
22. “Readers who have paid attention to the recent, meteoric rise of shame to its present housewife-megastar status in the firmament of self-help and popular psychology . . . may be feeling a bit uneasy at this point. So, for that matter, may those used to reading about shame in the neo-conservative framework that treasures shame along with guilt as, precisely, an adjunct of repression and an enforcer of proper behavior. By the ways that I want to be thinking about shame, the widespread moral valuation of this powerful affect as good or bad, to be mandated or to be excised, according to how one plots it along a notional axis of prohibition/permission/requirement, seems distinctly beside the point” (Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s The Art of the Novel, 6).


24. Ibid., 35–36.

25. “. . . the universal humiliation of all characters in this [ridiculous, queer] theatre gives it a repulsive air of viciousness, even cruelty, because it is absolute: the victims are accorded no basic dignity, no saving graces. We are not reassured of worthy or innocent motives of underlying rational seriousness. The characters are not just clownish or foolish but clowns and fools. They are not exactly funny. Isolated clown scenes, jokes and parodies that at first seem pure fun trouble us by their implications of profound ridiculousness. Some important, often protracted, actions are specifically and formally cruel humiliations: Bajazeth’s enslavement in [When Queens Collide] or Conquest of the Universe, the entire action of Screen Test, Lady Godiva’s undressing (according to [John] Vacarro, in Lady Godiva, Victor’s re-education in Vinyl. These humiliations bring this close to a theatre of the terrible. It takes a strong stomach to participate in their fun . . .” (Brecht, 36). Screen Test and Vinyl are both films by Warhol whose scenarios by Tavel became plays performed by the Playhouse of the Ridiculous.

26. Warhol and Hackett, 91.

27. Tavel, 77–78.

28. Ibid., 85.

2

Two Girls, Fat and Thin

Lauren Berlant

When You Wish upon a Star

History hurts, but not only. It also engenders optimism and disappointment, aggressions that respond to the oppressive presence of what dominates or is taken-for-granted. Both emotions are responses to prospects for change. It is not unusual to think of critical theory as an optimistic genre, since it creates so much exhausting anxiety about the value of the pleasure of thinking even the “thinkiest” thought.1 But the compulsion to repeat optimism, which is another definition of desire, is a condition of possibility that also justifies the risk of having to survive, once again, disappointment and depression, the protracted sense that no-one, especially oneself, is teachable after all. All that work for what? Love isn’t the half of it.

To be teachable is to be open for change. It is a tendency. It is to turn toward the story of what we have said in terms of phrases we hadn’t yet noticed.2 Eve Sedgwick’s work has changed sexuality’s history and destiny: She is a referent, and there is a professional field with a jargon and things, and articles and books that summarize it. For me, though, the luck of encountering her grandiosity, her belief that it is a good to disseminate the intelligent force of an attachment to a thing, a thought, a sensation, is of unsurpassable consequence. In the pleasure/knowledge economy of her work, the force of attachment has more righteousness than anything intelligibly or objectively “true”: She enables the refusal of cramped necessity by way of a poetics of misrecognition.

This is the process described by the concept of misrecognition. Misrecognition (méconnaissance) describes the psychic process by which fantasy recal-
librates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire. To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities— which it might or might not have. A poetics of misrecognition may seem to risk collapsing the critical analysis of fantasy into fantasy. Maybe so, but such a risk is unavoidable. Fantasy is that which manages the ambivalence and itinerancy of attachment: It provides representations to make the subject appear intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire's unruly attentiveness to new objects. That is, fantasy parses ambivalence in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it. To track fantasy across the scene of the subject in history, in this view, is to take seriously the magical thinking, or formalism, involved in seeing selves and worlds as continuous and whole. This is a theory of being, and it is also a theory of reading.

As any reader of her work on Henry James would attest, Sedgwick's mode of reading is to deshame fantasmatic attachment so as to encounter its operations as knowledge. For example, we may feel the violence of history as something it does to us. But Sedgwick argues that the stories we tell about how subjectivity takes shape must also represent our involvement in the pain and error, the bad memory and mental lag, that also shape our desire's perverse, twisted, or, if you prefer, indirect routes toward pleasure and survival. To admit your surprising attachments, to trace your transformation over the course of a long (life) sentence, is sentence. That's what I've learned. The pain of paying attention pays me back in the form of eloquence: A sound pleasure.

Yet for a long time now, Sedgwick argues, skepticism has been deemed the only ethical position for the intellectual to take with respect to the subject's ordinary attachments. Even Adorno, the great belittler of the popular pleasures, can be aghast at the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold to a dream. Dreams are seen as easy optimism, while failures seem complex. Sedgwick writes against the hermeneutics of suspicion on the grounds that it always finds the mirages and failures for which it looks: She finds critics overdetermined to a self-confirming scene of disappointment. In this view the disappointed critic mistakes his act of negation for a performance of his seriousness; perhaps he also elevates his thought by disdaining anything that emanes a scent of therapy, reparation, or utopianism.

How does one go about defetishizing negation, while remaining critical? Begin with Freud's dictum that there is no negative in the unconscious. Sedgwick seeks to read every word the subject writes (she believes in the author) to establish the avowed and disavowed patterns of his/her desire, and then understands those repetitions in terms of a story about sexuality that does not exist yet as a convention or an identity. That aim is what makes her writing so optimistic.

In it the persistence of sexually anomalous attachment figures the social potential of queerness, in which what counts is not one's "object choice" as such but rather one's sustaining attachments, which are only sometimes also one's social relations. In this way repetition, heavily marked as a process of reading and rereading, has a reparative effect on the subject of an impossible sexuality. The queer tendency of this method is to put one's attachments back into play, into pleasure, into knowledge, into worlds. It is to admit that they matter. In Sedgwick's work, desire's self-elaboration enables an aesthetic that is organized neither by the sublime nor the beautiful, the dramatic nor the banal, but by something vibrantly quiet. This would also be the erotic tonality struck by what she calls "reparative criticism," her antidote to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Set against the practice of deconstructing truth forms that she locates in literary theory of the 1970s, the aim of reparative criticism is to sustain the unfinished and perhaps unthought thoughts about desire that are otherwise defeated by the rear of conventionality or heteroculture. Any writer's task, in this view, would be to track desire's itinerary, not on behalf of confirming its hidden or suppressed Truths but to elaborate its variety of attachments as sexuality, as lived life, and as an unfinished history that confounds the hurts and the pleasures.

I love the idea of reparative reading insofar as it is a practice of meticulous curiosity. But I also resist idealizing, even implicitly, any program of better thought or reading. Those of us who think for a living are all too well-positioned to characterize acts of thought as dramatically powerful, whether effective or futile; we are set up to overestimate the clarity and destiny of an idea's effects. This can produce strange distortions in the ways we stage agency as a mode of heroic authorship, and vice versa. Thus the distinction I'm making here is about an attitude toward what thinking (as écriture) can do. I'm suggesting that the overvaluation of thought is both an occupational hazard and part of a larger overvaluation of a certain mode of self-reflective personhood.

Elaine Hadley tells the long history of the liberal elevation of cultivated self-reflection starting from its congealing image in Mill's Autobiography. Mill, she argues, posits an identity between thought and interiority, such that his version of the ethical subject takes on the shape of the intellectual who cultivates his self-awareness—that is, his awareness of himself as a self. More recently, there was a seemingly antithetical moment—call it '68—when a program of history from and of the subject opposed the proprietary clarities of institutional and bodily truth claims even, or even especially, in liberal capitalist/democratic contexts that elevate mental abstraction over bodily labor. In this Anti-Oedipal moment the subject's amalgam of knowledges—thoughts and practices—became a generative ground for refiguring the normatively social, especially in the domains of socialist and sexual politics. Bodies were elevated as, in a sense,
smarter and more knowing than minds, although ultimately the distinction heads toward exhaustion.

We are still in that epoch and need still to be, and yet there can be an uncanny confluence between the ideal of liberal abstraction or inner-directedness and the anti-liberal orientation toward the subject. I often experience the radical project as having attenuated somewhat, as it is thematized in stories about exemplary individualities and individuals seen swimming or drowning amidst unjust forces. Like Eve, my desire is to angle knowledge toward and from the places where it is (and we are) impossible. But individuality, that monument of liberal fantasy, that site of commodity fetishism, that project of certain psychoanalytic desires, that sign of cultural and national modernity, is to me a contrary form, a form that needs interruption by a contrary. There is an orientation toward interiority in much queer theory that brings me up short, makes me wonder: Must the project of queerness start “inside” of the subject and spread out from there?

This distinction is not an opposition. Here is a biographical way of showing it, though in writing this way I am working against my own inclination. Eve’s public stories about becoming possible—in Fat Art/Thin Art, Tendencies, and A Dialogue on Love— recount a crowded world of loving family and friends in which she thrives partly by living in the fold of her internal counter-narrative. My story, if I wrote it, would locate its optimism in a crowded scene too, but mine was dominated by a general environment not of thriving but of disappointment, contempt, and threat. I salvaged my capacity to attach to persons by reconceiving of both their violence and their love as impersonal. This isn’t about me. This has had some unpleasant effects, as you might imagine. But it was also a way to protect my optimism. Selves seemed like ruthless personalizers. In contrast, to think of the world as organized around the impersonality of the structures and practices that conventionalize desire, intimacy, and even one’s own personhood was to realize how univerisable the experience of being personal, of having personality, is. Out of this happy thought came an orientation toward passions of all sorts, including those intellectual and political.

Attachments are made not by will, after all, but by an intelligence after which we are always running. (It’s not just “Hey, you!” but “Wait up!”) This lagging and sagging relation to attachment threatens to make us feel vertiginously formless, except that normative conventions and our own creative repetitions are there along the way to quell the panic we might feel at the prospect of becoming exhausted or dead before we can make sense of ourselves. In other words, the anxiety of formlessness makes us awfully teachable, for a minute. To the degree that the conventional forms of the social direct us to recognize only some of our attachments as the core of who we are and what we belong to, one’s relation to attachment is impersonal. To belong to the normal world is to misrecognize only these modes of intelligibility as expressing one’s true self. It brings out my queerness to think of living less as self-extension than as a process that interferes with the drama of the self. You will note that I am talking about impersonality not as the opposite of the personal—say, as “structure” or “power”—but as one of its conditions.

In this sense, my world operates according to a proximate, but different, fantasy of disappointment, optimism, and attachment than the one I attribute to Eve. I think of how I met the girl. We are both shy—who isn’t? She gave a paper, and we talked about it. Years later, I gave one, and she listened to it. She wrote another book and I read it. There were meetings in airports and hotel dining rooms. We took walks, talked. Once, by accident, we took a small plane together. Reading is one place where the impersonality of intimacy can be transacted without harm to anyone: so are writing and paper-giving. There is no romance of the impersonal, no love plot for it. But there is optimism, a space across which to move.

