

Doubling, Dividing, and Interchanging: The Construction of Semiotic Systems
by
McKenzie Ross

A THESIS

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Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Associate)

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Rather than focus intently on the text and its infrastructure, words, academics treat literature as an ossuary for theoretical machinations and thus relegate art to become a vehicle for erudite discourse. This thesis hope to offer a counter by underscoring the ways in which texts can foil extra-textual applications and highlighting the profound nuance of inherent to texts which fashion self-contained semiotic systems.

Through an examination of two literary works, Gilbert Sorrentino's *Under the Shadow* and *Odd Number*, as well as the music of GFOTY, the scholarly portion of this thesis, *Doubling, Dividing, and Interchanging: Constructing Semiotic Systems*, focuses on the ways in which texts—through literary techniques such as intertextuality, self-referentiality, and subversion of trite artistic conventions—accentuate complexities of art rather than efface them with arcane terminology.

Abstract approved: _____

Gilad Elbom

Key Words: Semiotics, Sorrentino, Reflexive Art, GFOTY

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

McKenzie Ross, Author

This thesis is comprised of three sections. The first is a scholarly essay in which I examine art that is self-reflexive using semiotic theories as a main framework. In this section, two works of fiction by Gilbert Sorrentino are considered, namely *Under the Shadow* and *Odd Number*, in addition to the music of GFOTY. The remaining two sections are works of original fiction in which I attempt to employ some of the self-referential techniques examined in the scholarly essay.

Doubling, Dividing, and Interchanging: The Construction of Semiotic Systems

Semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems, is, in part, rooted in the Francophone philosophical tradition and, undeniably transcends national circumscription. In “A Course in General Linguistics,” Ferdinand de Saussure formulates the dyadic framework of the sign, where a signifier correlates to a signified. In this text he asserts two critical points: the sign as arbitrary and the signifier functions linearly; more explicitly, Saussure argues that words which represent a signified, i.e. a signifier, are not based on an underlying reason and that signification occurs synchronically and diachronically on an axis.

Sémiologie, Saussure’s contribution to the semiotic tradition, is seminal to the progression of philosophy. While the disregarding of his two-sided model as anachronistic has become commonplace, Saussure influenced, in various ways, many philosophical heavyweights of France, namely Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Julia Kristeva. Indeed, Saussure’s conviction that “in language there are only differences” is a concept on

which many 20th century philosophers rest the core tenets of their ideas and is a foundational component of post-structuralist thought, especially in regards to Derrida's work (70, Saussure). Moreover, Saussure's writing had an impact internationally, providing a catalyst for figures like Louis Hjelmslev, the creator of glossematics, and Noam Chomsky.

In America, Charles Peirce developed a triadic model of sign relation where there exists a Representamen/Sign, an Object, and an Interpretant. This model allows unlimited semiosis, in which unending chains of associations or relations between signs, arise. The Peircian theory allows for a more nuanced approach to sign systems.

Semiotics has largely always been an international affair, where scholars engaged with the field inspire and challenge one another regardless of borders, distance, or language. Prominent semioticians have not been concentrated in one country or regions but have and continue to be found all over the world. In America, Thomas Sebeok and John Deely, in Italy Umberto Eco and Susan Petrilli, in Russia, Roman Jakobson and Yuri Lotman. This thesis considers several of these semioticians ideas, specifically Baudrillard, Petrilli, Kristeva, and Deely. To a larger extent, this essay considers the ways in which Sorrentino and GFOTY fashion their own semiotics.

Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, warns of the consequences of creating a "visible myth of origin" which is pertinent to textual systems; when one "exhumes" a text with the indiscriminate backhoe of extra-textual understanding, one is effectively one is prioritizing a "visible order" over the text itself (10, Baudrillard). Discussing mummies, Baudrillard says "they die from being transplanted from a slow

order of the symbolic, master over putrefaction and death, to an order of history, science, and museums, our order, which no longer masters anything, which only knows how to condemn what preceded it to decay and death and subsequently try to revive it with science” (10, Baudrillard). Self-contained textual systems suffer the same fate as Baudrillard’s mummies. Drilling semiotic systems with theory to restore them to some underlying cultural “unconsciousness” through the use of extra-textual bits relegates art to archives while it simultaneously attempts to extract the traces of humanity.

Baudrillard has long discussed the usurping of the real for the virtual. Cutting to the core of the issue, in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* he states, “our virtual has definitely over-taken the actual and we must be content with this extreme virtuality which... deters any passage to action” (27, Baudrillard). He continues on, scorching our current state, “we prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror, to the catastrophe of the real” (28, Baudrillard). The notion of television, almost three decades later, operates as synecdochical expression for the inescapable pervasiveness of screens. We have arrived as individuals that worship in the house of tidiness and “complete” understanding through extra-textual insights, making narratives that subvert transcendence and visual experience supposedly vexing and ineffectual.

Baudrillard’s eroding of a stabilized separation of the virtual and real highlights the importance of fashioning an idiosyncratic semiotics. It provides a critical examination of the day-to-day semiosis being practiced currently, that of decodification and the ubiquitous tendency towards visuals. Seeking refuge from the

real, the hard messiness of existence, society perpetually adverts its gaze. The privileged can wish away difficult topics, ignore uncomfortable or otherwise challenging conversations with a click, a swipe, change of channel, or, more detrimentally, by choosing cultural artifacts that offer satisfying, familiar, and tidy narratives. In other words, solvable truths.

Gilbert Sorrentino offers an alternative to myopic renditions of semiotics, to the solvable truths. He subverts desires to decipher, categorize, and remove humanity from literature. Instead of providing readily solvable narratives rife with clichés, he presents something more challenging and complex. Not entertainment or distraction, but literature that concentrates on the importance literature; art that forces one to think, to focus on the page, rather than writings which proffer opportunities for mere decryption. Academia, particularly liberal arts, is not exempt from the noxious and unimaginative inclinations to find a fixed truth. Scholars tether themselves to the ability to decode, to offer arguments through their particular frameworks and theory. Imbricated here too is capitalism. The temptation, masked as “necessity” by those who point to the perennially looming threat of defunding, is to slather theory and esoteric lenses onto literature. Art becomes a vehicle for smug and aggrandizing “intellectual” feuds, rendering it second-rate fodder for articles and publications. Theory, the reliance on exterior knowledge and sign systems, supplants the text.

When a text anticipates and thwarts these efforts it forces readers to grapple with the real, to reclaim semiotics from specialized and detached scholars and, in turn, give priority to those who place an emphasis on imagination and the text itself. In Sorrentino’s work, the use of imagination presents itself in the intent attention to

textual components and the varying relations and recombinations. Effectively, Sorrentino rejects decodification and academic flame wars and, through use of self-referentiality and intertextuality, he demonstrates a method for fashioning an equitable, accessible mode of semiotics.

Authors like Sorrentino deal in possibilities, potentials. The “point” or “aim” is counter to the empirically and monetarily motivated social scientist; art does not identify hard veracities but rather present a variety where resolution, definition, and category are inoperable and become unimaginative. Precisely by offering sets and sets of unsolvable, pointless-beyond-the-text possibilities through the repetition of uniqueness over and over, Sorrentino’s novels do not give readers the satisfaction of reaching a trite axiom. Instead they function as an examination of fiction itself. *Under the Shadow*, Sorrentino’s 1991 novel is a prime example.

Under the Shadow:

Through interwoven vignettes, Sorrentino undercuts myths of cognitive coherence; unspooling fictions of psychological concretion, he reveals the capricious and endlessly intriguing fabric of human existence. Sorrentino’s collection of vignettes entangles various iterations and continuations of scenes, characters, and images while simultaneously maintaining discrete episodes and descriptions. The novel coheres through the unpredictable interconnections between the literary components of the novel; this allows the whole of *Under the Shadow* to function as a contained structure, the *syntagm*, while the distinct components of the novel, the vignettes, operate as *phonemes*. The text becomes legible and lucid only through the

links developed between vignettes, or the syntagmatic relations. This approach to the creation of meaning renders the reliance on stuffy formulas of conventional literature—obvious symbolism, vivid setting, and the rising arc—useless. Sorrentino impedes signals and interrupts the literary compass pointing to ultimate truths, permitting the novel to become a work of art that is immanent and self-contained. Simultaneously, this calls for the disavowal of transcendence. From here, Sorrentino is able to lampoon, with a hypercritical eye, the turgidity of literary and scholarly practice.

