

# Disavowal

## The Metaphysics of Escape

Jake Nabasny

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For Sloane,  
may you always  
be yourself as another

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## Preface

*Je est un autre*. I is an other. At the age of sixteen, a French boy from a farm near Charlesville wrote these words. Inscribing them twice into two separate letters to close friends, he tried to articulate something he knew quite intimately in his being, but faltered in expression. His insight found its best but still inadequate formation in a grammatical error: *je est* (I is) instead of *je suis* (I am). This failure of conjugation, which would have been a mistake under anyone else's pen, introduced a new conception of the subject, one based on a conjunctive synthesis or, in other words, the endless repetition of *je est* that, at the same time, says *je et...* (I and...). In just a few short years, this rural French boy would revolutionize poetry and thought itself with his fantastical formulations. His name was Arthur Rimbaud.

Rimbaud's statement was undoubtedly phenomenological. Mocking René Descartes and other philosophers who posited an essence or substance at the center of subjective experience (e.g. the Cartesian *res cogitans*), he countered that the nature of subjectivity was not an inch deeper than its object. The subject's essence, instead from *standing against* its object, milieu, or mood, is entirely formed by its relations to these supposedly "external" elements. "No matter for the wood that finds itself a violin," Rimbaud rebukes generations of *philosophes*.<sup>1</sup> This flippant retort should not be taken lightly, as I will explain.

"I is an other" was not intended to be a political slogan, although its author was no stranger to the



revolutionary upheaval of his time.<sup>2</sup> It does, however, have deeply social and political connotations. If “I” am neither myself (self-identity) nor the Other (Levinasian responsibility), then this “I” must have a radically different relationship to objects and other persons, one not previously conceived of in the realm of philosophy, politics, or poetry. The following collection of essays investigate and elaborate on the political resonances of Rimbaud’s statement. Rimbaud is taken up directly at times, but his thought is implicit throughout. This thought hints that the binary oppositions of self-other and subject-object are incomplete at best or violent at worst. This collection attempts to rethink the nature of subjectivity and political action along such lines.

The key concept adopted for thinking through this problematic is *disavowal*. As explained in the following essays, dis-avowal contains a hidden etymology that makes of it not just the dichotomous opposite of *avowal*, but also another kind of avowal, one that is “different than” or “alongside” the original avowal. These meanings are dormant in the *dis-* prefix. As such, the lexicon of disavowal provides a way of thinking through the problematic illuminated by Rimbaud and connecting the disparate interventions throughout history by other authors who speak of refusal, negation, denial, and so on.

In addition to its polemical task, this book traces a history of disavowalist thought throughout philosophy, literature, and culture. By no means comprehensive, these brief glimpses of a long and subterranean tradition provide the reader with a firm understanding of the uniqueness and meaning of radical disavowal. I invite the reader, if they are so inclined, to continue this project by writing their own

histories or manifestos of disavowal. One day, when all hierarchies have collapsed and the oceans have turned to lemonade, you may find a heavy volume of the complete history of disavowal, of which this book will be its first chapter. Until then, consider these chapters its signposts.

This book is organized thematically, beginning with a manifesto that presents the core strategy of disavowal. The manifesto is followed by a set of philosophical essays that locate disavowal in or against the history of Western thought. Next, disavowal is investigated as a cultural phenomenon through a series of texts on music and film. The book officially concludes with a rewriting of Rimbaud's famous "Seer Letters" for the year 2020. The appendix includes short pieces written before the Disavowalist Manifesto that anticipate and extend its orientation. They primarily consist of challenges to the binary logics of existentialism and psychoanalysis. Although not fully fleshed out, they form a valuable prelude to the realization of radical disavowal.



## The Disavowalist Manifesto

We will never know how many discourses we inhabit at once. Words like “socio-political” must be uttered in an ironic sense because any notion of strict division between discursive spaces is a fiction. One must remember that a “hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs.” Any and all distinctions are contingent, acting like hinges, where one component is not clearly distinguished from the other, but also necessary for the operation of the apparatus. It is not each discourse that produces meaning, as is commonly believed, but is actually that which produces a general meaninglessness. Above all else, the Disavowalist wants meaning. The only path to meaning is away from every black hole of signification. It is the disinterested wandering away from discourse that will be the coalescence of meaning: a complete refusal to avow; a disavowal.