Stupid optimism is the most disappointing thing of all. By “stupid” I mean the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking will secure one’s happiness: for example, the prospect of class mobility, romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or better sexual identity. Here is a stupidity of mine: “History is what hurts,” that motto of The Political Unconscious, is a phrase that I love. It resonates as truth; it performs a truth-effect in me. But because it is in the genre of the maxim I have never tried, I realize, to understand it. That is one project of this essay.

Did Somebody Say Wish?

Bodies and sexualities were in the wings of the previous section. Eve and I both write about fat because we identify as it, rightly or wrongly. She: “I used to have a superstition that / there was this use to being fat: no one I loved could come to harm / enfolded in my touch.” Me, writing about someone else, of course: “for him, it is a narrative in which the very compulsion to desire specific things . . . forces him to risk insatiability, a constant inadequacy to one’s own desire.” My claim is that our relations to these modes of embodiment register our proximate approaches to the incorporative and impersonal strategies of queer/utopian thought.

Mary Gaitskill’s novel, Two Girls, Fat and Thin, tells a story that comes close to encapsulating these dialectical impulses. All of her books try to make sense of the relation between painful history and the painful optimism of traumatized subjects trying to survive within that history, since they cannot put it
behind them. Trauma can never be let go of: it holds you. It locates you at the juncture of the personal and the impersonal, specifying you at the moment of least control over your own destiny and meaning. You become like a small pet that, when picked up, never stops moving its legs.

In *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, Dorothy Never and Justine Shade—shades of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Pale Fire*, and *Justine*—come in contact because of their common interest in Anna Granite, an Ay Rand-like figure. Like Rand, Granite intoxicates her audience with the promise that identification with one's sexual and intellectual power can produce happiness and fulfillment, achieving a victory over the deadening normal world. Justine Shade has decided to write an article on Anna Granite and the people who follow her for *Urban Vision*, a hip paper like *The Village Voice*. She has learned of Granite at her day job in a doctor's office, where the promise they make to cure bodies in pain appears to her a false but necessary form of forestalling despair. When a young patient with heart disease tells her about Granite, the philosophy strikes Justine as both stupid and powerful.

Dorothy Never had once been a Granite acolyte, liberated by the thought of living and promoting the beauty of destructive passion. The two girls meet when Dorothy responds to a three by five card Justine posts on a Launderomat wall that asks for information about Granite. At the time of their meeting, neither Justine nor Dorothy has had a good conversation with anyone in many years: Each has long ago drawn a "cloak" around herself (Gaitskill 1991, 112, 158, 173) that acts as an "invisible shield" or "square of definition" (128, 129). Yet from the moment of their initial phone call they resonate with each other, a resonance that they take personally but which has, in a sense, nothing to do with the other except insofar as the other functions formally as an emblematic opportunity for something transformative. "I invented possible scenarios daily," Dorothy thinks, "growing more and more excited by the impending intellectual adventure" (17). They convert into disembodied, vocal actors in each other's fantasy world: Dorothy is "lulled by the expressionless, melancholy quality" of Justine's voice (16), while Dorothy's "voice ... stroked Justine on the inside of her skull in a way that both repelled and attracted her" (23). There is an attachment: yet the interlocutor factors in it not as a human, but as an opportunity for the possible emergence of something human. This paradox of the impersonality of attachment, that it circumvents the personal—the historical—on the way to enumerating their relation, organizes the women's mutual attraction/aversion throughout the novel. They feel taken over by it at the same time as they are taken up in it.

Likewise, during the studied formalism of the interview, they find themselves overwhelmed by a compulsion to historicize, to narrate their lives to each other. In part, this is a banal effect of the event, in which journalism takes on contemporary modes of therapeutic confessional storytelling. Any number of times in the novel the girls tell their life stories to a stranger who exchanges his/her own for it: such is the strange sociability of contemporary trauma talk. But the girls' mutual attachment goes well beyond the content of the phrase. Each woman becomes a "strange world" into which the other "unwittingly pitched" herself (11, 17). They register ambivalence and embarrassment toward the enormity of this impulse, which is not at their usual practice.

When Dorothy meets Justine and intensity grows between them this dissonance arises first clothed in Dorothy's fierce desire to tell Justine about her childhood and then as an aversion to Justine for animating this wish to tell. Meeting Justine makes Dorothy want to burst open a long life of self-containment, a life in which she has hoarded her knowledge and made her body into a grotesque shield (39). Obesity and ugliness create a force field around her, seeming to neutralize what, in those "gatherings of the normally proportioned," might come from others—curiosity or attachment (169). In this way she is protected from saying what she knows, just as she is protected from the world's demand to know what she knows. "I preferred the elegance of distance," she notes (226). One might say that she shows, rather than tells. Yet she is also like a sadistic Sleeping Beauty, aggressively waiting for an opportunity to trust someone. On meeting Justine Dorothy begins to detach from her own defenses, but not from her own pleasures. Her mode of enshlement stays the same, but she follows the trail of the voice, and she's not sure why.

Justine's response to Dorothy is at first like Dorothy's to her—a desire to tell a hard story to a stranger to whom she feels averse, and then confusion about that impulse lived as ambivalence toward the person who animates it. Far more impersonal than Dorothy, Justine has a slower emotional metabolism (yet Dorothy is the fat one, Justine the thin), but eventually she returns to Dorothy, sensing that Dorothy knows something that Justine cannot bear to know on her own. This meeting and return frame the book. Meanwhile, the body of the novel narrates the whole life stories of Justine and Dorothy, which they never fully tell to each other. We witness them growing up paralyzed by fear and at the same time launching into madmesses of thinking, reading, eating, masturbating, attaching, and fucking. A traumatic frenzy of interiority and impersonality constitutes a scene of being and embodiment that they both control and control not a whit. If she wants a good life, what's a girl, or two girls, to do? When does doing matter?

This question takes shape generically through the novel's proximity to the case study. Each girl knows she's a case, in many senses—it's no accident that Justine works for a doctor and Dorothy for a law firm. This proximity to the case
is repeated aesthetically as well. Until the very end of the novel, each chapter has its own narrative voice, which is to say that it assigns each case its own norm of expertise. Dorothy tells her own story in the first person, while a narrator talks about Justine as "she." Each girl's mode of representation performs her relation to impersonality and self-cultivation, but not in a mimetic way: That is, Dorothy details how protecting her vigilant subjectivity requires strategies of social impersonality, while Justine's narrator tenderly registers the formation of Justine's dissociated intimacies. Yet their distinct lives mesh thematically in a hundred ways too, as though there were a certain generic rhythm to the traumatic tableau: peripatetic nuclear families, miserable fathers and mothers, childhood sexual abuse, never the right tone of voice or body. When the two girls are in their childhood families, they don't notice it that much. Their mothers give them enemas, their fathers overvalue them, whatever: They love whatever they can misrecognize as love. Distortion is the shape love takes.

Here is some of the case study content: A doctor friend of her doctor—father repeatedly and painfully masturbates Justine at the age of five. The awful "clawing" feeling of this event confirms something overwhelming she already knows without knowing it about the too intense emotional enclosure of her family; it involves them-against-the-world with an intensity of hermeticism that holds her close, but impersonally so. Justine participates in the economy of familial love by being "good": pretty and smart and submissive to the scene of parental aggression. At the same time she cultivates school as an alternative public for her badness. At seven years old, she gets a neighbor friend to tie her up and whip her; at eleven, she and her friends torture a fat and ugly girl with the nickname "Emotional"; at twelve she rapes a playmate with a toothbrush, masturbating to the memory later (99, 109–11). Later, the playmate asks for more, and Justine refuses her. During high school she develops a secret trashy wardrobe in which she can fit in with the popular girls who are marked by being known. They produce hierarchies of social value by trafficking in stereotype and mockery; they compete among themselves sexually to have the most "adult" experience.

In short, school is a world in which intimacies are always betrayed. But to Justine its viciousness offers a kind of confirming relief, for the explicit rule of cruelty feels truer to her than the familial amalgam of aggressive intimacy. She enters into adolescent heterosexuality by enacting the ambivalence of this scene repeatedly, but with herself as top and bottom, men being merely the instruments of violent relief from her "goodness." Perhaps her most telling act is to design a plot to lose her virginity violently at home. The scene to which she lures an indifferent boy is the rough floor of the family's "rec room," and its purpose is both to enact a fantasy of sexual surrender and to remain interesting to her closest female friend, Watley. The unpleasant harshness of the unfeeling fuck confirms something ruthless in Justine, and yet it marks her vulnerability too: After pretending that the experience was good high drama, she confides in her friend that it wasn't. Watley drops her and uses the story as capital to diminish Justine sociably. Vulnerability makes you worthless: Survival depends on producing forms of hardened identity and cloistering the soft remainders. On realizing that she has been outed as a sexual failure, Justine "walked with her arms around her middle feeling loneliness and humiliation coupled with the sensation that she was, at this moment, absolutely herself" (156). At the moment of that holding thought she is having, perhaps, the best sex of her life.

Dorothy also grows up with an angry father and a passive-aggressive mother, both of whom comment constantly on their daughter, whose value shifts according to the tempestuous parental mood. As a child she loves being at the center of this shifting scene, and yet like Justine she is hypervigilant—she can tell that something is off. "One of my first clear memories is having to deny the concrete truths of my life, of denying the clear pattern of them" (32). In particular, Dorothy shares with Justine a family that is weirdly self-enclosed, and she is likewise split from herself as a result. But Dorothy produces a different kind of split. Usually a "vision of my embattled father with my mother and me standing behind him" animates her. Like superhero partners she and her father "aimed for higher things; we had relinquished beauty and pleasure and turned our faces towards the harsh reality of the fight against cruelty and falsehood" (123).

At the same time, Dorothy begins to cultivate "beautiful and elaborate fantasies" about many things, including men and women whom she finds "unbearably beautiful" (117). She associates her drive for beauty with her mother's drive toward fictionalizing and femininity. Dorothy and her mother spend her youth drawing fantasy pictures together on construction paper in crayon. They tell each other "airy" stories about their visions, and then eat lavish desserts. At first, Dorothy draws countless Heavens "full of grinning winged children, candy bars, cake, ice cream, and toys" (81); then, on hearing her mother read aloud Peter Pan, Dorothy turns toward an addiction to Never-Never Land.

Its very name made me feel a sadness like a big beautiful blanket I could wrap around myself. I tried to believe that Peter Pan might really come one night and fly me away; I was too old to believe this and I knew it, but I forced the bright polka-dotted canopy of this belief over my unhappy knowledge. (81; emphasis added)

At ten, Dorothy—nicknamed "Dottie," then—is already practiced at disavowing disquieting knowledge she barely senses with an optimistic absorption
in beauty. But the anomalous style of her attachment both to her unthought thought and its compensations resonates unpleasantly throughout her life. She lets slip to an already sexualized friend that Never-Never Land is her favorite fantasy world, and the friend immediately betrays the immature fantasy, making Dorothy the “queer” pariah at school. When strangers speak to her she becomes “struck dumb by trying too hard to discover the correct response” (115). This result is, in part, a relief, however: It confirms something inchoate about Dorothy’s hyper-orientation toward her family, and the family’s toward itself. The alien eyes of her peers force Dorothy to disfigure her family romance and family romance in general. This is played out as her physical withdrawal from the machinery of familial narcissism.