The focus of the vignette “Sentence” is Miss Yolanda Filippo who has developed a preoccupation with the sentence “Myrna felt like undressing for the conductor” (74, Sorrentino). However, this sentence neither functions as a phrase harboring meaning nor is it entrenched in the contextualized frameworks of language and understanding. According to the text, her training as an art critic precludes her from viewing the sentence within the confines of linguistic function. Rather, “she saw the sentence as if inscribed on a blank field. She saw, that is, not the message, but a drawing, a picture, of the message, a picture which represented the sentence” (74, Sorrentino). The phrase is no longer an operative sentence but “a drawing” conceived within her “mind’s eye—a phrase she particularly admired” (74, Sorrentino). The reference to visualization, a primary motif of the novel, operates as a meta-fictional moment permitting a bit of humorous criticism to poke through. The characters of *Under the Shadow*, perhaps not unlike readers, fixate on images, the internal mental pictures that can be identified in familiar terminology—memories and dreams. In this vignette, a sentence, the literal infrastructure of the novel, becomes an image. What

would act as a string of signs, “Myrna felt like undressing for the conductor,” becomes a dynamic object. Slyly, we have a moment that references the construction of the novel, rather than attempt to bury its artificiality, and an allusion to semiosis as a whole. The style of the novel, in its apparent fragmentary approach as well as the beautiful and often protracted nature of Sorrentino’s prose, rejects attempts to make literature a kind of lucid dream or an experience of art that relies chiefly on visuals, making the character’s ability to manifest images in her “mind’s eye” ironic and droll. In fact, for Yolanda, an intense and unabating disassociation between signifier and the signified has arisen, dislocating the signified and relegating it to a realm of mystique. To offer an explanation as to what the signifier might refer to, the text jumps temporally to a scene or memory in which Miss Filippo, as a graduate student out to dinner with a prurient professor, encounters a sobbing, bruised, half-naked woman in the restaurant bathroom. The hypothesis put forth that the subject or “Myrna” of the Miss Filippo’s mental “drawing” is this woman.

Several times throughout the vignette, the text acknowledges Yolanda Filippo’s desire to undress for the conductor of a train on which she is boarding, demonstrating the psychological sedimentation and overlap or, in other words, the paradigmatic operations of the novel. Here, Myrna’s conceptual inclination to undress for the conductor fuses with Miss Filippo, resulting in a layering of the linguistic image or “drawing” and her desires. The use of paradigmatic relations as a literary device, this layering of desires, anxieties, delights, and recollections—made possible through idiosyncratic repetitions—make the novel profoundly complex, not unlike language.

This vignette, while intriguing, offers no tidy explanation; like much of the novel, “Sentence” refuses to elucidate a fundamental truth or provide an underlying certainty. When paired with a corresponding vignette, however, answers to the questions produced in “Sentence” ostensibly become legible. This type of concatenation is basis from which the novel’s syntagmatic operations emanate; through chains of literary components—characters, imagery, objects, and events—playing and relating to one another, the novel is able to fashion meaning. Both Yolanda Philippo and Myrna reappear in the vignette “Coincidence,” although Myrna is now a material character rather than a phantasmal component of a non-sentence sentence. Myrna resurfaces in the text with Miss Philippo’s old, still concupiscent, professor at a bed and breakfast who, together, ineffectually feign the relationship of father and daughter.

Several intricacies between the two vignettes are revealed to the reader. First, the crying woman from years prior is not Myrna, but Myrna’s mother. Second, the cause of the bite marks and contusions on Myrna’s Mother’s breasts is her husband, described as a “friendly and gregarious” lawyer, deacon, and runner as well as his wife’s “sexual despot and torturer” (106, Sorrentino). Third, it is revealed that Myrna’s father, at the time of the incident in the restaurant, is also Myrna’s “incestuous partner” making the pretend father and daughter relationship between Myrna and the professor, as the text describes, “ironic” (107, Sorrentino). Noteworthy elements of the novel, emerging within the interrelations between characters with metered frequency, are Freudian anxieties, desires, and fixations. The Electra complex developing in “Coincidence” serves as one such example. Taken with the

Sorrentino's inclination for paradigmatic play, the use of these tired themes becomes comic, an inside joke. As the author avoids the manufacturing of sterile narrative techniques, he teases readers with classic motifs that make for easy analysis. These Freudian slips, as they were, feed into a more poignant critique of writing: literature that follows the prescribed story-telling techniques offers nothing of substance, it is only a rehashing of what has already been said. As Sorrentino tugs at the scholastic fetishization of psychoanalytic theory, teetering on satire, he cleverly continues to exchange characters for one another, highlighting the ways in which characters are always a kind of mimesis, a signifier rather than signified.

As the details of "Sentence" and "Coincidence" are illuminated, it becomes apparent that these characters are variations or substitution sets within the psychological territory of the novel. It is an extension of the layering seen in "Sentence" as well as the novel as a whole. For example, Myrna and Yolanda Philippo are interchangeable for the purposes of the professor. For Myrna's father, Myrna, her sister, and her mother are substitutes for each other; he does not maintain a separation between the bounds of each of these women, which allows all three of them to fuse into one object on which his sadistic tendencies erupt. For Myrna, the professor assumes and interchangeability with her father. And for Miss Philippo, Myrna and Myrna's mother are also already layered in a particular way, as demonstrated in "Sentence." These characters are, in a certain respect, iterations of the same narrative, the same character. Taken in this way, Yolanda Philippo, Myrna, and Myrna's mother are all the same woman. The professor and Myrna's father are the same man. Though, it is clear, these are not the all the same character. *Under the*

Shadow creates an uncanny and almost ineffable concurrency in its characters, chapters, and images. Though this kind of singularity lasts momentarily then it vanishes into the subtleties of the text. It is a performance of differences.

“Coincidence” also delineates, as it were, several coincidences or “ironies” that seem to provide some answers to the questions raised in “Sentence.” First, Myrna’s father sat across from Miss Philippo and her professor that night at the restaurant. Second, Yolanda Philippo shared the same train with Myrna and the professor on their way to the bed and breakfast. And finally, at the end of the vignette, the biggest coincidence is revealed. Through both “Sentence” and “Coincidence” the professor has remained nameless, identified only by his professional title. The reader only learns his name when the text states, “who can believe—dare anyone believe—the professor’s name is Thomas J. Conductor?” (108, Sorrentino). Is it possible that Myrna and, subsequently Miss Philippo, unconsciously, felt like undressing for their professor?

The argument, ostensibly, is these events and relationships occur because of chance, the element of accident permeates the explanation of these two vignettes and of the signified— “Myrna felt like undressing for the conductor.” However, this is a revelation made within the enclosure of a novel where nothing is a coincidence. The discrepancy of identifying a series of events as coincidence or chance in an utterly fabricated environment underscores the tension between the organic fortuitousness of life and the ways in which life is rendered into the highly constructed and artificial margins of art. This inconsistency seems to be teasing those who pretend novels unfold naturally, that characters are autonomous beings who lead authors into their

narrative, or that the content of a story produces the form of a novel. These are the same authors that cite literature as an organic process while disavowing their paradoxical use of wholly manufactured literary devices and story-telling techniques. Sorrentino uses a kind of cognitive detachment one might find in a trauma survivor—here it is exemplified in Yolanda Philippo’s disconnect between the signifier and signified of her “sentence”—to demonstrate the ridiculousness of these kinds of literary convictions.

These two vignettes, “Sentence” and “Coincidence” emphasize the hyper-construction of writing and literature, demonstrating the frameworks of art through a beautifully manufactured layering and an incongruous internal explanation of the narrative. In the novel’s self-aware style, an effect is produced: each vignette exudes an allure, a familiar ache that is at once mystifying and palpable. In its assertion of its own construction, the novel resonates as a stunning and accurate rendition of the internal mechanisms of the mind.

Another interesting set of vignettes that play with this overlap and layering are “Moon” and “Sight.” In “Moon” readers are introduced to an amateur astronomer, Dr. Ronald Leflave, whose celestial predilections developed as an escape to his uninspiring life as a physician. While unsuspectingly examining the moon through his telescope, Dr. Leflave sees “a man about thirty-five...sitting with three young women...picnicking in the deep shade of huge trees” (25, Sorrentino). After an instantaneous interlude to process the ensuing confusion, Dr. Leflave returns to his telescope viewfinder to discover “the man has mounted one of the young women” (25, Sorrentino). Understandably, Dr. Leflave is stunned to find such phenomenon

occurring where he expects to find the surface of the moon. The consequence of stumbling on to this scene is an arousal, likened to a “carnal aguish,” and an acute loneliness; the text says, “how alone he is. Absolutely alone, and far from the empty white moon” (26, Sorrentino).

