted: hormones then and a baby now. A nimble mind can always uncover the politics to justify its own selfishness" (335). Reese does not explain what exactly is so selfish about wanting hormones or a baby, or anything that would provide a path to a future, but acknowledges that she can only do so with a "nimble mind." Selfishness, taking the term literally rather than with its negative connotations, simply means prioritizing the self's desires exclusively: at war with the rest of the world's desires. By positioning herself as separate from the rest of the world, Reese is caught in a double bind that degrades her own (rather reasonable) attempts at securing a future, while nevertheless wanting to pursue that future. The path forward, according to Serano, is not assimilating into the perceived unity of the world but recognizing that one's individual status need not be at war with the rest of the world: "So long as we refuse to accept that 'woman' is a holistic concept, one that includes all people who experience themselves as women, our concept of womanhood will remain a mere reflection of our own personal experiences and biases rather than something based in the truly

diverse world that surrounds us" (Serano 227). Priority of the self is not an issue–the assumption that the self is constituted by the reality of others is. For queer people, trans people in particular, the forging of one's future is always at war with the heternormative world, but it is not the only world that exists, and not even one that reflects the diversity Serano describes. In narrative, the queer person can attempt to reckon with heteronormativity, or reckon with the simple truth of the defiant that exist beyond that world.

In light of analyzing Serano's suggestion, the three main women of the novel–Reese, Ames, and Katrina–no longer constitute their own experiences as the basis of womanhood, but constitute the possibility of their imminent futures as that basis. At this point, Katrina is unsure of whether she should abort her pregnancy, and the concluding sentiments of the novel reflect each woman's position in such a state of potential: "They are together, and miles from each other, their thoughts turning to themselves, then turning to the baby, each in her own way contemplating how her tenuous rendition of womanhood has become dependent upon the existence of this little person, who is not yet, and yet may not be" (337). The ending of the novel, kept open with the unanswered question of whether Katrina's pregnancy will be aborted or not, is the only ending that sufficiently encapsulates the double bind that the women find themselves located in. For Katrina to abort the pregnancy would be to capitulate to the demands of a trans-fearing society and punish Reese for her sexual promiscuity with cisgender men, excluding Reese from any semblance of motherhood altogether. To continue with her pregnancy would be to subject Ames to further depersonalization (the father-but-not) and maintain complicitness with the society that pushed him towards detransitioning in the first place. And each decision would, in turn, create a situation in which the punished or silenced must remain as a witness to the other's perceived freedom. Recall the image from *Autobiography of Red*: of Geryon, Ancash,

and Herakles sitting before the bonfire's light. Possibility on their faces, night weighing on their backs. This suspension of the women's fates means that action will never be taken, at least within the confines of the story's purview. Whatever decision Katrina makes is apparently not worthy of the plot's ending. The women continue to be arrested of movement and are afforded no way out: this immortality is indeed freedom, freedom from the resolution of their double bind.

It is Reese's adherence to the narrative she has constructed of her own womanhood that causes Katrina to consider abortion–the ultimate reversal of Reese's hope for a future. But she is a deliberate narrator. Reese, while completely lucid and aware that her gender is not just extant to be affirmed by the violence of men, continues to abide by that narrative in order to avoid humiliation, and does so in order to assimilate to what she believes are cisgender ideals of womanhood. However, self-aware, she treats her attempt to assimilate as a viral condition, which puts pressure on whether she truly wants to assimilate to cisgender culture or not. Assimilation means death, but avoiding embarrassment means she "must not die" and she is therefore trapped in a double bind that cannot be resolved by the logic of the narrative, or by the logic of cisgender/heterosexual hegemony. Ames, who learned much about being trans from Reese, could not bear the brunt of these expectations and detransitioned, though his ambitions for non-fatherhood are still thwarted by Reese's fervent adherence to the narrative. Reese believes humiliation and shame are capable of killing her future–but through Reese's narration, it becomes evident that these narratives of female subjugation and transsexual obligation to gender roles contain the poison that can kill a future before it begins.