This strategy is sometimes represented in the political realm as *anarchism*. Is not an-archy a complete disavowal of the State, hierarchy, gods, and masters? Anarchists would certainly believe so. Yet it is this strategic disavowal that leads to the ultimate avowal of anarchism. So, it is a similar case with any discourse that introduces itself as a prefix. One finds affirmations and affinities everywhere in anarchism, dormant like razor blades in apples. However, it is not the positive, anarchist projects that adopt a stance of avowal in the sense that we are concerned with. A collective never hurt nor helped anyone. Implicit in the naked disavowal of *arche* is an impulse that

can surface as crude naturalism or frigid utilitarianism or any disease you could imagine on your lunch break. The Disavowalist wants to disavow everything including her own position. The evening news is trite and every book has been read: the Disavowalist is fiending for new intensities.

The first step to making your own disavowal: determine the field! We are not here to vomit three critiques about the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. Disavowal is a step away from what is to what is not. Some would call this metaphysics, but those people are not Disavowalists. We do not want to give you philosophy, political theory, self-help, or pornography. You already know where to find them; you already are them. We can only offer a constellation of images. These images will appear to form a coherent structure in an immanent matrix, but, like all constellations, each image is light-years away from the others. The question of structuration, that very event where the constellation becomes what it is, will be left open until the end, where one will rightly find the beginning.

Some philosophers have argued that our relation to the world is innately sexual. Either our bodies are always complicit in a sexualized energy of mechanico-biological connections, or sexuality underlies every thought and action as the genital property of power itself. What is overlooked far too often is that this sexuality always already entails production. The sexualized subject can only exist when it apprehends a sexualizing object. Therefore, sexuality is grafted on to the subject and this procedure has been naturalized throughout history. *Yet at every moment, the subject is primarily asexual before encountering the means of sexual production.* The desire to spread sexuality as much as the productive localities of sex itself is a

discourse of avowal. One must be weary of the counter-attack that posits anti-sexuality or abstinence as solutions; this is not what we are interested in. The Disavowalist becomes becoming by closing his account at the economy of becoming-sexual.

How does one become a Disavowalist linguistically? It should already be clear that the No is a trap. The No is an avowal of the negative; it is inextricable from that which is Yes. We have no pledge or principle. A strong distaste resonates equally from culture and counter-culture. The Disavowalist distrusts language because it affirms being over becoming. Yet, as Cratylus had done, one cannot simply give up language. Even this marks a return to negation. The Disavowalist is a black body radiator in the vacuum of language.

The Disavowalist sometimes adopts a name, but only to disavow it in the end, to give it up, to die. Hamlet became Disavowalist in his indecision to kill Claudius. This allowed him to ponder his fate, despise country and capital, and scorn vanity. The decision brought complications. All at once, Hamlet enters bio-chemical, political, social, historical, literary, and militant discourses. He is forced into the conclusion of all avowals: the death of the subject. And so, Hamlet's dying words solidify his predicament: he voices his opinion on a political election. Hamlet was a great Disavowalist, but Bukowski was greater. In Bukowski, one finds a critique of everything that is both clear and concise. Value-constellations of politics, sexuality, culture, art, etc. are dissolved to their most fundamental contradictions. Beneath it the reader finds a sincerity that is intentionally absent from all other writers. However, in the catacombs of Bukowski's style, one is

bound to realize his hedonism. It is an avowal of the beautiful that takes the form of Mahler, Lawrence, and the woman in 4E. Certainly, we must forgive Bukowski whatever joys he could find under the dirty covers of a rented motel room, but it was his disavowals that made him great, that inched him closer to the divine emptiness and the yawning spirit. We forgive Bukowski to read him again; we read Bukowski to not end up like him. However, Bukowski's failures are not that far from another great Disavowalist. It is *Bartleby's* mantra that could lead any Disavowalist to purified reflection, if such a thing existed: *I would prefer not to*. Is this not the goal we have been aiming at: to prefer not to do anything? Linguistically, *Bartleby* discovers a world of disavowal, but it is his practice that is lacking. In his radical disavowal, *Bartleby* forgets what he is still avowing: a particular spatial position. *Bartleby* engenders a critique of work and law that would not resurface until more than two hundred years later. He is also a reminder of what radical disavowal encompasses and where the Disavowalist needs to take caution. We do not want to be catatonic! Disavowal is an active becoming; any stasis is a negation of its principle.