During Dorothy’s early adolescence she gets quiet, fat, and disgusting, without knowing why. When I say “disingusting,” I am not interpreting: Dorothy characterizes herself as “gross and unhealthy.” When she is fifteen, her father abruptly enters her room to tell her that his frustration with the unjust world causes him to act out on her, and in the jumble of love and apology he utters he begins to molest and to rape her. This is no surprise to Dorothy, really, for underneath the fear and shame, underneath the excitement, it seemed that what was happening now between my father and me was only the physical expression of what always happened between us, even when he verbally reviled me. Tears came to my eyes; it seemed that his cruel words had clothed these loving caresses all along. (126)

This relation lasts for many years. At night, he grunts while she fragments in silence. During the day, he denounces her furiously—because she no longer obeys her mother. Dorothy looks down at her plate and eats. Subsequently, whenever she experiences anxiety, it is as though her organs explode through her body, in ways recognizable from the literature on incest but also, here, resonant as the bodily ground of what Justine calls Dorothy’s soft and graceful copululence.

(Most of the time I felt as if my body had been turned inside out, that I was a walking deformity hung with visible blood-purple organs, lungs, heart, bladder, kidneys, spleen, the full ugliness of a human stripped of its skin. (161)

She comments that “these bodily memories are so unevenly submerged and revealed, so distorted . . . that they may as well be completely invented” (44); this is not to say that the post-traumatic subject is doomed to false- or pseudo-
activity can be read as a departure from rather than an assumption of a way of being “who they are.” For the greater part of this essay I will turn toward this set of pleasures which, I am arguing, interfere with negating rhythms of self-continuity. Responding to trauma’s haunting plenitude not with ascetic but with a formalist abundance, the girls’ tactic of counter-absorption marks their will to live otherwise (“Wait up!”).

Pleasure #1: Food (for Thought)

Separately and together the girls “snack” constantly and “savagely” (15, 37, 81, 93, 241). Their mouths and their eyes consume potatoes, “a brown-bagged carton of milk,” “rum-flavored marzipan candies, each wrapped in bright red tinfoil bearing a picture of a mysterious brown-haired lady in découlage, bottled spring water” (12); sweet and sour pork (30); egg roll (36); cheese curls, diet soda, chocolate cake, cookies, sandwiches, coffee, Gruyère broche, Mystic Mint cookies (15); dainty fried snacks (25); “tea . . . lumps of sugar and cream,” “boiled dumplings” (28); “white bags of candy” (44); “cream and eggs” (45); chili, potatoes, beer, dry roasted peanuts (47); chili over spaghetti noodles, chocolate ice cream, ungnawable jawbreakers (48); cinnamon toast and hot chocolate (52); tuna sandwich (55); mucous eggs (56); gum (62); “old tea bags and carrot peels” (66); blazing Popsicles (66); Cream of Wheat (74); “apple cores, old potato chip bags” (75); “ice cream and . . . chicken pot pie . . . Almond Joys, Mallomars, Mellowmints, and licorice ropes” (76); “cookies . . . gum” (78); eggs (80); “crackers and peanut butter . . . candy bars, cake, ice cream . . . cake and ice cream” (81); “orange and pink candy . . . Sloppy Joes . . . hot chocolate” (84); “cookies and tea” (86); cocoa (87); gum (91); ice cream (93); candy necklaces (94); eggs (98); “alcohol mixed with Coca-Cola” (105); “ice cream and vanilla wafer” (107); “Choco Chunk bars and French fries” (114); “meat . . . potatoes . . . iced tea” (118); sugar (119); “salad . . . scalloped potatoes . . . orange corn curls” (120); “potato chips and beer . . . bite-sized Heath Bars” (123); “pork chops and green beans . . . boxed lemon chiffon pie” (124); “carrots . . . potatoes” (128); “lime sherbet” (130); muffins (137); “gristle . . . milkshake” (141); “coffee with three spoons of sugar” (146); “a box of chocolates, some of which had ladies’ faces painted on them” (154); “a chocolate . . . another chocolate” (155); ice cream sandwiches (160); “a box of donuts and bag of potato chips” (161); “a bag of burgers, fries, and orange drink . . . French toast” (168); “two chocolate donuts wrapped in cellophane” (174); “mushroom fried rice with green peas and lured red spare ribs” (175); “lumpy potatoes” (177); “cookies and coffee” (179); “salads . . . water” (185); “coffee . . . pizza . . . diet root beer” (193); “take-out salad” (195, 233); “cheese sandwich, potato chips, and candy . . . milkshake and double fries” (205); “lemon meringue pie” (206); “malted and potato chips, jelly beans and roast beef sandwiches dripping gravy” (211); French toast (214); “can of soup . . . bread” (215); “wonderfully gooey apple pie” (221); “champagne with our omelettes” (225); “hot coffee and a bag of sugars, stirrers, and petroleum milk substitutes” (229); “muffins . . . bag of cookies” (232); “a bag of cashews, a bag of marzipan, and an apple” (234); cookies (238); grilled cheese sandwich (241); misshapen bran muffin (242); “a bag of potato chips and a bag of candy” (244); “a plate of jewel-like sushi and shiny purple seaweed . . . sake” (248); cookies (258); “pistries and puddings” (260); cakes (261); chocolate cake (264); “bags of potato chips and cookies” (272); martinis (281); “little mints and cherry candies” (290); chamomile tea (309).

Forget the fat and calories: To live for one’s snack is to live by the rhythm of one’s own impulse for pleasure, as in creating “a paradise of trips to the grocery and take-out dinners” (76). “In this time of anorexic cuties” being a foodic is a way of both being and not being in the world, giving the girls leverage to engage in exchange and to withdraw from sharing anything with just anyone (95). Eating is their time. It’s their time. When either woman travels, she marks time by eating. When she waits, she eats. When she thinks, she eats. She eats before and after sex. In response to the overwhelming feeling of “sickening boundlessness” or endless absorbing interiority, food shapes a space of time for her, an epistle of alterity to herself that is nonetheless self-confirming (160). It provides and defeats structure. It makes consciousness (pleasure memory) and its opposite (inaarticulateness) too. To that is to say the girls’ relation to eating is a scene, not a symptom: among other things, the practice of eating provides a way to negotiate one’s incoherence while nonetheless refusing to organize a personality to compensate for it.

Dorothy never feels full when she’s on her own. Then, she can eat any spread infinitely. Only when she is absorbed in unoriginal acts—proofreading the law’s text on Wall Street each night or transcribing the debates that take place in Granite’s inner circle—does she something like satiety. To be unoriginal is thereby to gain a reprieve from desire’s self-articulating pressure: Accordingly, the more intense the desire, the emptier the body feels. To empty out one’s emptiness through work is something like negating the negation, at least for a minute, because work is absorbing, like eating. But Dorothy also shows that one cannot help but be original or to desire.

It was in Ohio that I developed what my mother came to call my “unattractive habits.” First, I stopped brushing my teeth, except on rare occasions. All at once, I hated putting the paste-laden brush into my nice warm mouth and scraping the intriguing texture of food from my teeth,
activity can be read as a *departure from* rather than an *assumption of* a way of being “who they are.” For the greater part of this essay I will turn toward this set of pleasures which, I am arguing, interfere with negating rhythms of self-continuity. Responding to trauma’s haunting plenitude not with ascesis but with a formalist abundance, the girls’ tactic of counter-absorption marks their will to live otherwise (“Wait up!”).

Pleasure #1: Food (for Thought)

Separately and together the girls “snack” constantly and “savagely” (15, 37, 81, 93, 241). Their mouths and their eyes consume potatoes, “a brown-bagged carton of milk,” “rum-flavored marzipan candies, each wrapped in bright red tinfoil bearing a picture of a mysterious brown-haired lady in décolletage, bottled spring water” (12); sweet and sour pork (30); egg roll (36); cheese curls, diet soda, chocolate cake, cookies, sandwiches, coffee, Gruyère croche, Mystic Mint cookies (15); dainty fried snacks (25); “tea . . . lumps of sugar and cream,” “boiled dumpling” (28); “white bags of candy” (44); “cream and eggs” (45); chili, potatoes, beer, dry roasted peanuts (47); chili over spaghetti noodles, chocolate ice cream, unmentionable jawbreakers (48); cinnamon toast and hot chocolate (52); tuna sandwich (55); mucusy eggs (56); gum (62); “old tea bags and carrot peels” (66); blazing Popsicles (66); Cream of Wheat (74); “apple cores, old potato chip bags” (75); “ice cream and . . . chicken pot pie . . . Almond Joys, Mallomars, Mellokween, and licorice ropes” (76); “cookies . . . gum” 78; eggs (80); “crackers and peanut butter . . . candy bars, cake, ice cream . . . cake and ice cream” (81); “orange and pink candy . . . Sloppy Joes . . . hot chocolate” (84); “cookies and tea” (86); cocoa (87); gum (91); ice cream (93); candy necklaces (94); eggs (98); “alcohol mixed with Coca-Cola” (105); “ice cream and vanilla wafers” (107); “Choco Chunk bars and French fries” (114); “meat . . . potatoes . . . iced tea” (118); sugar (119); “salad . . . scalloped potatoes . . . orange corn curls” (120); “potato chips and beer . . . bie-sized Heath Bars” (123); “pork chops and green beans . . . boxed lemon chiffon pie” (124); “carrots . . . potatoes” (128); “lime sherbet” (130); “sour plums” (137); “gristle . . . milkshake” (141); “coffee with three spoons of sugar” (146); “almond milk, chocolate . . . another chocolate” (155); ice cream sandwiches (160); “a bag of donuts and bag of potato chips” (161); “a bag of burgers, fries, and orange drink . . . French toast” (168); “two chocolate donuts wrapped in cellophane” (174); “mushroom fried rice with green peas and lurid red spare ribs” (175); “lumpy potatoes” (177); “cookies and coffee” (179); “salads . . . water” (187); “coffee . . . pizza . . . diet root beer” (193); “take-out salad” (195; 233); “cheese sandwich, potato chips, and candy . . . milkshake and double ice cream” (205); “lemon meringue pie” (206); “malted and potato chips, jelly beans and roast beef sandwiches dripping gravy” (211); French toast (214); “can of soup . . . bread” (215); “wonderfully gooey apple pie” (221); “champagne with our omelettes” (225); “hot coffee and a bag of sugars, stirrers, and petroleum milk substitutes” (229); “muffins . . . bag of cookies” (232); “a bag of cashews, a bag of maizeflakes, and an apple” (234); cookies (235); grilled cheese sandwich (241); misshapen bran muffin (242); “a bag of potato chips and a bag of candy” (244); “a plate of jewel-like sushi and shiny purple seaweed . . . sate” (248); cookies (258); “pastry and puddings” (260); cakes (261); chocolate cake (264); “bags of potato chips and cookies” (272); martinis (281); “little mints and chewy candies” (290); chamomile tea (309).