In this vignette the reader sees images that recur with some frequency throughout the novel: three young women, a lake, and women wading in a lake. The individuals of these recurring images are, in this vignette, anonymous to the reader and, it would appear, to Dr. Leflave. These figures emerge as textual components of the novel, manifesting significance in their presence and not in their identities or constitution of character. However, in the succeeding iteration of this vignette, these interchangeable textual elements take on personas. The correlating vignette “Sight” divulges a cause for the piercing effect of the images in his telescope; he says, “nothing satisfactorily functioned to cloak that which he knew to be the truth: that the man...whom he had seen...energetically thrusting into the sweet flesh of the woman, was his father” (111, Sorrentino). This realization prompts the recognition “that one of the women wading in the cool shallows of the lake was his mother” (112, Sorrentino). At first, the images in “Moon” appear as a dizzying and arbitrary sequencing of textual figures, yet despite Dr. Leflave’s attempts to distract himself, the scene develops in “Sight” to reveal a horrifying possibility. On a fundamental level, Dr. Leflave is realizing that his parents, in particular his mother who “taught him that moods do not exist,” possess sexuality and erotic desire (25, Sorrentino). On another level, especially when considering Dr. Leflave’s cognizance of his parents’ age in this incident and his calculation of his own as birth as years prior to the

happenings in the “grotesque tableau” another possibility emerges, this scenario is a memory to which a young Dr. Leflave played witness (112, Sorrentino). Once again, the use of psychoanalytic theories comes to the fore; Dr. Leflave is found amidst a primal scene. These two vignettes together function as a psychological event, a demonstration of the unconscious bubbling up submerged images of the past. Sorrentino plays with mental distortion and psychological complexities to color the character, ultimately ending in another type of layering of an emotional variety. The vignette ends “the very presence of the thin silver crescent high amid drifts of stars fills him with anxiety and foreboding. Yet he did want to see. He wanted to see” (112, Sorrentino). Dr. Leflave is filled with disgust and even feels “soiled by this corruption,” but he is still aroused by the scene, the images of lascivious parents. The contrapuntal desires to look away and to see more is an extension of the continuous layering effects of the novel.

Dr. Leflave’s awareness hinges, as the title of the vignette suggests, on sight. This lends itself to the exploration of scopophilia underpinning the novel. The resurfacing of this memory, the traumatic quandary now plaguing Dr. Leflave’s life, is mediated through a telescope; it is not brought about by a smell, a sound, a taste, or even a location, but pulled into focus by a phallic contraption designed to slash distance and bring clarity to the eye, which makes this particular scene even more lurid and unbearably intimate. Moreover, his mother is not cast in the purely passive role but is a conspiratorial onlooker, assuming a position similar to her son. The vignette “Lust” employs techniques of cinematic horror to depict a rape scene. The vignette plays out as brooding, psychosomatic short. The establishing shot: an

attractive and youthful woman, Jenny Hounsfield, is spotted in a window; eventually she begins dressing for a dinner party “to which, Ivan, her husband has committed them” (33, Sorrentino). Their marriage appears normal and, as a sleazy dean remarks, they are “charming people to have on campus!” (33, Sorrentino). The given details of their setting, “a heavy wind drove a torrent of rain against the window-pane, and Jenny stepped back, startled” queues a sense of foreboding, whips a current of fear into the narrative. Then come the stock sequences and the familiar blocking of body genres: “He walked toward her, his hand reaching out; he could see in her face the dread of his massive desire” (34, Sorrentino). The scopophilia on which body genres rely are invoked in this vignette; the narrative moment is tethered to seeing, Jenny’s face, much like in a horror or pornographic film, acts as the reader’s gage, her face signifies that visceral fear, the corporeal jolt. This sentence, and the scene at large, occurs in an imposing and claustrophobic sweep. The distance between them quickly closes and, next paragraph, “Ivan then was brutally on top of her, his trousers tangled around his ankles, her torn panties twisted about her left knee” (34, Sorrentino). Here, readers are given a cinematic axiom, a close-up on the details that serve as synecdoche for the dreadful act occurring. Then, as the tension mounts arousing disgust and intrigue, the hallmark Freudian complex of the horror genre, castration anxiety, appears: “he drove his stupid, hateful flesh into the secret, hairy wetness which makes her the rutting animal she is” (34, Sorrentino). The final jab occurs “It was Jenny’s fault. Crazed, enraged, he stumbled into his orgasm, and turned his agonized face away from her wide eyes” (34, Sorrentino). Ivan raping Jenny is, for him, an ineffable sensation. In a way, readers who attempt to translate the text into

images, those who ignore the foundational aspects of a text, words, are not unlike Ivan.

In the related scene “Mother,” a familiar succession of events takes place and, at the end of the scene, it is revealed to be an incident between a young Ivan and his mother. However, peculiar differences manifest which situate this vignette as a kind of inversion of “Lust.” A woman, framed by a window, begins undressing—the first reversal. Conjuring an image found other narrative scenarios of the novel, “she stood before the mirror, soaping her arms, under-arms, shoulders and breasts, watching the tears running down her face” (78, Sorrentino). Her three-year-old son walks in on the scene and the woman glances to find him “staring at her nakedness” (78, Sorrentino). Presumably, this event, the assault of sexual difference, could produce a castration anxiety. Next, “the woman grasped the collar of the boy’s mackinaw and propels him toward the half-open kitchen door and out onto the wooden steps leading to the backyard” (78, Sorrentino). The mother, effectively treating her son like a dog, demonstrates the second reversal; here the woman is able to control the corporeal moments and, as such, effectively locks Ivan out, rendering him a helpless creature. If, in “Lust,” Ivan is able to force his way inside and this is comparable to readers who attempt to dissect the text, then reverse seems to also be a possibility, the text can shut out readers.

By capturing the morbid overlap of memory, people, and yearnings, and combining, recombining and playing with the interchangeable nature of textual components, Sorrentino is able to fashion his own immanent structure, his own semiotics. In the rejection of fixed truths, *Under the Shadow* becomes a work of art

that embraces the quotidian, begrudged ambiguities of life and, in this, recognize them, not as nuisances, but as the aspects of existence that add an incomprehensible amount of depth and richness to a world devoid of intrinsic meaning.

Odd Number

While *Under the Shadow* pokes fun at readers who convert words to images, *Odd Number*, Sorrentino's 1985 novel brutally undercuts their efforts. *Odd Number* dislodges readers' patience to organize, categorize, and "make sense" of narrative. In turn, the grand "meaning" or "purpose" of a text becomes defunct. The notion of a "purpose" of a text relies on decodification; the reader inputs time and decoding skills, resulting, presumably, in an interpretation which allows one to obtain a main point or a general argument from which to learn and to incorporate into daily life. Thus readers are deprived of the dubious pleasure of cultivating their faux-ability to reduce art to a satisfying aphorism and are forced instead to observe the complexities of the text itself.

In his preface to *Frontiers in Semiotics*, Deely argues for an understanding of semiotics that does not situate linguistics as its core:

It is a question of transformation, but transformation from within, and using all the former means according to a new formality and content no longer irrecusably tied to the physical organism as such in its here and now interaction with other organisms or other physical elements such as the environment. It is a question now of a content cognitively separable and linguistically conveyed in vehicles which depend on perception ... at every point but are not reducible to what perception as such attains. (xiv, Deely).

If Deely is correct, the treasure hunt approach to literature, where the reader excavates the text to expose the "truth" the author has buried, must be altered. If content, in this case a novel, cannot be reducible to human perception and is not

tethered to a physical organism, i.e., the writer or reader, then the Interpretant becomes, certainly, the novel itself. This notion subverts decodification and, instead, asserts that the text is much more complex than a one-to-one translation permits. So what happens when a text sets out to ensure the saliency of such a concept? The form or immanent structure becomes the emphasis.

This absence of an ability to decode makes the whole premise of *Odd Number*, a detective story, a playful taunt. Readers cannot use the “detective skills” necessary to “solve” the text. Not only is there nothing to solve as there is no central crime motivating the novel, but the whole of the text, through its structure, precludes even basic deciphering. A marked example of such a tactic is the overarching structure of *Odd Number*, a text divided into three sections and nothing else. There are no guiding markers or paratext that allow the reader to distinguish blatant chronology or locate a general order, a general purpose. From the outset, the self-consciousness of *Odd Number* harshly repels fussy readers with lines like, “this modern so-called modern fiction is confusing you can’t keep anything straight bad as life” (11, Sorrentino). A quippy line that underscores a verity, art is sometimes closer to reality than reality itself.