Disavowal leads indirectly to a peripheral subjectivity. The subject is a foundational position, which is prior to objectifying apparatuses and discourses. To be clear, if such a thing is possible, we do not desire to reaffirm the classical role of the subject. Individual and pure values are inextricable from the discourses they inhabit. We seek a world beyond value. It is here, at this point of no return and constant return, that the subject becomes identifiable, but only as clearly as a corpse. The subject is not a goal or end; it is what remains after radical

disavowal. The subject's position in the world is always contingent. It involves a coming out (of the closet, of consciousness, etc.) to the Other and the world. One finds multiplicity only in a return to singularity. Radical subjectivity necessarily composes radical alterity. The radical subject is not absolutely present or coherent, but is merely a subject in-and-for-itself. Our goal is to disavow the Other in our-self in order to discover the Other as itself: "We can only remember that seduction lies in not reconciling with the Other and in salvaging the strangeness of the Other." A disavowal need not lead to any particular configuration, but it is always already a becoming-subject in the face of alterity. The subject is only inherently valuable insofar as it is in relation to the Other. Yet the Other is already everywhere; it is discursively produced in a perverse space overflowing with contradictory values. The Other, in its relation to the subject, which is always already murdered by discourse, is a pure Other for-itself. The Other emerges on a plane of disavowal along with the subject. Disavowal is necessarily a movement: it meanders toward the Other and meaning. One must not remove oneself entirely as Bartleby does. What constitutes this movement is a new topic for each person. Disavowal is a violent conquest directed at parts of the map that do not exist. With every new horizon, one must be cautious of avowals that blossom everywhere like landmines.

Slogans for Walls and Wars:

Don't Try

I Would Prefer Not To



RADICAL INDECISION

To Be Or Not

Lego La Nada A Nadie

I DECLARE NOTHING

# **Philosophical Essays**



# The Metaphysics of Escape

## Descartes on the Impossibility of Suicide

Introduction: “How am I not myself?”

In the film *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), Brad Stand is a corporate executive on the rise who hires a pair of existential detectives to investigate his life. He is popular and well-liked by his coworkers because of a comical story he habitually tells about meeting Shania Twain. In one scene, a detective asks him, “Would you be being yourself if you didn’t tell stories?” He intuitively responds: “How am I not myself?” The scene then ends with the two detectives repeating this question to themselves as Stand becomes confused and wanders away. The question, which at first seemed so clear and distinct, becomes a haunting aporia. How am I not myself?

The popular belief in the contrary claim, that I am myself, must be examined further. There is little doubt that this predisposition gained ground over the course of time. The inception of our collective imaginary (that event we call “modernity”) corresponds to the moment of auto-deictic identification grounded in a theologically guarded self-certainty. In other words, I know that I am myself before all else, and even God could not make this untrue. This foundational self-certainty was heralded by the father of modernity himself, René Descartes, who based his philosophy on the tautology, “I am what I am.”<sup>3</sup> For the Cartesian subject, everything that did not immediately follow from one’s self-certainty had to be put into doubt. Anything unlike or unknowable to the subject, insofar as the subject only knows itself, must be excluded. Based on this theory of subjectivity, is it ever possible to get outside the subject?

Regardless of whether this outside is characterized as the world, things-in-themselves, or other minds. The possibility of this outside will be the topic of this paper.

In order to get “outside,” to see the world as it is untethered from the current configuration of subjectivity, one must break through the threshold that has isolated the subject. This break implies a destructive act that would annihilate the very boundary separating interior subject from exterior world. Such an event would mean the death of the subject. Even more, if perpetrated by the subject itself, it would denote the subject’s sui-cide, in the etymological sense of “murder of one’s self.” However, who or what would be left to experience the “outside” if the subject was to commit suicide? The beginning of an answer can be found in Descartes’ philosophy.