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annihilating the rich stew of flavors, the culinary history of my day, and replacing it with the vacuous mint-flavored aftertaste, the empty cavern of impersonal ivory. . . . In addition, I began giving in to gross and unhealthy cravings: candy bars, ice cream, cookies, sugar in wet spoonfuls from the bowl, Hershey's syrup dunked in gulps from the can, Reddi-Wip shot down my throat, icing in huge fingerfuls from other people's pieces of cake. (64)

Dorothy shifts between the name brand particularity of her attachment and the formless inner world of taste that she also creates. Her body is a kitchen in which the things of exchange become thingness, sensory knowledge, and material for a counter-temporality ("the culinary history of my day") that enables her to "chop up and organize [her] life to lessen the impact of the outside world" (112). The violence of the chopping is accompanied by the pleasures of the result, which she appreciates with all the pride of an author. "It was never enough," she notes (64). Frequently, she reads when she eats. In the factory of Dorothy's abundant counter-sensorium, then, the personal is produced as a formally continuous but constantly mutating scene of gratifying repetition. The subtlety of her incremental attachment to tastes is strictly her property, her inalienable hoard. At the same time, auto-pollution is not just a victory over something: In school and in her family Dorothy is a stray, a "deject," an outsider. It is not enough to say she embraces her negativity, because she doesn't.32 The pain of inasimilability is unbearable while also remediated through the modes of self-care I have been describing. Eating cuts a swath in the anhedonia she experiences in the normal world by liberating her from the time and space of her sociability, where she is only inadequate. Devouring, and its plangent after-affects, engender an endless present. Collaborating with her body makes it a gift that keeps giving, but it only gives to her, meanwhile confirming its social negation with bodily grossness. That two negatives do not make a positive here means that the rhythm of this process sets up an alternative way of relating to the formalism of negation. Dorothy's misery is central to the system, and her social abjection seals her off from the shame of wanting to be normal after all. Yet her will-to-absorption is a drive toward self-annihilation that seeks, at the same time, to be topped by its optimism for pleasure. She associates the annihilated self with the subjected, abjected, and therefore impersonal one, whereas her grandiosity is a creative force that thrives as long her enflishment becomes separated into flavors, tastes, and smells.

Justine lives according to a similar scale of culinary plenitude, but its place in her sexual economy takes on quite a different shape, one involving cultivated objectification, rather than the subjective spreading we see in Dorothy's case.

In one moment the world of Justine, "alone under the covers with her own smell, her fingers at her wet crotch, was now the world of the mall filled with fat, ugly people walking around eating and staring." (93). To have sexuality even in private is to be exposed to her own hypercritical gaze. An object of her own disgust exposed as having had desire, Justine's desire is further degraded because of its banality; after all, in the mall as in masturbation she seeks to stimulate desire while minimizing surprise. Yet when Justine actually eats rather than fantasizes about it, the world seems manageable and pleasant: "When Justine left work she bought a bag of cookies and rode home on the subway eating them with Queenly elation" (22). Justine's pleasure at public eating envelops her in a protective bubble: eating in public is better even than masturbating, because the outside is an anonymous space that enables episodic abandonment of the hurt self. While Dorothy's saturation by the taste of her uniqueness constitutes a kind of homeopathic aggression at her stereotypically enflshed identity, Justine's mode of survival involves generating a pleasure in the repeated gesture rather than in any sensual or visual specificity. When it works, each woman is relieved of herself in the act of taking in what she can bear to have of what she wants. The processual nature of Dorothy's sensual ingestion paradoxically enables her to shape the external body as a blockage while the sensual intellectual zone allows infinitely hoarded internal self-elaboration. In contrast, for Justine eating is a formalist strategy of impersonality, of time- and space-making, whether or not it appears "really" to be creativity oriented toward the self. They share a formalism of the invented gesture, organized for survival: What differs between them are the ways their compulsion to eat negotiates the economy of the personal and the impersonal.

It would be too grand to call any of these moments of food exchange "agency" in any transformative sense. In Two Girls, Fat and Thin any individual's sustained emancipation from the hurt of history is unimaginable. History is what hurts because that which repeats in consciousness, that which gives the pleasure at least of self-continuity, is what the subject deems her history. She is what she continues to have been. Traumatically-identified people in this sense take a technical pleasure in their histories, insofar as their histories are what they have, their personal property. But this is not to say that the history that hurts is destiny, a gothic repetition. Optimistic compulsion in Two Girls, Fat and Thin produces a counter-temporality that provides not narrative continuities but something more like the deep red areas on an infrared image. It involves attempts to experience moments of negative density.33 Inhabiting such dense moments of sensuality stops time, makes time, saturates the lived, imagined, and not-yet-imagined world. The impossible act the girls seek to repeat, for which food and eating serve to substitute, merges will and repetition to pro-
duce something not uncomplicated or amnesiac, but something that as yet has no content, just inclination. What they achieve is not nothing; nor is it readable. Paying attention to what’s absorbing marks a direction for the will to take. At one point Justine thinks, “The hell of it was, the fat woman was obviously very tough in some way” (195); then, “a man in an Armani suit . . . wildly waved a broken bottle and yelled ‘I love you! I love you! I want to eat your shit and drink your piss!’” (196).

Pleasure #2: (History Is What) Smarts

I have suggested that, for the girls, eating is a technique for pulling the world in and pushing it away according to their own terms and sense of pacing. It is neither an act of conscious intentional Agency nor a manifestation of unconscious symptoms in any objective sense, although the narrative center of the novel, which tells the girls’ stories one episode at a time, does use eating to establish the girls’ way of participating in ordinary life. Yet along with making sense of their lives in the usual way, the novel shows another mode of organizing knowledge about persons. Technically it provides a sense that pleasure—a reiteration that makes a form, not necessarily something that feels good—also captures a way of being a something unbound to an identity that circulates, or that can be tracked to personality. Christopher Bollas calls this the “unthought known,” and argues that knowledge forms before it is experienced idiomatically, in terms of the subject’s own patterning. This suggests another way that traumatic repetition might generate knowledge beyond itself despite the manifestation of repetition as a kind of paralysis. The pedagogy of repetition involves a shift of the relation of content (the scene to which one returns) to form (the pacing and placement of one’s attachment).

In Caravaggio’s Secrets, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit describe the intricate relation between desire and form as the enigma of sexuality itself. The enigmatic quality that allures derives from the sense that one’s attachments are at best only symbolized in their objects, and that the objects are so charged by our regard for them that they remain enigmatic to us at the same time as they are never fully known. Bersani and Dutoit focus on the ways that sexual attachment is constituted by the risk of becoming open to the scene of unpredictable change that the misrecognition involved in erotic attachment brings. In their view, jouissance is a counter-traumatic shapelessness that shatters the ego, pleasing the subject’s desire to be overwhelmed while marking a limit to what it can know. Nonetheless, attachment taps into a desire not-to-know as well, an aversion that has many simultaneous functions: preserving the object’s enigmatic quality protects one from becoming bored with, alienated from, or overwhelmed by the object. At the same time the seriality of repetition protects the subject from experiencing the unbearable pull of her own ambivalence toward what she has attached to. In the world of Two Girls, Fat and Thin, this is why it is safer to open oneself up to reiterated forms rather than to persons or fetishes. The reliable rhythm of the girls’ impulse to eat neutralizes the pressure of the pleasure motivated it serves: eating is a way of admitting desire without having to “know” that its sensual enactment stands for anything but itself. It is an attachment to a process, not an object, with diverging implications for each of the girls. In both cases, though, having a masticating habit does not amount to an attempt to become null, numb, or stupid. These girls are sharp cookies. Here as everywhere in this novel, the visceral quality of attachment to a practice inevitably involves a kind of acute awareness as well.

The intellectual referent of the word “smart” derives from its root in physical pain. Smartness is what hurts, or to say that something smart is to say that it hurts—it’s sharp, it stings, and it’s ruthless. It is as though to be smart is to pose a threat of impending acuteness (L. acutus—sharp). In this sense smartness is the opposite of eating, which foregrounds the pleasure of self-absorption, not its sting. In Two Girls, Fat and Thin, the fear of and attachment to that sting has multiple functions. As defense: hypervigilance enables pleasure in judging and explaining, including explaining away one’s own contradictions; and it aims to ward off traumatic surprise. As libidinal drive: its constant activity works as well to find scenes for controlled acting out. For like eating, monitoring appears to control the shape and pacing of exchange. Hyperactively speaking, therefore, the counter-traumatic functions of smartness are almost indistinguishable from its traumatic effects. Mediated to people as a zone of personal perception and will, smartness can just as easily be seen as the site for grandiosity and dissimulation.

Both girls’ hypervigilant minds munch the storied scenery of memory by reoccupying it optimistically with ideas. In itself, a new idea does not reeducate the mind, erasing or sublimating its knowledge. Rather, it organizes the opportunity to identify with pursuit, with the raw energy of desire. As children they read with the voracious need to inhabit parallel worlds that operate, as Justine says, according to better rules. In this sense even the aesthetic is an instrument for providing a better idea than the one that governs actual living: All novels are utopian, by definition. Definitism too appears to be an intellectual source for emancipatory optimism, but likewise, in the end, its content is irrelevant. For the girls, the pursuit of the ideal form is the pursuit of alterity. Risk, transformation, denigration, and beyond: a yet unenumerated possible destiny. Perhaps this is why Justine can only bear to get “ideas at the rate of about one a year” (18): It is still more risky to interfere with the reproduction of the life you know than to follow an instinct toward something.
Intellection thus appears in the novel as content—philosophy and plot—
on the one hand and as a hunger for a kind or form of freedom on the other.
That is, the emancipatory form does not require a particular content but
instead the capacity to be both surprised and confirmed by an attachment
of which one knows little. For both girls the word for this unthought form is
“beauty,” in its spectacularly alien capacity to absorb a person, to take her out
of her old way of being whether or not she finds a place elsewhere. The most
thematic but not least dramatic instance of this double movement is in
Dorothy’s encounter with Anna Granite. Dorothy:

She showed me that human beings can live in strength and honor. And
that sex is actually part of that strength and honor, not oppositional to it.
And she was the first writer to do that, ever. To show that sex is not only
loving but empowering and enlarging. Not only for men but for women.
As you can imagine, this was a big revelation to me. And then the rest was
just... the sheer beauty of her ideas. (27)

In this domain of Definitist thought, thinking and sex are modes of power that
women and men wield with equal force. The couplet “thinking and sex” con-
stitutes a utopianism whose violence and rage is embraced right up front as cen-
tral to attachment and intimacy: Granite elicits a “muted snarl of urgency and
need” from her followers (12).