The first section of *Odd Number* engages the tropes surrounding the interrogative methodology found in detective fiction. By posing a series of questions, some explicit and others unwritten, the text imitates readers’ desire to “get to the bottom” of characters’ motives, the plot, a singular truth. But *Odd Number* demonstrates how exerting such efforts towards art are, essentially, bottomless. Instead, what is important is not readily identifiable elements of conventional

literature—plot, character development, cohesion—but the form the novel takes, the words and their relation to one another on the page. Sorrentino constructs a wall of subtleties, the excess quickly becoming arduous. In a sense, Sorrentino creates a polyphonic novel. In another meta-fictional remark the interrogee says, “this is a novel in which what we think of as reality is seen to be, because of fractured and multiple mirror image of self-reflective, as well as self-reflexive events, not at all the gist?” (11, Sorrentino). This quote begins to offer a level of apprehension of the text, but is quickly cut down by the interrogator’s hastening to get to the point, to obtain the “gist.” Again, Sorrentino’s acerbic humor mirrors the reader’s intentions and undermines their “work” as an engaged reader.

Notably, the text foregoes conventional or even commercial formalities of grammar and storytelling. White space or line breaks, imprecise terminology for fiction, interrupt the cadence of the prose turning any focus from potential mental images to the page itself, a literary technique common in poetry. These physical pauses induce not only a garrulous tone but also a frantic, frustrated, anxiety-riddled mood. Sorrentino, refutes closure and, instead, opts for unending ambiguity. There is no conclusion or definitive answers, a fact mirrored in his play with ostensibly necessary grammatical players, such as periods. The first section of the novel, which is absent periods, most frequent punctuation is question marks. By dismantling any semblance of a fixed telos, *Odd Number* renders the idea of grand ideological morsels to be extracted from a text nonexistent. The novel decenters the reader’s experience as well as the author’s intentions, a critical technique that ultimately disallows the substance of the narrative (i.e. the relations between words)

to become detritus. What bubbles to the surface is an incomprehensible network of amorphous associations between words, characters, scenes, and other novels while simultaneously drowning the takeaways and truisms readers are desperate to glean and grasp. Fragments, according to Sorrentino, can form coherence only through connection to other pieces of would-be debris. Sorrentino constructs a semiotic system that functions on its own by undercutting traditional approaches to literature through pointed caricatures and meta-fictional remarks.

GFOTY:

Dejecting music from the sooty claws of sound-to-image conversion is GFOTY (Girl Friend Of The Year) a British artist on the UK label PC Music. GFOTY employs methods comparable to Sorrentino's literary techniques; she highlights the artificiality of music through self-referentiality, utilizes "glitch" a musical practice akin to Sorrentino's experimental line-breaks, overwhelms her listeners with discordant sounds that are simultaneously grating and cheerful, boasts obnoxiously high-pitched, commercial-centric lyrics often stylized to be choppy, looped, and polyphonic. Ultimately, her music is incongruous with an underlying message, meaning, or any kind of linear trajectory. Though she plays with stereotypical ingredients of pop, namely upbeat, dance-y tunes with nonsensical lyrics, her music is also experimental enough to ruin a bottom-line, undermining a genre positioned around moneymaking formulas. By subverting generic pleasures such as melody, chorus, or love-focused lyrics and opting for an exacerbated, parodic distortion of pop-music, GFOTY, like Sorrentino, creates a semiotic system that offers a critique of the profit-oriented, pleasant, escapist aspects of her artistic field.

Sorrentino coldly jabs readers seeking easy-going narrative that produces, functionally, internal TV. In a similar way, GFOTY aims her sonic diatribe at supporters of pop music and ultimately consumers in general. As a character, GFOTY satirizes pop's target audience: young, consumerist-driven white women whose favorite pastime is to drink too much Starbucks, among other beverages, and to get lost in maze of self-absorption made ironic by their apparent homogeneity. Though the "basic bitch" trope is her entry point, it can be argued that GFOTY's critique spreads to everyone participating in mindless post-industrial consumption. Her music does not permit reverie or follow narrative arc; rather GFOTY plants the listener firmly in the dystopic mood of consumerism and the apathy permeating humanity by exploiting pop-music trends and quotidian sounds of the twenty-first century.

What is also notable about GFOTY is the length of her songs. Ranging from forty seconds to a ceaseless two minutes, her music is quick, never following "musical math" formulas for a satisfying aural experience. The pithiness is also indicative of the ephemeral whirlwind of web culture. On the whole, GFOTY is not "listenable." Her music is purposefully superficial and undeniably grotesque. Songs scale as if building to something, but there is never a pleasing release. GFOTY creates pointless pastiches of noise.

The first track on her album GFOTYBUCKS (GFOTY, 2017), "My Song" is a jumble of pitched vocals samples laid over a mercurial and often disappearing melody with bubbly cyber sounds thrown in for good measure. The lyrics, rarely crisp and regularly engulfed by other shrill mechanical sounds, are self-referential. Stating "my song, I'm on it/my song, get off it" highlights the egocentricity of the character

and mocks the way consumers attempt to claim music as elements of their personally identity (GFOTY 2017). However, it also does something more important: it hints at the way in which music is always artificial. By plugging the author into core of the piece lyrically, listeners are reminded that someone has fashioned the music; it is never organic. The aural motifs of artificiality are furthered by the use of electronic instruments that recreate an Internet soundscape with notification dings and beeps of video games. By sounding digital, that is to say entirely manufactured, and choosing to make a song about, essentially, the song itself, GFOTY pulls together the elements of a self-contained semiotic system. This is intensified by intertextuality of her music. For example, in “My Song” a polyphonic sweep of “without my friends I’m better” leads to “walking down the street in my brand new car/ X5, blacked out, Range Rover” which is the only line of her song “Brand New Car” featured on her collaborative album *Dog Food* (GFOTY, 2016).

Reinterpreting lyrics, as well as sounds, is common across these two albums, and within PC Music generally. In an introduction to Julia Kristeva’s collection of essays “Desire in Language” Leon S. Roudiez underscores a common misunderstanding surrounding the term intertextuality coined by Kristeva. Roudiez states, “it has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the sources of a literary work; it does on the other hand, involve components of a *textual system* such as novel... it is defined...as the transposition of one or systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position” (15, Roudiez, italics original). The music of GFOTY, like Sorrentino’s fiction, employs intertextuality often, as determined by Kristeva’s

definition. The lyrics in GFOTY songs are often contoured into sounds that are then appropriated on other tracks. An example of this is the exchange between the songs “Big Red Dog” (GFOTY, 2016) and “USA” (GFOTY, 2017). The lyrics featured on “Big Red Dog” are comprised of a single vocal sample stating, “it’s big” (GFOTY, 2016). Ultimately, this sample does not function as lyrical content but rather becomes a percussive component interplaying with other percussive components. While in “USA,” the same sample “it’s big” stays lyrical, the relations between other lyrics and sounds are rounded together (GFOTY, 2017). Intertextuality of her music in combination with the brevity of her songs rejects the possibility that any GFOTY song become a standalone track. Instead, you have songs and albums that push one to listen intently and savor the ways the sounds relate to one another. In the way that Sorrentino takes textual components from his other novels, most conspicuously characters, GFOTY takes musical components like lyrics and reiterates them, creating a musical system.

When GFOTY does take on the typical content of pop-music, relationships, it is not to produce endearing imagery. The first quarter of her song “Drown Her,” GFOTY spouts “I want you, I want you, I want you to like me” while an acute high-toned squeak adds to her otherwise monotone vocal plea (GFOTY, 2017). A brief interlude, featuring overlapping vocals, cat cries, metallic pounding familiar to industrial music and plurivocal spoken lyrics “come to mine/ you know you want to/ she’ll quake up and scream ‘where are you’/where’s your phone?” leads into a buzzing hive of vocals repeating “drown her in my tears” (GFOTY, 2017) A crunchy distortion gives way to more industrial booms and then returns to the line “I want you

to like me” made cheerful in relation to dark sound and lyrics of the previous refrain. The self-centered lyrics make for a disturbingly indifferent ambiance. The lyrics are not, as the usually are in the genre, the driving force of the song. Instead, because of the incessant repetition, the sounds themselves are made salient. There is no escape into a beautifully composed ballad about desire. She does not dip her brush in the clichés of achy pop music to paint a tableau to contextualize the pain of longing. Rather, “Drown Her” throws the listener into a chaos made entirely of sounds where nothing feels identifiable. What is left, presumably, is closer to the emotions one experiences in wanting someone you cannot have. GFOTY’s “Drown Her” sounds how pining feels: unpredictable, baffling, puncturing, oscillating, ugly, obnoxious, and self-obsessed. GFOTY is out to drown her listeners in noise.

GFOTY rearranges the traditional mode of pop music, noting that when formulas become familiar, it does not mean they are organic or natural. Instead, by opting to subvert formulas, make sounds the focal point, and interweaving musical components across songs and albums, GFOTY creates her own self-contained system. In the works of both Sorrentino and GFOTY, emphasis is placed on the ways in which textual or musical components relate to form a system. Each disavows the translation of the base components of these semiotic systems, words and sounds, into images.