In this paper, I examine the groundwork of Descartes’ philosophy and its culmination in the *cogito* argument. Next, I argue, against Jean-Luc Marion’s interpretation, that the *cogito* grounds an interiorized subjectivity. This interiorization is intensified by Descartes’ fundamental condition for knowledge developed in the *Meditations*. Once the Cartesian subject is fully articulated in its isolation, I consider a way out by elaborating the philosophical consequences of Descartes’ comments on suicide from his letters with Princess Elisabeth. Ultimately, Descartes leaves open the possibility of a non-fatal suicide, which would be the act *par excellence* of getting outside the subject.

## Doubt and the *Cogito*

In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes attempts to understand the nature of the self, articulated by the general but always personal “I” (*moi*). Through a program of radical doubt, he demonstrates the supposed discovery of indubitable truths about himself and the world. This is only possible, he argues, if everything that cannot be proven without a doubt is rejected as false. If a given proposition is not an absolute certainty, it cannot meet Descartes’ criterion for knowledge. According to these first principles, Descartes sets out on a meditation that establishes the nature of subjectivity.

After introducing his necessary condition for knowledge, Descartes demolishes all of his old opinions by putting them in doubt. Although the mind is cluttered with false could opinions that have been accepted since childhood, the mind “uses its own freedom” to return to a zero-degree of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Although this return appears to be completely autonomous, as if it were the essential capacity of any mind, it presupposes that one is already well on one’s way along the path to truth. It is not a singular moment of demolition that returns Descartes to this zero-degree, but a long maturation and habituation to the capacity for doubt. Such a doubt would not be immediately accessible to the untrained, for example children. This point is announced at the very origin of the Cartesian method, before it would be replicated in the *Meditations*.

What will come to be known to Descartes as the “method” was first established in the unpublished manuscript called *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*

(circa 1628). Rule Two of this work establishes that knowledge must stem directly from indubitable cognitions. Anything doubtable, as Descartes echoes in the *Meditations*, is not knowledge. Yet this demand of scientific inquiry is not meant to negate the centuries of theoretical discoveries that preceded it. In fact, learning about these discoveries, in the forms of science and philosophy, could help habituate one to the project of radical doubt. This argument is made by Descartes in the context of education, specifically of children. He writes that children's minds "left entirely to their own devices [...] might [lead them] towards a precipice."<sup>5</sup> The danger of such a precipice arises from children themselves. They lead themselves to it, according to Descartes, as result of being left "entirely to their own devices." In this way, the fall would be their fault. The educator could be blamed for not warning the child beforehand, but it is ultimately the child who risks throwing themselves over the precipice. Thus, what is clearly at stake here is an irremediable fall from wisdom, a kind of intellectual suicide.

However, these children can be saved. They can be led to a "course that is more secure" by proper Scholastic education and obedience to pedagogical authority.<sup>6</sup> This *disciplinary* training, although it will be demolished one fine day in the interests of the method, is the pre-requisite for that very method. The rules by which one directs one's thoughts, i.e. the method, can only be uncovered once one is "old enough to be no longer subject to the rod."<sup>7</sup> In the *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes will announce again that the method could not begin until he was old enough to escape the control of his school masters.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, he will remind us in the *Meditations* that his

project of doubt was not possible until he had become a fully matured adult: “I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries.”<sup>9</sup> This requisite maturation is foremost a technique of security. Secure from what, though? From dubitable and “childish” cognitions that threaten the foundations of the method. As I will show, the search for security is paramount in Descartes, and must always, I will argue, be thought of as security from self-destruction, or suicide. With this let us return to Descartes’ project in the *Meditations*.

The goal of Descartes’ skeptical inquiry is to produce knowledge that is solid, transparent, evident, and certain. The senses are immediately deemed unreliable since they often produce contradictory beliefs. For example, a castle looks small from a great distance, but enormous from much closer. So, the mind, rather than the senses, must be the medium of knowledge. Doubting requires me to disbelieve the *content* of my thoughts. To see a tomato on the table takes a lot for granted. Is it really a tomato, or a separate tomato-like fruit? I must even doubt that there really is anything there at all. My thought that a tomato is on the table could be a hallucination or, according to Descartes, a false thought placed in me by some evil demon. Nevertheless, to doubt is to have a thought, no matter if it is true or false. It is here, in the *form* of thought, that Descartes finds his first indubitable truth.