Dorothy and Justine both see that Granite’s followers are as likely to be nerds
and strays as they are to be authoritarian masters. The rhetoric of greatness
Granite speaks, for example, seems to be experienced by many of her fol-
lowers as a kind of soft Nietzscheanism that rejects the emaculating properties
of normative middle-class order. Dorothy’s embrace of Definitism strikes a simi-
lar, but not identical chord. She attaches to a vision of sexual emancipation
that is far more iconoclastic and risky, embodying a will of intelligence beyond
intention and rationality, a will afraid of nothing, neither death, nor what’s
scarier, living. What she calls the “beauty” of this possibility makes her weep
with anger and gratitude. For Definitism is the first philosophy of living that
accommodates the range of Dorothy’s responses to the world—her softness
(desire for intimacy) and her hardness (rage and intelligence). Only in this
domain are they continuous attitudes and positive values rather than evidence
of monstrous vulnerability that requires hiding. For Dorothy, to develop a self
that can exist powerfully, not in compensation for abject objective powerles-
ness but in affirmation of her power, is to denigrate the aspersions of her fam-
ily, her father, and the taxonomizing cruelty of the normal world. Then again,
Dorothy is not actually transformed by Definitism. The beautiful idea turns
out not to rehash the girl’s capacity to navigate worldliness: When we meet
her she has regressed to her adolescent bubble of sadistic thought and culinary
self-consolation. What, then, is the value of the idealational event?

That’s the beauty of it. On an impulse, Dorothy decides to leave college to
join the Definitist Movement. “I could allow [Granite] to penetrate the tiny
but vibrant internal Never-Never Land I’d lived in when there was no other
place for me,” she thinks, understanding that “the intimacy and understand-
ing that I fantasized was such that it would rip my skin off” (167). To do that,
though, she has to imagine that Granite will make that space beautiful, as she
makes all others. “Beauty is part of what makes life livable” (133), Dorothy says,
especially “strong, contemptuous beauty indifferent to anything but itself and
its own growth” (132). Granite legitimizes Dorothy’s ruthlessness as a form not
of monstrosity but beauty—in the abstract. Alas, when they meet, the girl strug-
gles, feeling “disappointment, a dark wave under my need to worship”(169),
for here was Granite “looking like a middle-aged housewife in a Chanel dress.
No, no, she didn’t look like that. I don’t want that recorded... She had beau-
tiful lids and eyes,” a “beautiful black cape,” a “beautiful tan” (28–29). “Then
the light caught the necklace she wore, the deep blue hunks of precious stone
that encircled her, and in a flash, I saw her halved by the brilliant wattage
of blue, the air about her ululating with an iridescent current of energy... My
fantasy mightily puffed out its sails” (170). As was the case in her fantasy of Peter
Pan, Dorothy here cannot bear to be disappointed (again): her desire for the
beautiful idea to saturate both the abstract and concrete zones of survival com-
packs her to project beauty onto the smallest screen. The novel makes clear that
Definitism requires such a commitment to misrecognizing impossibility as the
beautiful: Evaluating Bernard, another follower, Justine notes that “he arranged
his perception into fantasies of beauty and strength, glory and striving, fantasies
he nursed deep within himself... Through this armor his deformed sensitiv-
ity strained to find the thundering abstractions of beauty and heroism that con-
soled it” (177). This is the compulsion to repeat optimism. Later, encoun-
tering Justine, Dorothy repeats this pattern. Paragraph by paragraph she judges
her friend’s physical, psychological, and intellectual adequacy to the beautiful
idea and its transformative promise.

At the same time that she meets Granite, Dorothy renames herself. “Dotty
Foorie” becomes “Dorothy Never,” a fantasy pseudonym borrowed from Peter
Pan, a renaming that negates her family, marks her historical anonymity and
stokes out her attachment to a transformational harmony of desire and will
through the idea. Granite asks Dorothy to tell the story of her life and then hires
her to be a secretary and a scribe for the conversations held in the circle of
philosophers that Granite convenes. Dorothy’s job is not to comprehend the
beautiful ideas that whirl around her, but to take them down as dictation—as
sound, not as meaning.

The experience was so charged, so heady that I lived those days in
my head, my breath high and quivering on the pinnacle of my deserted
body. . . . After the first hours had passed, my frayed perception forked
into two—one navigating the landscape of words, phrases, and ideas, the
other absorbing the sounds, inflections, and tonal habits of the voices.
This secondary perception transmuted words and phrases into sounds
that took on shapes of gentleness, aggression, hardness, softness, pride
and happiness, shapes that moved through the room, changing and
reacting to one another, swelling and shrinking, nosing against the fur-
niture, filling the apartment with their mobile, invisible, contradicting
vibrancy, then fading away.” (203, 209)

“Fortunately I went emotionally blank,” Dorothy thinks (207), appreciating
her post-traumatic capacity to dissociate in order not to interfere with the sound
track she absorbs comprehensively. This absorption marks another entry
into the archive of beautiful forms she has amassed, and not surprisingly
this time, as the sound fills her body no longer needs its protective cover of fat, and
she loses piles of weight. It is as though the sound substitutes for food, and as
though the rhythmic pleasure of talk sublimates the solitary pleasure of eating.
“All loneliness is a pinnacle,” Granite pronounces (163). It is not loneliness
abandonment but as the impersonality of intellectual intimacy that frees
Dorothy from the compensatory body she had developed as ballast against
annihilation. Fat, the congealed form of history that hurts. As though it were
indeed true that “the body remembers everything” the loss of fat reveals a new
Dorothy. She begins to shop, to cultivate her new striking looks, and to fall in
love with a musculature she hasn’t seen since she was struggling and fifteen.
She also begins to have sexual feeling.

Characteristically, smartness for Justine provides a scene of optimism and
absorption much like Dorothy’s, but for Justine smartness is far less personal-
ized and embodied, less oriented toward savior-heroes in their magnificent
iconicity. Instead, to identify with intellectual absorption is to develop an inter-
nal aesthetic that serves as an index for the feeling she can imagine having in
a better life. That is, smartness is not utopian in the productive sense, but marks
a yet unembodied affective relation toward which she directs herself. Arguing
for “the beauty of loneliness” and “the intrinsic value of beauty in writing,” she
does not make the connection explicit: and yet the isolation of writing consti-
tutes for her a space of grandiosity without violence, a space of possibility (175).

Stark” beauty is her chosen mode of public impersonality: Through writ-
ing she passes as normal by withholding her perversity. No one can see and
therefore touch her plenitude: The hell of abandonment to herself is thereby
safeguarded from further trauma.

Face to face, Dorothy experiences Justine as retiring and dutiful, marked by
“methodical reserve,” and otherwise “insubstantial” and tentatively alive
(27–29, 12). But in her head, Justine is otherwise: gloriously judgmental like
Dorothy, just less dramatic and vocal about it. She believes in her judgments,
hers, her contempt, her aversion, her ambivalence, and on the rare occasions
when she has it, her approval. But it is difficult to inhabit this grandiosity
in public: and in this sense she and Dorothy are grotesque inversions, each pro-
ducing an impersonal body for the deterrence of others through strategies of
hyperbole and litotes, hyper- and hypopresentation. But the impersonality of
the socialized flesh does not suggest that anyone’s true personhood lies
beneath. Their bodies are the condition of possibility for the truth-function:
They provide a space for navigating the risk of knowing. They provide for the
girls the time and space to judge freely, angrily and bemusedly; to seek the
experience of big feeling and the protection from exposure. Impersonalizing
bodies facilitate escape from the very monitoring intelligence that the girls also
cherish.

In this regard, their overvaluation of the idea is akin to the pleasure of criti-
cal negation. The idea enables the girls to hold themselves, to embrace their
own bodies at the pinnacle of their greatest humiliations. Their embodied
cloaks of loneliness protect a cherished sense of bitter superiority and abjec-
tion. But, more cherished than the relation between contemptuous defensive
knowledge and the libidinal stimulation of intellectual comfort are these forms
of distance—of interference with the rhythm of the post-traumatic shuttle—
that they have developed with an instinct toward surviving. The differences
between them matter here, but as content more than form: Dorothy cultivates
the idea as though it were an actual world for her, while Justine experiences in
the alterity of thought a relief from the too intimate alterity of the world she
lives in. For both girls, though, being mental provides almost a rhythmic relief
from being reactive that protects what they know (without knowing it) about
the possibility of a better or less bad relation to enfleshment, epistemology, fan-
tasy, and intimacy.

It is with such strategies in mind, no doubt, that Adam Phillips titles his essay
on intellectual subjectivity, “On Composure.”46 Phillips wants to understand
why some people come to identify with their minds: not the mind as the true
self but as an appendage that does things, that can be trained and cultivated for
the self’s benefit. The image of a judge watching him/herself judge, for exam-
ple, and taking pleasure as though the judging organ were elsewhere. Phillips argues that children with unstable caretaking environments will sometimes turn to the mind as the better mother. It holds you, it maps the world for you, and perhaps most important, it produces a space of composure between you and the world, so that you amount to more than a reactive impulse (“Hey, you!”). The space of time that composure produces enables you to set the scene of your entrance and makes the world come to you when you want it (“My close-up, Mr. DeMille”) to some degree or another.

A number of consequences can be distilled from this structure. Phillips argues that the precociously mind-oriented child (read “intellectual”) enters the world with “diffuse resentment,” a certain self-confirming and sadistic thrill at the scene of optimism and disappointment. Why is this, though? In part, disappointment can be channeled as though it were a judgment rather than a feeling, supporting the mytheme that the solitary and independent life of the brain precedes and is superior to the simple attachments of intimate proximity. On the other hand, no one experiences abandonment as a pleasure that simply feels good. Dorothy: “I clawed backward into the past and found no comfort in anything there unless “comfort” could be had in the excruciating site of brute, ignorant love, cowed and trapped, exposed by the wildly panning camera of my memory” (162). My argument so far has been that this recognition precisely brings the comfort or pleasure of recognition itself: but that this cannot be confused, say, with happiness. The mind enables alternative means of self-production without ever necessarily cultivating them. It is a camera that pans where it must, but also where you will it—not that the will is smarter or more creative than the unconscious (far from it!), but that one identifies oneself with its action. Usually, as Dorothy notes, there is “an awful thematic sameness under the deceptive novelty of the experience” (160). As composure approaches the posture of impersonality, it protects the subject’s sensorial capacity to impoverish threatening objects while animating new ones and, more importantly, animates animation itself, spurring new processes of paying attention. At least this is the counter-traumatic structure of mindfulness in Two Girls, Fat and Thin.