Conclusion

Sorrentino aptly uses the discrepancies between men and women, that is to say, gender relations, to underscore the ways in which readers approach texts in a predatory manner. The visual constituents of gender disparity, a peg and a hole,

describe precisely how academics handle literature. They treat art as if it were defunct extension of the author and, chiefly, as a receptacle waiting to be pumped and probed with the cattle prod of theory. However, art that is self-contained, self-reflexive, and emphasizes relations between textual components as the site where meaning is forged, is resistant to such advances. It grows teeth; it bites back. In this way, I think one could draw parallels between immanent semiotic systems and identity. Not only would this offer a means of resistance but, more critically, it could allow more nuance into conceptualizes of identity. Whereas current notions of subjectivity are static, formed precisely by differences and imbued with meaning, identity has far more in common with semiotics than the unimaginative illustration of an intersection.

It is clear, decodification has infiltrated our notions of subjectivity. Petrilli states, “human rights are substantially conceived to be the rights of identity” (75, Petrilli). Western ideology cements an idea of an all-encompassing self-reliance or, in the age of technological assemblage, an imperative disguised as opportunity, to augment oneself, to manufacture the self as a perfect, productive object. Identity politics, a method of belonging reliant on assimilation and antagonized but reinforced by revolutionary belonging is hurdling towards a cybernetic, if not completely mechanical, telos (19, Rowe). Identity politics, will always lend itself to capitalistic fantasies of achievable perfection, because this is what identity has always done. Prescribing circumscribed imperatives, doling out limited traits and scripts, fashioning an ever-changing-never-attainable signified for a signifier, is the modus operandi of identity. Intersectionality, when it colludes with identity politics, becomes an abstraction of humanity, not unlike the abstraction of male and female to prick and

cavity, which disavows relation and affirms individuality and thus, decodification. Overall, semiotics systems constructed through literary techniques outside of the traditional and commercial mode have much to offer in the way of posing meaningful questions and approaches to art.

Novel Ideas

If I wrote a novel, it'd be artificial and stuffy, certainly, but abrasive. Cunts galore. Of course, quite a few dicks too, but, you know, Pussy (yes, capital p) is superior. As you're well aware, far more fascinating things happen with and from and to pussies. That'd be the topic of my novel: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Pussy*. I'd include a chapter on a Pussy within a Pussy. Pussy II was ultimately forged in Pussy I, right? Maybe I'd incorporate an interlude where Dick raps on the cervix of Pussy I to greet Pussy II for the first time. I could even discuss Pussy II's part in the death (manslaughter, really) of potential pussies, as all those squirmy dick bits whirl past Pussy II inside Pussy I.

I'd probably focus, too, on the neighboring clitoris. I'd make Clit a Christ figure or have it hailed as a founding member of the Vulva Tribe. It'd be Clit's face on the flag of Vulva. Clit, a trueborn leader, standing erect and bald, is ready to disseminate pleasure throughout the nation's limbs, our dear somatic geographies.

Of course there'd be drive-by panoramas of pap-smears and IUD insertions. Latex gloves, of many varieties, are frequent tourists of Vulva Country. It'd be careless not include them, even as minor characters. Obviously the narrative would be interrupted at random by blood's longwinded (and occasionally embarrassing) soliloquies. It's a tenacious, repetitive diatribe but eventually, as Pussy II learns, Blood tires out.

Maybe a there'd be a chapter on child birth if Pussy II happens to be into that sort of thing, but with the rate of C-sections now days, it's unlikely that Pussy'd even see that kind of action. Probably just be the funnel for all those pregnancy fluids, a banal yet noble supporter of the delightfully cavernous and occasionally ornery Uterus. But at that point I'd probably make use of the classic circular story and start all over again with Pussy III inside Pussy II, the hero's journey you've been warned about. Or maybe I'd forego *The Nefarious Chronicles of Pussy* and opt for more asinine fantasies to assuage the American public. For example, the record cover that's currently sitting on my bedroom floor. A woman, smothered in whipped cream, tantalizes with a sensuous gaze and a finger poised for licking. You know the one. Every man I've ever brought into my apartment has jacked off to that image. Or at least that's what I imagine they mean if they don't say it outright, because there's always the inevitable comment and sly, knowing simper.

She'd make a good character in an erotic novel, though it's doubtful my level of expertise could carry an entire erotic novel. Then again, a lot of contemporary "erotica" is written by women who've never had any formal training in writing. Whenever I come home from class, I undress, plop onto my bed, and think up scenarios for her, Darla, the two dimensional goddess of my bedroom clutter. I like to imagine how awkward the photoshoot was. People watching, expecting her to perform as if she's some bitch at a dog show. However, I've settled on a more charming story where she gets off on being photographed. Sticky with a sweet treat, enjoying all the rightfully bestowed attention, she's convincingly in her element. Darla makes seduction look easy. (Which is, in fact, easy but let's suspend the sad

reality of men's desperation in favor of more fun observations, like how wet she's made herself beneath the blanket of whipped cream). Darla knows how to delight in the male gaze. Of course, if she were my character, I'd have her go home, snack on some grapes then suds up with her lover, Billy, a stout bull dyke, who makes her come twice daily.

Their relationship would, in this hypothetical exploit, go something like this: Darla, under most circumstances, is a perfectly good girl. Endearing, genial, and aloof to her charms. She grew up in Minnesota or Nebraska, or some other insignificant landscape of the American consciousness, and moved to northern California when her Husband, Burt or Bernie or maybe it's Albert, started his doctorate research. He's a devout scientist fascinated with serological properties and immunology, which Darla finds impressive, but he's more invested in antisera and bunny blood than in Darla's sexual wellbeing. No matter, she's a dutiful wife and supporter of his budding career, hence the relocation. She sees his potential and has resigned herself to ensuring his success. Every superfluous detail is tended to: his shirt's pressed, lunches made, bungalow tidied. No crease, slice of bologna, or pillow is overlooked or out of place. She will have done her part in the advancement of science.

Darla encounters Billy working a construction site across the street from the park where she picnics. They make sly glances at each other for thirty minutes everyday at noon, Monday through Friday. One day, while indulging in a tangerine, Darla decides to make her intentions clear. Billy watches her pull apart the sticky membrane, delicately tearing the fibers. Darla tosses the small slice of fruit in her mouth. A smutty expression floods her face for an instant and suddenly, as if by fate,

Billy knows. Billy bends her over the kitchen counter, uses her heavy work boots to splay Darla's legs, and squeezes a taste of honey onto her backside. She keeps Darla up all night just to tease her, titillating every inch Bernie-Burt neglects, unraveling in Darla an insurmountable degree of lust and white-hot passion.

See? I bet I could capture the market of sexual underwhelmed soccer mommies, whose husbands are busy rubbing one out to a tired teenage delusion featuring the same protagonist, even without an MFA. However, I'm pretty sure that crowd is less into my gay-girl predilections and more into the cloaked (and therefore noble) rape fantasy, which I can't delude myself into writing. Though, admittedly, I genuinely get the appeal, but I'd be hoisted onto the feminist pike at the first mention of a nice, hard spanking.

Your crimes against feminism are as follows: (1) Propagating the normalization of sexual abuse and somatic settler-colonialism (2) Invoking the conqueror mentality present in all power dynamics (3) Advancing the commodification of gender-based violence under the guise of "literary" female sexual empowerment. And before the tribunal of armchair activists, I'd plunge myself onto the pike. (And yes, I'm aware the image of a pike can be construed as phallic, but you find me a weapon that doesn't cite virility and an encroaching turgid appendage. Plus, it makes for a better close reading of my psychological state, don't you think?). Masochistic fantasies are, I'm assured by my fellow undergraduate Women's Studies population, a privilege. Not even worth mentioning in trash erotica. And so, with that, the erotic expedition *Other Delights* is dead.

I could write stream of consciousness nonsense for fifty pages. Call it Ramblings. But, in all honesty, I don't have the creative finesse for such a feat. I'm afraid my thoughts are too linear, too predictable. It'd be some boring ramble-jamble about acne, my cat, bizarro dreamscapes where I can't find a sensible place to masturbate, meatless hot-dogs, and pages of anxieties (mainly of the social variety) that preclude any sort of interesting tidbits from arising and becoming an enjoyable piece of writing. Or maybe it'd devolve into genuine stream of consciousness and reveal my foul mouth and latent perversions, which might be more embarrassing than this already is. Either way, the solipsism of people my age is tedious and doesn't make for literary writing, if I happen to decide that's my goal. Pop-albums, monetized vlogs, and salty kidult memoirs, sure, but not a pulitzer prize winner.