Whether I am dreaming or awake, it is true that I have thoughts. If anything exists at all, it must be these thoughts. If this much is true, then the bearer of the thoughts must exist as well. In this way, possessing thoughts is a sufficient condition for existence. Therefore,



the conclusion reached is already well-known: “I think therefore I am” (*ego cogito ergo sum*), which is often abbreviated simply as the *cogito*. Yet the *cogito* is already overreaching this simple proof. One knows that thoughts and their thinkers exist, but a sort of metonymy or vagueness is introduced when one refers to the thinker as an “I.” Just who is this “I”? More importantly, can I find out who I am if I find the reference of this “I”? Am I myself, or is it the case that I am not myself?

Once this “I” is introduced, Descartes finds it necessary to define it. Previous definitions, such as Aristotle’s “rational animal,” appear too conceptually dense to pass the skeptical test for knowledge. Not only must the “I” be defined, but also “guarded” against anything that is not itself: “I must be on guard against carelessly taking something else to be this ‘I’, and so making a mistake in the very item of knowledge that I maintain is the most certain and evident of all.”<sup>10</sup> Since Descartes, the “I” established by the *cogito* has been taken to be a substance, a subject, and everything in-between. What these interpretations miss, however, is the fundamental quality of Cartesian selfhood.

## Interiority as Minimal Subjectivity

I still do not know what “I” am. Or should it be put: I still do not know what “I” *is*? This uncertainty oscillates between taking the “I” in the first person and third person. Is it a pronoun used by the thinker to refer to him- or herself? Or is it the noun that defines the thinker as substance? Can such a substantive “I” even be derived, through some sort of “philosophical alchemy” as Vincent

Descombes recently argued, from the pronominal I?<sup>11</sup> In either case, a difference emerges. I who recite this *cogito* am (or *is*) in some way different from the “I” that the *cogito* guarantees.

Jean-Luc Marion, in a shocking reassessment of the “subject” in Descartes, has claimed that these different inflections on the “I” must be kept strictly separate, although they have been historically conflated. This separation means that one is necessarily dealing with two distinct moments: “l’argument du *cogito* ne comporte justement pas *cogito*.”<sup>12</sup> Most significantly, such a distinction casts doubt on the popular conception that the *cogito* is performative, that is, that it both establishes and proves the existence of the “I.” Many commentators have objected to the *cogito* on the grounds of this conception. They believe that the supposedly performative *cogito* has produced a substance or subject, knowledge of which would never be allowed by the project of radical doubt. Marion specifically challenges this objection.

Marion first deals with Kant’s objection to Descartes, which claims that Descartes has substantialized the ego *in reality*, when the ego’s attribute of substance can only be known *in its idea*. Yet what Kant ends up arguing, according to Marion, is precisely Descartes’ position. It is true, he notes, that Descartes mentions in the *Meditations* that I am a substance, but this qualification is only made with reservation.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, the reservation involves the priority of knowledge about the “I” or ego. Marion argues that the term “substance” is deployed in Descartes only to define the essence of the ego, whereas the term was unnecessary for the argument of its existence. Substance will later be an important concept for the proof of God, but

it bears no relevance to the proof for the existence of the ego. Marion is emphatic on this point: “une objection contre l'éventuelle substantialité de l'*ego* ne porte absolument pas, ni en droit ni en fait, contre l'argument sur l'existence de l'*ego* en tant que pensant.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the substance objection, Marion gives no credence to interpretations that understand Descartes' ego in contemporary terms of the Subject. It is common to conceive of this subject today as someone who is separate from the world and others according to an individuating quality such as substance, autonomy, responsibility, self-consciousness, and so on. These variants of self-sufficiency already, according to Marion, overstep the simple yet profound insight of the *cogito*. Descartes does indeed speak of the *subjectum* or *sujet*, but Marion notes that in almost every case the subject is defined according to its *subjection* to something:

les variations de *sujet/subjectum* renvoient le plus souvent à ce qui se trouve *soumis à* (« sujet à une erreur », « sujet » d'une discussion, etc.), éventuellement soumis à la pensée elle-même, au titre de ce que nous nommerions facilement aujourd'hui des *objets*. Et lorsque Descartes évoque, rarement d'ailleurs, un « ... *subjectum meae cogitationis*, » il ne s'agit justement pas du moderne *sujet*, mais du *substrat* de mes pensées, *aliqua res*, évidemment la *res cogitans*.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, any talk of subjectivity in Descartes is anachronistic since the Cartesian “subject” is of the order of, in modern usage, objects. The *cogito*, instead, functions within the *substratum* of the self's thoughts. In this way, it precedes the self's self-identification and, rather than

determining any qualities of the existent, merely guarantees that the existent exists. If there is anything more that can be said about this existent, it would solely be that it thinks: it thinks, it is, and nothing more. Marion affirms that translating the Cartesian ego as a form of subjectivity greatly overburdens Descartes' original insight:

Descartes n'a pas recours à la problématique du « sujet », qui ne s'imposera qu'après lui – [...] toute critique de la « subjectivité », entendue autrement que comme la crise du *substratum*, de la *materia prima* – bref, comme la disparition du concept même de *matière* –, laisse en droit et en fait intact l'*ego*, qui est et existe en tant qu'il pense, précisément parce que cette performance ne suppose aucune intériorité ni aucun substrat.<sup>16</sup>

One can follow Marion's astute analysis up to the point that he says, "aucune intériorité ni aucun substrat." Interiority is precisely the condition under which the ego's awareness of the *cogito* may arise. While the ego may not be exactly the same as the argument for the ego, it is only through the argument that Descartes is able to discover the identity of the two selves (I and "I"). The project of radical doubt, unequivocally stated in the *Rules* and *Meditations*, begins in both instances with a break and an isolation. Descartes must break with his former education (despite its necessity for this very break) and isolate himself completely.

Isolation proper will not appear as an explicit theme until the *Discourse*, but it can be found implicitly in the *Rules*. Descartes stresses the independence required of the thinker in order for a secure foundation to be established. He must reinvent everything, even language. As Descartes

assures us, he may utilize words from Scholastic philosophy, but they will have an idiosyncratic meaning (“adapting them to my own meaning”) in his works.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the method is intended to be wholly self-sufficient. Descartes compares it to the mechanical crafts which have “no need of methods other than their own, and which supply their own instructions for making their own tools.”<sup>18</sup> It is necessary to highlight here not only the propriety of the method in its self-same reproduction, but also the parallel idiosyncrasy of the path that the thinker (i.e. only *one* thinker *alone*) can pursue.

The isolated thinker on the solitary path becomes a theme on the first page of the *Rules*. Descartes contrasts the artisan to the scientist or thinker. It is commonly believed, he argues, that an artisan can only excel at a single craft. Pursuing any others would be a distraction to his ability to perfect his skill in one. The thinker, by contrast, can study all the fields of science and, in fact, be better for it. In the case of science, a study of every field presents a general view that is more amenable to establishing the universal laws of the method. The advantage of the solitary thinker becomes a necessity in the first part of the *Discourse*.

After describing his educational experiences under the Scholastics, Descartes, as I have shown, determines it necessary to set out on his own path and to, he says, “conduct studies within myself.”<sup>19</sup> Having excelled in one of the top European schools, he believed that he was especially prepared for this undertaking. Moreover, it gave him a privileged insight: “This made me feel free to judge all others by reference to myself.”<sup>20</sup> These solitary judgements would gain ground once the thinker was immersed in physical solitude. The method begins in

earnest, Descartes writes, once he was “shut up alone in a stove-heated room, where I was completely free to converse with myself about my own thoughts.”<sup>21</sup> This isolation was not a convenience for the creation of the method, but necessary for it. After comparing the universal laws of the method to the political laws of Sparta (which were excellent because they were created by one person, he says), Descartes reiterates this necessity at least three more times in Part Two of the *Discourse*: “since the sciences contained in books [...] is compounded and amassed little by little from the opinions of many different persons, it never comes so close to the truth as the simple reasoning which a man of good sense naturally makes concerning whatever he comes across”; “My plan has never gone beyond trying to reform my own thoughts and construct them upon a foundation which is all my own”; “a majority vote is worthless as a proof of truths that are at all difficult to discover; for a single man is much more likely to hit upon them than a group of people.”<sup>22</sup>