Psychoanalysis always raises anxieties for critics about its tendency to universalize individuality and normalize conventions of, say, individuation and autonomy as ideals of health that should be cultivated and always intelligible. Working between Winnicott and Lacan, Phillips articulates a different view, disidentifying health with the appearance of successful anything. Thinking about the form of the subject as related to his/her capacity to be composed, Phillips rethinks Freudian disease categories, pointing out that the pervert plays with his composure, the hysteric with its absence, and so on. In other words the idea of composure tells us that the symptom lies. When the pervert gives form to perversion, this is his/her performance of composure, a private way of keeping the world at bay until she/he is ready. What looks like an absence of composure might well constitute its presence at the level of form, not representation. The subject who identifies with thought might be able to disavow her/his dependency and disappointment through the appearance of composure, and she he can act as an autonomous author of the salient terms of accountability, judgment, and value with which she he and the world shall be measured. Or, disappointed in the world’s unhomeliness, the subject might experience the contingency of autonomy in a way that either impoverishes or overvalues the boundaries made by intellectual will. Composure then might feel desperate, like the drag of melancholy or the push of mania. Or, perhaps the subject absorbs unhomeliness as a just desert for being unlovable. Composure then might be experienced not as a condition of action but of dark affectlessness or simple neutrality. From this perspective, one cannot predict how and when—with intellect as the guardian of the bruised and disappointed self—one will move toward any number of possible identifications. Composure is the formalist protector of fantasy, the subject’s medium for misrecognizing what it takes to make some sense.

Pleasure #3: Sex

Sex negates composure, except when it doesn’t. We have seen that, throughout the novel, all forms—all patterns that can be misrecognized as objects—are managerial habits that orchestrate the subject’s cadence of optimism and disappointment while minimizing her/his risk of unwanted exposure or discomposure. A complex relation of fantasy to self-understanding ensues: Even though I wish to remain myself, I want to experience discomposure, yet only the discomposure I can imagine, and how can I bear the risk of experiencing anything but it? And so on. What counts as composure might be a conventional style of instability rather than an instability that actually threatens the subject’s core patterning. These questions of the seeming and being of exposure and instability are central to the scene of sex in practice. Both confirming and interfering with intelligibility, sex’s threat is objectively indistinguishable from its capacity to confirm. How do you know whether a change is a change or the confirmation of a (conscious or unconscious) expectation?

A sex event technically interferes with the ordinary self, the self who mostly is not having sex, who spends time mostly not risking the pleasure of a momentarily different body/mind relation that predictably overwhelms. Tellingly, when the girls imbue ordinary acts of eating and thinking with qualities like “queenly elation,” they are valuing the sense of mental uniqueness that they
are able to project into the acts, which remain ordinary even as they open up into the extraordinary. It may look ordinary to eat a cookie or to be fat, but mentally, an infinite domain of optimism opens up directed toward an enigmatic somewhere. In contrast, what the girls value most about sex is its unoriginality. The more mental work involved, the more dangerous it is.

For instance, the orgasm seems to make you shatteringly different than yourself was a minute ago, but in another minute you are likely to be doing something utterly intelligible, like pissing, shmoozing, looking away, or walking into the kitchen and opening the refrigerator door. Is it not possible that the very unoriginality of the sexual experience, its banality, also makes it worth cherishing? This is not a rhetorical question, but one that argues methodologically against the transparency of bodily response. Shattering is not always shattering, just as shame is only one way of coding sexual aversion; sentimentality, say, might be a much bigger threat to someone’s defenses than any sexual event is, pace normative ideology.39

When people consent to inhabiting the potential for change that sexual events require they are mainly consenting to enter a space whose potentially surprising consequences are kept to a minimum. The only requirement is that sexual subjects be able to manage any anxiety emerging from their failure—always possible—to be the something that they need or want to be. Such instability can have its comforts, nonetheless, if the subject can successfully control the degree of unwanted uniqueness engendered in the event. Bound optimistically to the impersonality of sex, s/he does not have to take personally its failure or her failure to do everything it is meant to do, in whatever context. So when Justine makes “what she hoped were attractive moaning noises” as a lover undresses her (149), and Dorothy describes “the mystery of masculine tenderness that enveloped me like the wings of a swan” (222), the girls perform rhetorically the comforting conventionality of sexual mimesis and the freeing impersonality of sexual sociability in general. There are phrases about sex that one can say; there are sounds that one can make; there are things one does and one doesn’t do; there is what one can imagine. When one occupies the domain of those desires one is using fantasy norms to shape what feeling sexual is, in advance. Sex events might be expressive of one’s true feelings or not, and they might be exciting, overwhelming, painful, and/or boring. One can never be sure, though, whether one will be confirmed or threatened by the negativity or positivity that one attaches to the event. The struggle to master the implications of the impersonality of sex is central to the novel, at least, if not to living: For the girls in particular, I have suggested, this is a fundamentally aesthetic question, a question of training the senses for building possible and beautiful worlds out of impossible ones.

Sex is the culminating counter-traumatic pleasure of Two Girls, Fat and Thin, then, because its challenge to the girls’ composure is the greatest, even greater than the adrenaline rush that comes from a good thought or piece of cake. Adrenaline is the addictive booty in this novel: its experience always involves tapping into one’s creativity, even if the scene of stimulation repeats the most unpleasant or disappointing urges of need and desire. An idea, a possibility, takes over the girls. Suddenly as though they are all nerve endings, they turn and return toward mania, compelled to be compelled to repeat. “Justine was morbidly attracted to obsessions” (21); Dorothy attaches to scenarios with “wildest invention . . . growing more and more excited” (17). Romance narrative and violent sex are twins here the ways the girls, fat and thin, are also nominally twins. These genres of the viscera use heightened adrenaline (from longing and fear) to play out a threat to the subject’s attachment to formalism itself. All genres produce drama from their moments of potential failure. (What, the romance might not pan out, or its failure might not affirm the beauty of the elusive ideal? The hero might not survive, or the rule of law that his survival affirms might not be affirmed by his death?) Just as thinking and eating turn out to be ways of managing the risk of sociability formally, sex works dialectically in this novel. It wears its ordinary dress as the site in which the subject’s structuring drama is repeated, and it functions as well as a site of metacommentary about traumatic repetition and what it takes not to negate it, but to break its stride.

I have described the girls’ attachment to reading as a space for detaching from the normative world while cultivating a parallel sensum from it. By the time they become readers, both girls are hot for the dual historical functions of romance: as the site of grandiose alternative worlds and of recognizable intimate intensities. We cannot underestimate the gendered divisions that subject the girls to the thought that love plots, intellectual and sexual, will emancipate them from the deadening space of their own worlds. They read about suffering in Victorian literature, absorbed by its dramas of subordination. Further, like many middle-class American girls during the 1960s, they read Anne Frank’s Diary and other Nazi and survivor tales from World War II, savoring and expanding these images of adolescent girl heroism.

This pedagogy of feminine suffering teaches many things. The girls learn to savor the story of bodily submission. They cultivate all sorts of scenes that repeat this submission and interfere with it too, by living the full range of their sensuality more fully as intellectuals than they do as social persons. As adolescents and adults, they read everything as romance, amalgamating the big passion of utopianism to the big passion of heterosexual lust. Even though one girl looks normal and the other grotesque from the perspective of white, middle class sub-
urban femininity, these forms of survival render the public body more impersonal to them than the mental body is. They end up in New York City, where the relief and pain of that impersonality is a fact of life. Thereby the power of the idea merges into sexuality.

One would think that Anna Granite’s ideology of conscienceless power might not appeal to girls so femininely trained and so post-traumatic. But, and crucially, Anna Granite disseminates her ideology through romance novels. In effect, she turns all readers into adolescent girls. A utopia of the ruthless drives uses the genre of the ruthless drives: how to tell them apart? Which is the tenor and which, the vehicle? Granite’s novels, The Bulwark, The Last Woman Alive, and The Gods Disdained, are repeatedly characterized as trashy and preachy pornography. They are all about “the struggle of a few isolated, superior people to ward off the attacks of the mean-spirited majority as they created all the beautiful important things in the world while having incredible sex with each other” (163). This clearly ironic sentence is not ironic to Dorothy. Reading that the beautiful (fictional) Solitaire D’Anconci experiences trauma that forces “the hot anger of her pain into the icy steel of her intellect” makes Dorothy feel “possible,” like a beautiful person whose social banishment is not fitting but the effect of a vicious and mendacious world (163–64). That Granite’s plots feature women who submit and men who benefit from that submission is not supposed to be interesting: Dorothy scorns Justine for suggesting as much, arguing that the power to submit without fear of loss is the pinnacle of anyone’s individuality—if they can bear the beauty of it. We have seen that Dorothy cannot bear the ugliness of it when Granite turns out to be, after all, a bad practitioner of her theory. When turned down sexually by a younger man, Granite banishes that man publicly from the cadre, wrecking the ideals for which Dorothy needs her idol to stand. Granite’s belief in the ruthlessness of desire turns out to mean mainly her desire and not everyone’s. To Dorothy, this threatens to make Granite’s philosophy merely an individual’s sexual alibi, not a way to real, the world for emancipated sexual personhood.

What would emancipated sexual personhood look like if she did encounter it? A cultivated individual that merges inner ruthlessness with the beautiful form of desire in practice feels liberating to Dorothy in her intellectually organized affects. When she experiences it, however, the rhetorical archive for this fantasy is a romance novel, a vehicle central to the reproduction of feminine ideology in the first place. In Two Girls, Fat and Thin, the one relation involving sex that Dorothy seeks is with Knight Ludlow, “a wealthy New York financier” and colleague of Granite’s. Engaged to someone else, Ludlow looks at Dorothy in a way so thrilling that her life changes overnight. She moves from her shabby apartment to a nice one, from shapeless clothes to shaped ones, and

from exorbitant fat-eating to moderation. As they move toward becoming lovers, the language of her chapters takes up the song of romance: sparks fly and “streams of colored light” sway between them (218). “The ricocheting chatter in my mind became inaudible, the zipping comets of quasi thought slowed to melting putty. Rivulets of liquid gold, swollen with nodules of heat, spanned my limbs. A glistening flower of blood and fire bloomed between my legs, its petals spanned my thighs” (222).

This ratcheted up, rhetorical blast crashes the moment Ludlow moves toward Dorothy’s vagina. She turns to ice and then dissolves in tears. As she does, her traumatic story leaks out, but this enhances their romance. Knight holds her, tells her his hard stories, and they sleep together for days until they make love happily. At this point the language of the soft and warm flowering vagina renews itself. Afterwards they eat a big champagne breakfast, and he leaves to rejoin his fiancée. Dorothy is happy: she has been idealized. That’s the end of sex for her. The memory stays perfect, before it fades.