Maybe I'd go the opposite direction and only use words from a meticulously curated collection of bits and bobs I come by in a set time span, maybe three months or a year. Eventually, I could take it a step further and make writing adhere to the rules of the quotidian and ephemeral; upholster pithy narratives to dictionary entries, memes, itemized receipts, to-do lists, AC instruction manuals, muffin recipes. However, both these ideas result in a literary garage sale very few will appreciate (read: buy) so let's scrap that.

Postmodernese, the influential academic language, would be a fun feat to master. I'd do it just to prove that I can, however rudimentarily, imitate the "discourse" of big-boy scholars. Of course it'd be a sad attempt to underscore how the pleonastic writing spewing out of Universities exists as a type of cognitive circle jerk. It's all intellectual masturbation anyway, scholastic pornography inciting the

frenzied use of pretentious words, protracted clauses, and extra-textual insights. In the end, one's left with an underwhelming, donnish money shot and the sour taste of ivory tower. Academia looks miserably orgiastic; bodies infecting each other with scholarly ick by way of the virus "citation." It's a nasty illness, flavors everything with an empty metallic tinge.

Maybe I'd write an allegory of our current political moment instead. Title it Daddy Issues or, better yet, Fatherland. Though it won't really be an allegory because I don't even know where to begin with that. Instead, I'll just embellish details from my adolescence.

Darla, if it weren't for this goddamn phase, would be a perfectly good girl. Messy, entitled, and aloof to the realities of the world. A petulant brat brought up in a gated community and spoon-fed the American dream (though she puked it all back up) does silly things like sleep on strangers' couches, sport fishnets, and fuck unsuspecting daddies at the pool, which is actually her favorite summer pastime. Arriving in the shimmering early afternoon, she scouts the patio and plops down on a lawn chair beside a bickering couple. Their kids, a boy and two girls, frolic a few feet away pretending to be dolphins escaping a menacing shark. They argue about financing the kitchen remodel. He makes a cutting remark about being bled dry fiscally and jabs further with a cool, nonchalant "you're just like your mother, useless." The wife makes a move to leave, citing a craving for the club's salad. She asks if he'd like anything, to which he responds, "a Coke." A graceful, mature exit, undoubtedly, though she's spotted crying in the mini-van by a nosy woman from Relief Society a half-hour later. Darla understands this is her window and seizes the

opportunity.

After slipping out of a slinky cover-up she pulls out the pool-side essentials: a towel dirtied by grass and boxed-wine; a cherry flavored popsicle accompanied by a baggy of off-brand microwave popcorn; a worn anthology of E.E. Cummings' erotic poems bookmarked with a condom; and a bottle of Hawaiian Tropic tanning oil.

She makes a big show of the oil, the condom, the popsicle. It works because seduction is, in fact, easy. The encounter, short and uncouth, took place in the family restroom with her splayed over the Koala Kare changing station. He was curt, direct, and a bit rough, so she didn't mind his tubby belly and the chlorine smell.

She thinks of that moment, and similar moments, as a break from the looming dread of returning to school. It also serves as further justification for the crowning title of School Slut. So the day after Labor Day, when she pulls smelly knee-socks onto her feet and foregoes panties under her plaid skirt, she knows she's earned it.

The school year is spent giving blowjobs under the stairs of the fine arts building, a tactic to avoid writing papers on Toyotomi Hideyoshi and "Ode on a Grecian Urn." She fails algebra, comes close to failing French, and manages to perform just under average in Biology only because she enjoyed killing insects for her bug collection and showed a high level of care and fascination in the cat dissection unit.

Her therapist, Dr. Burt, concludes she's acting out because her father, a construction tycoon, remarried a much younger woman. In fact, Darla's stepmother, a nice girl from Minnesota, was born on the same day as Darla's oldest sister, a dental hygienist pregnant with her first child.

Five naked women, each donning rabbit masks with large red Xs in place of

eyes, pose in an abandoned factory. Two flank the scene, the central figure holds a pitchfork, another rubs bunny blood, or maybe be it's menstrual blood, over her breasts while the smallest squats in front with legs spread and finger hooked in mouth.

It's an image from a poster her friend's brother hung in his bedroom or possibly an album cover left on his floor that, whatever the origin, Darla enjoys getting off to. She likes the proud display of vulva. The blood, the rusty pitchfork, the pubic hair all congeal into a sweet treat. This is the first mental picture she has of nudity, a brazen display of female power.

It's a bizarre fantasy. Darla wonders who took the photo and if there's another naked woman just out of frame encouraging the sullen masks, providing fresh blood. Sometimes she imagines she's snapping the obscene photo, arranging the pieces, coordinating the details.

Within the past week she's begun to conjure this image with a minor addition. In the far left corner appears a cloaked man gazing intently at the bunnies. Perhaps a poacher, waiting to slice fur from flesh.

Gently Used

Clara Reeves, the performance artist, has, in fact, gone mad. In a telegram received Friday evening, Chemist, the renowned engineer and husband of Reeves, confirmed her psychotic break. Avid readers will recall the opening of Beige, the restaurant located in the central tower of the Fortress. It is alleged Reeves jumped from the window situated above the main dining saloon.

A self-declared fashioner of feminist “squelch” phantasies, though scholars predominantly categorize her work as post-punk ekphrasis with ephemera rising, Reeves’ most notorious performance-piece, *Usine à bébé*, incorporated aborted fetuses illegally obtained from the clinic’s mass grave as well as the uterus of a goat used in the second installment of her work *Tragedy is my hot, hot sex*. Reeves, to the dismay of many Tribunal members, fashioned a suit of the slaughtered fetal material and manipulated the goat uterus into horns sported on her head. Further details of the unfolding situation are pending.

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C,

I play fill in the blank with interrupted dreams: A bedroom hovering over a fictionalized downtown. It’s seasoned with a checkered floor, an unmade bed, a 2001: Space Odyssey poster freckled with spaghetti sauce, and the noise of tea being sweetened in the next room. The level of detail is impeccable, really, except when it comes to your face. In the topography of my memory you’re a looming figure. Slim, tree-like.

It’s far less creative than other settings of my brain. It feels as if there’s a Rolodex of outlandish geographies for me to scroll through. Abandoned industrial pools or an oubliette sex club are some I feel an acute fondness for. A lurid candyland forest spotted with dank Italian buildings, a nocturnal waterpark embedded in a noodle bowl of neon freeways and bridges, a coffin that’s actually crawl space to a hearth room, a coven’s swap, a jungle villa, museum shopping malls, mechanical caves, seedy versions of my childhood home.

This room, your room, is hopelessly banal. Something I'd see if I knocked on my neighbor's door and asked to look around. I suppose if anything I know about dream psychology turns out to be more than new age ruminations, then the humdrum of this space makes sense. I need boring settings to cope with the bizarre fantasy of you.

Alarm sounds.

Always,

Your C

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Chemist and Clara often threw sumptuous parties in their cellar that, in actuality, was not a cellar. It was a title given to their basement which, due to the hiring of an upscale interior designer, oozed a particularly icy brand of retro-futurism. Its circular design contained wood paneling, orange carpet, and white furniture deliciousness.

Monitors inlaid into the walls flashed, on special occasions, a collage of old record covers. More frequently, the screens oscillated between computerized porn and live footage from slaughterhouses. These images, clearly meant to shock and repulse guests, never accomplished their objective. The party-goers found such images not uncanny or abhorrent but entertaining.

Mr. Wells, for example, acquired solace in the repetitiveness. The predictability of the movements stimulated a gummy tranquility. Precise men performing so

intently pleased him; the slicing of throats and endless thrusting helped him unwind, come undone.

Clara was known for crass impulsivity. During one of the couple's famed fights she etched her emotions onto the wall of the downstairs bathroom using an X-ACTO Knife. Chemist, in his remorse and fluorescent empathy, decided it'd be best to leave the words, carefully painting the small cuts with a putrid green to highlight Clara's seeping despair and, of course, to make it an extension of the decor. Now when a guest, stumbling and high, wanders into the half bath they read Clara's incoherent rambling. Attempts to retrieve the wall for archival display have been fruitless.

At the time, the carving created a flurry of speculation as to what kind of fight could cause such an obnoxious and dismal bit of psyche to emerge on a pristine wall. Many concluded that it was Clara's "tender-heartedness." A polite way of discussing her inclination to twist words into their most painful connotations, to see the world in that sweet, skewed understanding. It was not necessarily her fault, they had said.