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Conclusion: Hope for the Anti-Author

> Fame is a bee.
> It has a song—
> It has a sting—
> Ah, too, it has a wing.
> –Emily Dickinson

The three works of fiction examined in this paper all end on the point of precipice. The standards of narrative conclusion do not adhere to each narrator's identity as a queer subject–they refuse the death involved in capitulating to heternormative demands, and the path beyond remains unclear. Though they struggle under the weight of shame and manipulate language in order to avoid further shame, the very act of narrating itself insists that the subject of narration be made clear. An attempt to obscure and censor the self creates a narrative in which the attempt is made clearer, and the reigning culture that demanded such an attempt is obscured instead. This effect calls into question how the queer narrator can structure their story in a way that does not place shame at the center by avoiding it, and how they might respond to heteronormativity without affirming its authority in the cultural sphere.

The answer, perhaps, lies in the texts' commentaries: *Autobiography of Red* presents a narrator who perceives himself as monstrous and struggles with delimiting mythical language as he tries to articulate himself in the poetic language. His double bind is parallel to that of the queer subject in general: requiring recognition as a person, but needing to be subjected to the rules of the world in order to gain that recognition, which creates a back-and-forth. The queer subject constantly chooses between revealing their true self and obscuring it, both resulting in costs that take away from their authorial presence. Carson structures the end of the novel so that it specifically lacks resolution: by avoiding the death of articulation, privacy allows the subject to live but denies him recognition. Thus, deny the denial–give the queer subject immortality and freeze him in the gulfs that the double bind swings him upon.

Cleanness attempts to reckon with a more specific, more current mythology surrounding queerness: that it is somehow dirty or polluting. In attempting to shed this off and achieve cleanliness, the narrator cannot accurately reconcile the cleanness that the ideal image demands of his identity and how heteronormativity makes his very identity seem dirty. Unlike *Autobiography of Red*, he ends in a state that is temporary: embracing the uncleanliness, defying the ever-present knowledge that the "filth" must be tended to eventually. For Greenwell, constructing and manipulating one's own image through the process of narration is not a sustainable solution, but neither is embracing the confines of heteronormative degradation of queerness. Dirtiness, so long as it is called dirtiness by the narrator's framework, retains its lowered status and continues to afflict the narrator's authorial subjectivity.

Continuing on to the realm of *Detransition, Baby*, we are presented with a narrator-subject who continuously regards her own manipulation of the narrative, and defends herself against an anticipated judgment. She recognizes that shame cannot either be avoided nor embraced, but willfully destructed. Even in doing so, however, she regards the source of that shame as a necessarily degrading thing: she aligns herself with the cissexism that bars her from a privileged and abundant future, not as a matter of choice, but as a matter of survival. To do otherwise would be a metaphysical or literal suicide.

The open endings, and therefore open questions, that each narrative puts forth are a reflection of the queer subject's dilemma in the contemporary culture wherein queerness is public acknowledged, but acknowledged as a contrary identity to that of the cisgender or heterosexual. The stakes are high in each text: affirm and struggle against the source of oppression, or risk death by scrutiny–or, death by obscurity. Hope for a different narrative is hard to come by, but can be gained by examining the cogs of how these narratives' endings have come

to be. It would take a drastic change in society to demote heteronormativity as the dominant sphere of oppression for queer subjects, and queer subjects do not have the time to wait for that change to occur: instead, through these endings, we see that such a subject must deny an inevitable future of continuous struggle against heteronormativity and cissexism by keeping their own futures shrouded in open-endedness.

The stories we choose to believe in, though brought upon us by countless instances of indoctrination and coercion, are bound by our willfulness to believe in them. What could (or should) a conclusive ending look like for a queer narrator that is looking beyond anti-authorship? Queer identities have, truthfully, not been allowed to exist in the public sphere for very long in the span of recent human history–at least, not without an insurmountable amount of scrutiny. There is far, far more to go when constructing narratives that attempt to translate the queer subject's life experience into fiction. Stories are saturated by heteronormativity's illusions of what is superior and what is debased. The solution for the queer subject, perhaps, is to construct a new system rooted in queer authorship. As Woolf's Orlando once ruminated after becoming a woman: "I am losing some illusions, perhaps to acquire others." Constructing such a system requires a loss–as I have suggested in the beginning of the paper, the language we have to describe queer identities is simply inadequate as it only positions the queer community as an Other. To acquire a new way of thinking, the answer lies in destructing and reconstructing language itself: to find a narrative that looks beyond the othering terminology of how we see subjects that are "queer."