Justine’s history of painful sex takes on much the same trajectory as Dorothy’s romantic one. “This memory [of sexual violence], with its ugly eroticism, was not in the least arousing; however she recognized something compelling in it, a compulsion akin to that of a starving lab animal which will keep pressing the button that once supplied it with food, even through the button now jolts its poor small body with increasing doses of electric shock” (235–36). The story of the starving lab animal suggests the bare relevance of content to what drives a being toward what negates him: the unlivable experience of infinite need. The “poor small body” wants food, gets shocked, and is compelled to return to the place of pain by the possibility that shock will again turn to food. Or, the rat is compelled to return because returning is what the rat now knows how to do. All the rat might know is reduced to that one habit of living. The smarting rat is not using his smarts: it has no smarts. It is compelled to create a form of living through repetitions that do not gratify him. But they do gratify him too, in the sense that this is a scene he recognizes. Recognizing oneself when one has survived shock provides a foundation for a mode of survival that is more than just a failure to die.

Heterosexual conventionality is, exactly, a painful maze for Justine — given her history, a perverse desire. Like loneliness, S/M performs the unnaturalness of normal intimacy for her by eroticizing form and boundary. It takes up the aspects of grandiose suffering she already associates with love and rescue plots. Her femininity is all tied up with training in the excellence of survival against the odds, the uninevitability of happiness, the pain of bodily pleasure. In this sense sexual trauma only slightly exaggerates ordinary sexuality. Thus on the one hand, it is not surprising that she turns toward a formalist mode of sex that
foregrounder and replays the unfailing merger of violence and pleasure. On the other, and like Dorothy, when Justine meets Bryan, an artist and an ad man who accosts her in a bar, the defensive impersonal version of Justine’s social self develops a softer, more feminine persona than we or she has seen. Bryan immediately gets Justine’s persona as the gamine/terrorizer she has been. She responds to his perspicacity by recounting to him a sexually violent experience with a lover who “penetrated” and “opened” her up in a way that she could neither control nor wanted to control.\(^{39}\) He takes her up on the promise of that story, frightening her with an image of “people being tied up and beaten, women getting racked by dozens of guys” (201); they proceed to a whirl of soft romance and hard sex. Their relation feels normal, reciprocal—confusing. Bryan’s surprising penetration discomposes the intellectual in Justine, shredding the “cleak” of loneliness that has protected her as well as emotionally repeating the surprise of intense childhood sexualization. It gives her pleasure to return to this complex tableau, although her narrator makes it clear that she must still shift positions constantly to get the responses from him she wants. But that Bryan knows how to be human in the context of heterosexual and S/M formalism opens Justine up to new and destabilizing practices.

What’s stunning is that each woman gets exactly what she wants out of consensual sex. She gets to be other than her default self. She gets to be impersonal by virtue of the imitative quality of the sex, its conventionality or formalism. At the same time, she can identify with that impersonality and see it as an opening up of something that may or may not lead to something else. Finally, each girl gets to experience a simple feeling with another person. For Dorothy, this is a scene in which she can socially experience ownership of unimpeded “beautiful” femininity, while for Justine this is a scene in which vulnerability and defense recombine into a personality that can be recognized and desired.

These enacted desires for simplicity, flow, and normalcy, in short, are gratifying to the girls. Formally these brief relationships repeat the girls’ impulse to become other than who they are historically, but they repeat this desire with a change, in that a certain conventional feminine rhetoric and sensorium is let in the door. Is this irony, or is it destiny?

The end of the novel asks as much. Meeting Justine reclaims for Dorothy the desire for belonging that she once associated with Definition. The energy released by these memories now attaches to Justine, not to the memories. This is why Dorothy sees their relation as “mind-boggling” (17): Justine becomes her newest object, her next opportunity to idealize and to become idealized by another human. Sex seems to interfere with idealization; but sex is only one route to love. As the novel closes, Bryan has just whipped Justine. At first, this is at her direction, but then it escalates beyond her consent (310). Meanwhile,

Dorothy is acting violent and crazy in public, sputtering curses and wild accusations aloud on the New York City subway while reading Justine’s article on Anna Granite in Urban Vision. Dorothy feels both accurately depicted and “raped” by the article. She marches up to Justine’s apartment furiously, and enters the room enraged. But seeing the scrawny, naked Justine tied to her bed all bloody, scarred, and fatigued, Dorothy takes up like a super hero, beating Bryan up and ejecting him from the room naked. Justine and Dorothy talk a little, but, exhausted by this show of violence and release, Justine falls asleep in Dorothy’s arms. This is not a lesbian ending, exactly, since exhaustion is not sexuality. On the other hand, this mutual fall into bed is not nothing. It’s something else.

Coda: Melotrauma

This is what we come to: the exhaustion of a repetition. What does it mean to turn an exhausted something into something other than itself—a lesson learned?

It may be that any commentary violates the spirit of the novel’s ending, to the degree that the image of the two women hovers there as what it is. They need no longer to monitor. In contrast to us, they no longer shuttle between the traumatic and the critical. It is our task to catch up to them, to find out what happened: wait up! Were we to take on the tactic that sustained them throughout their struggles we would return to their desire for beauty, for absorption in the emancipating image or sound. We would have no choice but to be gratified that, finally, these two hypervigilant minds have come to rest in their bodies without being dead or crazy. It may be that the beauty of writing of love in the post-traumatic scene requires the risk of acknowledging, even coveting, the possibility of such simplicity.

This beauty is born of simple violence, too. Literally iconoclastic, it has beaten up on the heteroimago that has for so long provided the content for girlish fantasy. Now the girls are literally beyond biography. Not only that, but the door has been closed on boys. A newly sensible scene prevails to attach to that desire for an attachment to repeat. At least it amounts to a less bad world for anomalous women and sexuality, if not for sex. Perhaps it also sets forth a new lexicon for memory, and those lesbians and gay men Justine and Dorothy encounter suddenly become characters to whom they have paid too little attention (72, 116). We can extrapolate from this a practice of intimacy that does not refer to the birth or childhood family, property, or inheritance. Nor does it require the bodily and sensual cultivation of alternative worlds inside individuals who exchange stories about them without changing their actual lives. If,
that is, we want to read Dorothy as beneficent, as something other than a monitoring top who now both rescues and fondles the adult, but diminutive, Justine Shade. Her father eerily haunts that structure. So does another subject: the young Dorothy. Earlier in the novel Dorothy reads The Little Match Girl the way she will later read of other suffering protagonists. She imagines rescuing the poor little girl, feeding her Cream of Wheat, and then sleeping with her, “her bony back pressed against my front, my arm wrapped around her waist” (74). At the end of the novel Justine faces Dorothy and falls asleep in her arms (312). Now Dorothy experiences “white flowers” blooming in her heart, and the erotic luminaries of Definitist romance who have “for so long” absorbed her libidinal energy suddenly dissolve. We know nothing about how Justine is feeling—the poor girl sleeps, impersonal as ever, but more relaxed. In other words, the novel can be read as Dorothy’s voice-over, a sound loop, and the story of a mind-boggling tenerness that she looingly projects. As with so many voice-over narratives in which things happen outside of the writer’s experience, the decision as to whether this is true testimony or a troubled scene is a matter of trust or transference (desire). In this case, the ordinary narrative questions are compounded by Dorothy’s particular habit of idealization for emancipation from herself.

No matter, the novel’s closing scene enables something to be constructed in the present, from where the people are. We can even read this scene as the foundation for an actually feminist queer theory, if we can imagine Justine waking up rested and content. This would involve following sexuality along all of the perversions it will travel—the traumatic, the conventionally romantic, the experimental, the meaningless, the hysterical—paying less moral attention to visceral content and paying more respect to the simple imperative to fight for women where the urgencies are. Because it can seem so trivial, private, self-referential, and minor in the “big picture” of things, feminists have paid a big cost for attending to sex, the elaborate economies built around it, and their impact on women. Some have left feminism behind as white, heterosexual, bourgeois tic. Two Girls, Fat and Thin provides a good case for both arguments.

The problem is most acutely staged in the terms of that other emancipating promise suggested in the sleepy ending: that of a post-psychological world, a world where people are defined in their actions and where the monitoring subject is not deemed closer to the truth about living. Two Girls, Fat and Thin associates psychological interiority with the traumatic incapacity to disavow: Trauma confounds the subject’s censor, substituting its own wild aesthetic of distortion and repetition, and at the same time provides a counter-traumatic grandiosity for the now impossible subject. This novel provides for us an easy way to recognize trauma: it happens through sex. But the girls know it is more than this. Their families are traumatized and traumatic. I do not mean that all families are traumatic and traumatized, but these particular families in their historical milieu were incited to attach to a good life that was not very good for anyone in it. The structuring “unthought known” of their lives is that the sexuality of the family, its amalgamated intimate and financial economy, is already a terrible context for the cultivation of anything. Sexual trauma shapes knowledge the girls already have, rather than being the event that merely structures subsequent consciousness.

I have told a psychological story here about the two girls’ will to attach, suggesting the convolutions of repetition in the traumas of femininity. I tell it this way because this is how the novel explains the mental involution and bodily expression of the two girls, and I wanted to spin out for you a concept of impersonality that both marks any ordinary subject and presents strategies for interfering with particular toxic intimacies. But, as Carolyn Steedman reminds us, typically only some people—the middle classes—get to have (complex) psychology, while others—one the economic bottom—are deemed as mere (simple) effects of social and material crises of survival.

Justine and Dorothy are saturated by the mass cultural signs of the United States from the late ’60s through the ’80s. Like virtually every recent film about the ’60s Two Girls, Fat and Thin locates the girls historically by depicting them listening to pop music, buying pop style, eating pop food, and watching pop TV. On television they witness the civil rights actions of 1963, Martin Luther King, and metropolitan rioting. Their parents pronounce lots of historically predictable softly liberal opinions from their perch at a safe distance. In short, the two girls are not exemplary traumatic subjects, or children, or women, or any kind of exemplary Subject of History, whether of nations, capitalism, or sexuality. They are two middle class white American girls, enclosed in nuclear families that live in communities so white that “the Jew” and “the Spic” are easy to spot from a distance. Economically more than comfortable, the girls nonetheless have virtually no resources but themselves and books with which to escape the given world. It is entirely predictable that they would end up addressing the problem of living by diving inside their bodies and feelings. Partly, this is training, as during adolescence, their parents send them to uncomprehending therapists. But even if this were not the case, the girls’ isolation and involution are to be expected of children of the professional classes. Their interiority is the product, the cost, and the benefit of seeing themselves, in the terms of bourgeois universalism, as autonomous individuals who demand some attention and independence, parental affirmation and private space. What if the girls had inhabited worlds in which the burden to make happiness was not indexed according to power at work and harmony at home and
by the achievement of a family so complete it needs nothing else but itself. They would not be who they are. In this sense too, what is personal about them is also impersonal. Not strategically, but analytically and historically speaking.

In short, even if we could agree on the meaning of the girls’ final binding moment, their particular story can be only a part-object, involving the exhaustion or discomposure of heterocultural trauma stories as the destiny for certain sectors of the professional and metropolitan elite. When I say this I may sound accusatory: aha! But I mean not to sound that way, just to name the particular location out of which their drama comes. I also realize that there is nothing “beautiful” in this explanation of the repetitive modalities of optimism and disappointment, will and transformation that I have been tracking. Such a poetic seems so connected to the cultivation of selves, will, and desire that it feels like clunkification to say anything but “as sexualization is the problem so too will its better cultivation make the solution.” But this has not been my argument.