Clara had a way of making everything about sexism, patriarchy, misogyny (common lingo then). She tied herself so tightly to these terms that tweezing apart her feelings and, later, suturing them together, would be impossible without this vocabulary. Every glance, slight, comment, explanation, scoff, wink, smirk could, if analyzed by Clara, come down to some iteration of those three words. So many iterations, in fact, that an ongoing project of Clara's was a Vulvanary. Titling the work Dictionary, because of obvious homophonic tendencies, would not do.

Snipped from a 1980s Adam & Eve shop-by-mail catalog, appearance has always been her principal concern. Clothes, houses, accumulated wealth. Though

property viewings and trips to the Caribbean have vanished for her at this point, if she preserves her shape and her youth she might still make it. Find another man, another doctor or maybe a lawyer this time. All it takes is self-control.

A beautiful figure is a foundational component to appearance, as anyone will tell you, so it's perfectly understandable that every night of the divorce she'd eat two chicken enchiladas with rice and cheese covered refried beans just to puke it all into the toilet of her tiny apartment bathroom. That's the problem with appearance, it nags and nags because nothing is ever good enough. It nags until you vomit. It nags until you hate yourself. It nags until you slit your wrists. But appearance, like your ex-husband, doesn't actually care if you live. A solution: weed or, if you're really in for it, diazepam and vodka. Together they make inane tasks, like driving your daughter home from play practice or buying another pair of designer jeans, bearable.

It pays more to not think or speak as a woman. Sit quietly in class, sit quietly in the OB's office, sit quietly in fights with your husband. Suffocate your opinions, become an empty space for men to insert themselves. Let them practice writing memoirs on your skin or use your hair to sop up the ejaculation of their confidence. Vacate your gullet to make room for a cock. Puke up shreds of humanity stringy and coagulated like melted cheese. Above all, remain blank. You control your emptiness.

I can fulfill desires on the page. I can conjure the sweet sting: hit, strike, blow. Describe hot come dripping down my ass. Brew images of slick upper thighs, the consequence of too much teasing. But desires compressed into the incinerator of words pilfers the free fall. Adds the pressure of control.

It'd be one thing to bury all this in a story, a character's dream maybe. That'd

be quaint.

You'd like that. I'll work my ass off for you to enjoy yourself without a hitch, no interruptions on my part. Just clean, crisp writing. A dash of character development, a cup of plot, a tablespoon of setting. I'll bake it in my brain at 355 and present a delectable novel, steaming, just for you.

Is that what you're after?

I can display my sexuality for you, too, if you'd like. That's what it's there for, right? I'll lay myself out and you can cut away the juicy slices like prime rib on Christmas Eve. I'll fix myself to your liking, become your personalized spectacle. I'll dress myself down and rely on your hunger for exposure. Humiliation for consumption. Affect for viewing pleasure.

It'd be more prudent of me to opt for canonical fantasies. Nurture the details, guzzle the stock predilections: Blonde, ample tits, tractable. A self-fashioned fantasy. Play to the audience, simmer Pornhub statistics until I'm a blowup doll. Cast my own effigy.

Or I can create something more demure. Which, I agree, is far more fun than someone who spoils it outright by stating their intentions. Better to let it ferment. Make it a sly gaze or oblique comment. Second-guessing leads to wanting more. Let desire fester.

The things men do that annoy me the most aren't pesky things like rape and murder. At this point I've accepted the fear of those two looming morsels of cheer as a regular chore. My hyper-awareness has fed into a dull, rote consciousness. Treat your fear of rape and murder like changing a tampon or paying the garbage bill,

otherwise you'll go insane.

The list of things I can handle grows: walking down the street and being called sexy, beautiful, pretty, baby, sweetheart, honey; having someone follow me home or taking photos up my skirt; getting spanked or otherwise "prodded" by strangers; generally being regarded as a fuck-toy; and, of course, the adorable way men are able to expunge ambiguous social cues like "no" or "stop" and "fuck off" from their memory. If it comes to it, I can make peace with being strangled or stabbed or hit over the head with a tire iron. Bleeding to death lasts what, twenty minutes? Less? The insidious conversational bullshit lasts a lifetime. It gets worse once you're not fuckable, when your age isn't fetishized. Slather on the taboo of foregoing the baby-creating properties of your snatch and you're utterly useless! A no good, washed-up whore taking up too much space with her knitting needles and kitty litter.

What I wasn't prepared for, and what I hate most, is how men treat you like, come here girl, a dumb pup that, sit down girl, needs guidance and, stay girl, should have its nose rubbed in its own piss, good girl! Express any hesitance on a subject and brace yourself, your co-worker starts in on a soliloquy. Or the grad student in your French class will explain, step-by-step, how to accent your e's in a Word doc. Or when you ask a basic question and, your bad, it was actually an invitation to be a sounding board for sad poetry about how hard it is to be, god forbid, a decent person. Or, my favorite, when you match your brother-in-law's wry tone and he proceeds to explain sarcasm. Remember, women just don't get men's humor! Their inferior sensibilities preclude them from understanding poorly executed jokes!

Then there's the way you're supposed to be grateful for their unsolicited guidance. Thank you so much, sir, for telling me my degree is useless, sir, can I suck your cock to demonstrate my appreciation for sharing such a profound and original epiphany? Truly, I would have never come to that conclusion on my own. You're so brilliant! Would you like a back rub? A slice of pie I baked myself? Or, I can bend over for you right here because the sound of your voice makes me super duper wet! That's right, you can even put it in my ass if you'd like.

I'm here only for your pleasure in whatever model you'd prefer. Don't like when I cake my face with makeup? No problem! Are my tits kind of small? I'll call a surgeon! See an extra pound or two or ten I can do without? I can stop eating! I do regret to inform you, however, that there is one disappointing factor I can't change: I've been spoiled by another man, technically two. Just the two though, I talk a big game but I'm no slut, just a slut for you. While I can't return to a virginal state, I can act like yours is the first I've ever seen. I'll make it a good show, I swear. Don't let my gently used condition dissuade you.

Just to make it extra clear I could get a tattoo on my face that says "doormat you can put your dick in" or, if pithiness is your thing, "subordinate fuck hole" but if I listen closely there's a generic deep voice reminding me men don't like girls with aggressive tattoos. However, if I don't snarl and wear leather I'll be reprimanded for my lack of assertiveness, told off for displaying the internalization of the docile qualities men love so much. I'm so sorry, I forgot men need a sense of breakable confidence in a woman, even when they're not dating her.

In my other ear, ultra intelligent devil's advocates are grunting with their hot

beer breath. They're occupied with "discussion" of how sexism is too a men's issue! They were catcalled once! Their feelings are just as valid when it comes to sexist oppression! Basically, women should be satisfied with being shit.

It's you too, you know. Educated and well-versed in feminist theory, mangling lived reality to increase your cultural capital. Uphold rapists and point out their feminist leanings, that's definitely helpful. Though I'm sure for you this is all a thought exercise. A cute way of feeling hip. Okay, I submit-- you're different. You aren't tempted to elicit black-out moans. You're unable to envision the little piggy crying, her eyes begging you to stop as vomit rises and falls in her throat. Absolutely cannot fathom the dehumanization necessary to violate and humiliate. You're not already contributing to it, with your milf this and teen that. Tell me again how "Fuck and suck anal with surprise facial (ATM)" doesn't distort your perception of my autonomy?

I watch you, everyday, teeter gently on HR protocol and the confines of fidelity. You stare at her ass, peek down her blouse, then that question, sticky on your lips, slithers out: "sweetie, do you understand?"

Remember this is not your problem. It's me. I'm too sensitive. I see sexism where there is none. It's that Women's Studies education, I'm telling you. Unusable *and* warps your reality? Abominable! I'm just angry. Filled with rage. Seething, resentful, unhappy bitch. A fat, stupid cunt that doesn't know what she's talking about. Clearly can't take a joke either. But don't let my insecurities get in the way of you living your life. It's in my head. I don't know what I'm talking about. Another ditzzy skintern, who's, like, stupid. I don't know anything. I'm just an apologetic little

girl. I'm probably not even fuckable. I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm only cum dumpster. I don't know anything at all.

Will you explain it to me?

- - -

Dear C,

My dreams of you have grown mutedly bizarre. Your image, which is never clear, is always accompanied by a beautiful woman, her limbs as sugary as her kindness. Together you perform odd but soothing domestic sequences while I, playing voyeur, roll around in the scent of your life absent me.

I see you in your two-story rental, setting the table for dinner guests while she tugs a checkered skirt onto her hips. Or I'll find you, strung out on coupledness, at the farmer's market in a walled French city smelling blissful flavors of soap: lavender love potion and warm honey. Together, you examine the architecture of JonBenét Ramsey. You make it through that animated fever dream *Heavy Metal* without pausing for my feminist analysis.

Her legs, exposed in that professional but always suggestive manner, evoke a vision of your blurred face buried at their seam. A roiling encounter, piquant and crisp. It's easy to fasten together the intricacies of you and her.

In waking hours I've taken to fabricating the memories you share, the habits you've placed behind the glass of your relationship. I fall victim to the consuming lull of these scenarios. You eat lunch with the lights off, curtains loosely hugging the windows to interrupt the blaring sunlight. After finishing your sandwich you delicately wash the crumbs off your plate. The home you've woven with threads of

intimacy teeters on sterile, except for the door that's always ajar, a jacket waiting to be hung up, and a book or two out of place. She can be found on the bed reading fast paperbacks like *Exquisite Corpse* or *Baise-Moi*, something morbid and grotesque. You love watching her sweet face pour over the unseemly; that juxtaposition whips you into a subdued frenzy, hands wringing until they find a place to let loose.

I have become a tourist of your love life, both enraptured and disgusted by my imagined concoctions of your togetherness. Gripping my map and shading the contours as they develop, I take mental snapshots, enjoy monuments, jot journal entries, sketch facades, collect bric-a-brac, and retreat hastily to the cool, quiet of my hotel room when the bright street, those steaming details, become unbearable. I sleep in a bed that has sheltered other lovers, absorbing their tenderness. It buoys my cracked longing as it leaks over machine-washed pillowcases.

I heave. I quell.

Sleepily,

Your C

- - -

A bit drunk, her head hangs in such a pathetic limp way that I start to hate her. "I'm just that cunt, that bitch."

"I don't need to tell any of you how much sexism sucks." Sucks is the wrong expression. What she means is piles on, sediments. That's a word she uses a lot and here it fits horrifyingly well.

Above her, small travel bottles collect on a shelf. Potions that give her the commanding appearance we fawn over. Even as my disdain mounts, I note the brands

and flavors so I can emulate the cohesive exterior.

Prior to the downtrodden complaints, she'd spew statements like "all the grad students cream their panties. They're impressed with his Ivy League accreditation and dead language skills" and roll her eyes in a rousingly beautiful way. Or "gross, I mean his wife is great, I love her, but have you read his book? He's got a weirdo fascination with breast milk" and end with an ironic and sweetly droll remark like "vom dot com" that'd test the limits of my hatred.

I hate that she's almost in tears, using nasty human words like cunt. I hate that she let herself be tenderized by professionalism. I hate that she continues to complain about departmental politics. She's hemorrhaging fuck and it makes me nauseous. Wish I'd seen her hurl all that white wine instead. But you can't purge disillusionment from the body; it's got that gunky, permanent residue.

- - -

Chemist,

I never think of rings. Hair, jewelry, phone calls. "I'll give you a ring."

I have begun the process of hollowing my heart, scouring the fetid muck, muck, muck of each artery, each clot. The usual trinkets surface: checkered floor, unhinged limbs, Coke can, spaghetti sauce, nail varnish, plum pie. A pretend collection of my very own to dress and play.

With a carving knife I peel my skin. Each layer reeks of you, reeks of you. You, you, you. Stuffed between every stratum are pockets of wool, clock hands, tails of mice. When I strike bone I can begin drilling.

Next, I'll empty my cavity. After the initial laceration, sternum to belly button, I'll use eggshells to scrape out the accumulated dust and debris. I puncture my stomach with a pencil. As the acid begins its trickle, thumb, following index, cranes the hole. Thrashing at that gaping spot is a trout, his sweet mouth gasping. Open, close, open, close—my night-light.

Dried scabs scratch the dome of my skull as if it's their lover's back. Their blistering noise erupts proudly over my brain. Those, I'm afraid, I can't get to; the phantoms chew and shooters pew.

Oh the putrid residue of you, you, you.

Why is it you won't give me a ring?

Yours,

C

- - -

The events that took place at Beige Friday night are as follows. Seated nearest to the fireplace on the plush hides and furs signature to the restaurant, Clara and Chemist received their meals, mussels-frites and truffle carbonara, respectively. Reportedly, the window above their seating place provided frigid streams of air, offsetting the heat of the fire. The inconsistency in temperature is one proposed explanation for the brash behavior of the couple.

The waitress, whose name we cannot reveal as the investigation rages, though she is notorious for a sparkling demeanor and eyes that conjure an overpowering simulation of intimacy, is alleged to have exercised her charms and wiles on poor Chemist, who, as is the case of any virile American man, fell victim.

Other dinners have suggested, which is also evidenced by the rage splattered over the bathroom door, mirror, and display of triptychs, that Clara barged into the bathroom to find the young, fertile waitress riding, in a sexual manner that is, Chemist, who, though this is all informed speculation, was certainly mired in an entranced stupor, fashioning for Clara an undoubtedly sick and lurid scene, propelling her already melodramatic tendencies into an unrefined frenzy.

The sight was too much for her delicate sensibilities; the vivid image of another body, extremely taut and quite youthful, pleasuring her husband swelled into an unbearable pain causing her to burst and, as it were, pushed her over the edge.

Clara was discovered by the maître d' mangled but breathing on the WBB landing beneath the dining saloon.

The particulars of her current condition remain unspecified.

- - -

Dear C,

As I write, her mom is pulling a spiced plum pie out of the oven. The 1970s one-story is untidy. Groves of dinner trays are welded into chunky, shit-stained carpet. Newspapers of a different decade obtrude foot space beneath the counter. A cult gathering of "Season's Greetings" establishes chaos on the sideboard. The family continues Tetris with the trash and plays Jenga with the Stouffer's smeared dishes. You're in another room while I eagerly consume questions, disavowing your new wife's blank, alien face; even with that stern expression she's prettier than me.

I imagine a game of Twister in her parents' bedroom.

I knock over my glass of milk.

I grow suspicious of your cautious compliments.

I waste finite smiles and taxed laughter on someone who doesn't enjoy prompting them.

C

- - -

Chemist,

Simulacra my ass. Grow up.

C

- - -

Playboy stuffed under the mattress is, I'll admit, a cliché. So I'll have him keep such smut on the top shelf of his closet and sandwich little lingerie catalogues in between coffee table books on Parisian monuments or Ansel Adams photography or the Uinta Mountains, it doesn't matter much. The point is, it's there and, in what I suppose would be retro fashion, it's physical. Ready for his daughter, Darla, to stumble on, providing a platform for her first cognizant encounters with sexual iconography. The construction of an "adult" world of sexuality is, at small age, intoxicating. Let's us use Darla, a classic case, as an example.

Darla finds adult sexuality fascinating mainly because her parents incited a taboo. They use annoying euphemisms like "private parts" and give her a forty-page picture book titled *NO! NO! NO!* which illustrates the importance of disallowing others to touch aforementioned private parts. None of this is helpful; it only exacerbates her curiosity and kindles a fear of being kidnapped.

For Darla, sex will not be mentioned until the age of fifteen, at least by her parents. However, her current penchant to rub up on a stuffed, vibrating Cookie Monster at bedtime will be brought up during divorce proceedings and, therefore, will be a thing between her and a neuropsychologist, Dr. Goldstein, who'll ignite her hatred of the color yellow and, incidentally, men. Darla will always be punctured an unabating twinge of humiliation and she'll garner resentment for her parents as they demonstrate the repulsive underbelly of human relations in a six-year custody battle. There are other little things, too, that will fill her with acrimony and spite. For example, their proclivity for dragging her in and out of psychiatrists' offices and the conferring of their emotional wreckage as an evergreen inheritance gift, and, though it's a given, the wear and tear of quotidian misogyny will accumulate.

She'll subsequently be disappointed when sex is actually not illicit. It'll be obnoxiously rote and, at times, devastatingly tedious. It won't make her feel satisfyingly nervous and bashful, it won't make her anxiety dissolve, and, the worst, it'll take work. Too many conversations on what feels good and what would make things better. Though, conversations might be the wrong word. Darla will learn from her mother to sit down and shut up. Staying quiet is preferable, especially when it comes to dealing with men. She'll absorb her father's tactic on handling desire, so her fantasies will be smashed between the box-spring and the mattress. Stating things like "I want you to tell me I'm a good girl when I go down on you" or "It'd be great if you hogtied me once in awhile" or "I'd love it if you tell when I'm allowed to come" will be impossible, unthinkable, and, inevitably, will become sticky with ridiculousness.

Silently, everyday, she'll wonder what's the use of having the capacity to

fashion elaborate fantasies if they're always butchered by language. She'll quietly wait to become an anecdote, dense and frozen, like her dinners. Someone, at some point, will mention an ex-girlfriend, or maybe an ex-wife, filled with profane disillusionment and too much "emotional baggage."

And that'll be that

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