Further, we are trained to read the end of a novel as though it provides a solution to a problem or a diagnosis of a case study subject. All the details meld into a shape, and finally a moment comes when it all makes sense. But Justine and Dorothy are not finding sexual truth when they finally get some rest from working the relations of trauma and absorption, history and fantasy, will and misrecognition, flesh and abstraction, form and content. The concept of the two-as-one as a solution to individual isolation is conventionally recognized as a requirement for happiness, but as such it nonetheless produces the kinds of hermeticism that marked the girls out in the first place as likely to misrecognize their story as personal trauma. Dorothy’s movement toward Definitism demonstrates this paradoxically, as it requires a new style of risky collective identification and deprivatization in order to promote the legitimacy of all individual will. The “Two Girls” twinning in the novel’s title therefore suggests to me a different thought.

The novel’s epigraph from Nabokov reads, “All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and chimeras, something real ahead.” The closing image of Dorothy and Justine’s attachment might testify to something real. We can also read the conclusion as the new present from which we cannot predict, but only intuit, futures. History is what has hurt and it continues to make shadowlines, and we are always in the haze of the present, sensing new repetitions-to-be, some of which can be willed, others of which remain enigmatic. We are still unlearning the transparency of repetitive representation, and still therefore improvising how else we might know to pay attention.

We are also given a little help toward this reading. When Dorothy provides that image of their final bodily intimacy, she produces it as a soundtrack. “Her body against me was like a phrase of music” (313). The soundtrack is not accompanied by dialogue: It is as though we have returned to the melodramatic stage where the smallest bodily gesture communicates so much about the eloquence of the language we have. A musical phrase is powerful because it repeats: As we become attached to it, it helps us find a place before the plot tells what it means and where that place is. Melodrama is trauma’s perfect vehicle in that regard, the unspeakable meeting the unsaid, all the while music bypassing the order of composure to make contact with the audience’s affective intelligence. Melodrama is associated historically with the breakdown of political regimes (of class, of government, of family). These dissolutions release energies for social organization into the public that had been siphoned off into institutions. The transparency of melodramatic emotion responds directly to the enigma of a present no longer capable of being understood in terms of inheritance and its institutions—law, property, religion, family—whose oppressive histories have hurt but have also organized life consequentially. We can make a claim that the emphasis of melodrama shifts slightly in contemporary melotrauma. The former consoles its audience with an aesthetic of transparent embodiment and affect that produces continuity with the very past that is dissolving, while the latter humbles the viewer with the enigmatic quality of institutions, affects, and bodies in the present. Melotrauma is a fundamentally temporal form, focusing on the urgency to wrest the present both from the forms we know—the burden of inheritance, of personality, of normativity—and from the ones we can only imagine in the futures to which the claims of the present are always oppressively deferred.

So, the urgency to not take the present for granted as a rest stop between the enduring past and the momentous future provides another reason to conclude this essay with neither ringing optimism nor disappointment. To interfere with the work of trauma means to refuse its temporality. Singly, the girls counter-temporize constantly through fantasy and habit in the ways I have described. Together, they break the time-stunting frame of girlhood by finally relaxing in each other’s presence. No longer living within the mania of intellectual and erotic attachment, they drink a soothing cup of tea and unclench into consoling positions, much like the one I am in now toward you. To lean into the body of an intimate is a most personal thing. But what’s personal about it is like the deep anonymity of sleepers finally disburdened of the weight of bearing themselves.

Our Professor Sedgwick, whose beautiful and acute thought teaches me how to read the meaningful stammering of repetition, has elsewhere instructed us not to think that feelings are constructed, and I have no doubt that she is
right that the body responds to stimulus as it will. My angle on the question is slightly different. To me the evidence suggests a distinction between the moment of affect and what we call that affect. I may feel overwhelmed, I may feel composure: my panic might look like a stony silence, and my composure like a maniac will to control. In one decade, what looks like a shamed response may look like an angry one in another. Subalterms seem always to have tone of voice problems. All babies smile, but it might be gas. One decides these things according to one’s education in tracking repetition, form and norm. In contrast, an aesthetic that values the beauty of fantasy because it produces pleasures we can feel and not feel too overwhelmed by can believe too much in the thingness or idea of the representation, and can believe paradoxically that the viscera are hardwired as to motive and aim. This is a paradox because the motive and aim of the aesthetic education is to train the viscera. The aspect I love most about a poetics of misrecognition is that it teaches us that our viscera are teachable, if anything is. This view is also central to why I find impersonality such an optimistic concept for interfering with the march of individualities toward liberal freedoms.

I have tried to suggest, then, something quite different here. First, no model of subordination can rely on the view that emotions are transparent if the critic wants to interfere with the reproduction of normative claims about that which should organize optimism and disappointment. On this basis I have argued that pleasure does not always feel good, and that understanding the binding of subjects both to their negation and incoherence is key to rewriting the ways we think about what binds people to harmful conventions of personhood. Second, emotions have content and form (the repetitions — of word, lyric, music, or sound). They are not species of pre-ideological clarity, but quite the opposite: they are taught (“Hey, you!”) and barely known (“Wait up!”). Two Girls, Fat and Thin articulates this haze of clarity and incoherence around emotions, as do the three zones of absorption the girls invent to interfere with the subordinations that feel inevitable. Third, the novel’s conclusion tells us nothing conclusive about how not to be a case study subject, since all it represents is a fantasy that someday the self-consuming negotiation of ambivalence will stop and we can rest. I think of the relation of composition and composure. I am hoping it has something to do with a political claim on the present, but that might be just me. The novel presents eating as creativity and self-annihilation; language as meaning and sound; the intellect as weapon and cushion. These clusters of image and pulsions of attachment might mean anything or be meaningless. The test is a broadly historical one, which wonderfully unsettles what’s personal and impersonal about being and having a history.

Notes

2. By “phrase” I refer both to The 18th Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte [in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 594–617] and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), where the concept of the phrase resonates musically—a form generated through repetition that comes to seem like the origin and limit of meaning, rather than a scene of it. The differend is what goes beyond the phrase; it is what, in Marx, the bourgeois cannot afford to avow and which, therefore, is everywhere enacted in the tawdry pleasure and violence of ordinary discipline and taboo.
4. On this question, see generally the work of Leo Bersani, Teresa DeLauretis, Laplanche and Pontalis, Jacqueline Rose, and Slavoj Zizek.
8. Christopher Bollas puts forth the phrase “unthought known” for those knowledges one has inarticulately or unarticulated, and which one expresses in practices of being rather than in language. See The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
9. I learned to recognize the overvaluation of this mode of self-reflective, self-elaborating personhood as a major effect of the liberal project, dating from John Stuart Mill, from Elaine Hadley. See also David Lloyd and Paul Taylor, Culture and the State (New York: Routledge, 1998).
11. In the end, of course, it's a dialectic between the Althusserian "Hey, you!" and "Wait up!" but these locations are not antitheses either, because they each mark the subject's lag (Nachtraglichkeit) with respect to the meanings and desires that organize her.


17. Thanks to Howard Helsing for the Pale Fire reminder. The literary history whose repetition pulsates in this novel requires a story of its own.

18. On "normal intimacy," see Berlant, Lauren, "Introduction," in Intimacy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). On case study normative intimacy see, in the same volume, Candace Vogler, "Sex and Talk." Vogler's procedures for tracking the contradictions between the ideology of more intimacy and the seemingly actual need for less of it is central to this essay's conceptualization of impersonality.

19. Freud's essay on "Femininity" argues that female masochism emerges from the lack of sanction for women's justified anger in and at the world. Much contemporary feminist theory follows through this line, although not Gilles Deleuze's "Coldness and Cruelty" [Masochism (New York: Zone Books, 1989)], which mainly forgets to remember women.

20. I refer to Freud's description of the child's desire to master the relation of control to loss of control in the fort/da game. The child's "loss" and "recovery" of the top is read generally as the bargaining any subject does to retain a notion that her/his intelligibility or continuity in the world is a function of her/his will. However, the capacity of the ego to respond to contingency via a principle of form should not imply that the subject "really" is contingent and only masterful in a compensatory way. Each position, repeated countless times, is its own pleasure.

21. In Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari comment that cultural minorization - a relation of displacement within a hegemonic frame, a non-position of internal exteriority to ideal collective norms - is reenacted in the displacement of speech and writing by eating. Eating performs a displacement that is already a social fact: it stuffs the mouth that cannot be heard anyway, except as a distortion.

22. In Kristeva's version of abjection the abjected subject becomes a thing - a stray, a reject. One cannot, in my reading of this text, embrace one's abjection, because that would imply a capacity to disavow one's expulsion from normal personhood. That's the difference between a notion of subordination as subjectifying (I am an "x" kind of person) and desubjectifying (I am not a person, I have no form, I am a negative). I have suggested throughout this essay that these positions are inassimilable but proximate, articulated in the relation between a psychologically-oriented subjectivity and an impersonal one, at least in Two Girls, Fat and Thin, and perhaps beyond. See Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).


27. Ibid., 44.


29. Here I allude to a longer argument I make elsewhere against the presumption of shame as the primary sexual affect (recognizable by queers). While I agree with Sedgwick that subjects' responses may well be hard-wired as such, I maintain the importance of reading the gap between an affect and its coding. That gap is an historical and political one, one which is part of what's at stake in sexual politics. See Frank, Adam, and Eve
to take the opportunity of this essay to say something about the experi-
ience of having one's thought remade on the occasion of reading Eve Kosofsky
Sedgwick. I think that the first time I read her, I certainly had a dawning real-
ization about how heterosexual triangles are framed and what sorts of homo-
sexual readings occlude and contain. That was no minor realization. But then of
course, it was the first time I heard her (first in 1986) and read her again, and each time I was being
made to think differently than I usually do. Our sensibilities are in some ways
mutually different. She is a passionate literary scholar and innovative theo-
dratic writer, who suggests that my own formation is as a more conceptually linear philosopher, for
the better. But I have needed the encounter with literature again and
again, in order to nudge me out from the tight grip of my conceptual threads.

In the possibility for a kind of thinking that moves against the strictures of
radical, deconstructivist philosophy has been part of the challenge of Sedgwick's work for me.

Of course, this is made all the more interesting by virtue of the fact that
her work is profoundly conceptual, although the concepts are very often staged in a
way that produces dissonance and insight. They are
not always, inextricable from figures, from tone, from a form of polit-
icism. Reading her has made me more capacious rather than less, and
I am grateful. Let me recount my instances for you. I hope you will see
in them a reason to think otherwise by virtue of reading
her work. In Sedgwick, and in every instance it has demanded that I think
that I did not know thought could do—and still remain thought.