Of course, readers of the *Discourse* will recall that Descartes calls for collaboration in the interests of the method’s survival.<sup>23</sup> There are simply too many experiments (*expériences*) to be done in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and one person cannot do them all. Descartes goes as far as to ask his readers to send him their work because “many people are able to see more than one alone.”<sup>24</sup> Yet even here Descartes will reassert his privilege in establishing the method. Not only does he request that all “collaborative” experiments be sent solely to him, but also he reasserts the Spartan ideal of the solitary thinker: “if there was ever a task which could not be accomplished so

well by someone other than the person who began it, it is the one on which I am working.”<sup>25</sup>

Hence, the terrain of Descartes’ path is clear: barren and solitary. There will be only the thinker and him- or herself, not just in a figurative isolation, but a real, material isolation, like when one is locked up in one’s room during a state of emergency. This isolation is a precondition for the operation of the method. The interiority of the room allows Descartes to catalog and analyze the interiority of his mind. This interiority is a security and a separation from the world, others, one’s youth, Scholastic philosophy, and everything else that may tint the pure natural light of reason. Contrary to Marion, Descartes’ isolation signals the primary characteristic of the Cartesian ego, which may also be considered its necessary and sufficient condition: interiority. It is thus possible to speak of a *minimal subjectivity* to which the *cogito* draws one’s attention. The stakes are raised in the *Meditations* when Descartes reiterates these themes and builds them into his fundamental condition for knowledge.

## Securing Knowledge in the *Meditations*

The theme of isolation continues in the *Meditations*. Descartes in fact reaffirms its necessity for the method:

So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions.<sup>26</sup>

In this isolation, the well-known argument for the *cogito* unfolds. Descartes realizes that he can only be certain of the fact that he has thoughts. The body and all of its appendages can be doubted to exist since one knows of them through the senses. Thus, it is only thinking itself that can define my subjectivity. For Descartes, the subject is merely this: a thinking thing (*res cogitans*) that “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”<sup>27</sup>

The *cogito* is so evident that Descartes cannot find a way to make it any clearer for his reader: “The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is *so evident* that I see no way of making it *any clearer*.”<sup>28</sup> This conclusion, that I am a thinking thing, is built off of equally self-evident postulates, such as the fact that I have thoughts: “For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that *such transparent truths* should incur any suspicion of being false.”<sup>29</sup> Transparency, throughout the *Meditations*, becomes a significant criterion of truth. Like mathematical propositions and God’s goodness, the *cogito* is deemed true and irrefutable due to its supposed clarity. But to whom is the *cogito* clear and transparent? Me, *moi*: the Cartesian subject. Thus, transparency originally manifests itself as in the form of self-identity; the basis of all knowledge must rely on the certainty that I am myself, the bearer of thoughts and the thinking thing. Everything known beyond this originary transparency must be related back to it. This requirement forms the basis of Descartes’ proof of the existence of the material world.



The Second Meditation introduces the example of the piece of wax. Although the qualities of a piece of wax (smell, shape, taste, texture) may change when it is heated or cooled, one does not believe that there is in fact a different substance. Descartes uses this example to argue that regardless of what confused ideas one may receive from the senses, a clear idea of the wax exists by means of “purely mental scrutiny” if one is to concentrate hard enough. In other words, I may think that a change in quality (from solid to liquid, for example) means the appearance of a different object, but this is a confused idea procured by the senses which are incapable of acknowledging the subsistence of the wax itself. The precondition of clear ideas, Descartes explains, is possession of a human mind, which was just guaranteed by the *cogito*. The Second Meditation concludes with a discussion of how this piece of wax example impacts the nature of the “I” or mind. In this conclusion, there are two crucial moves that secure knowledge of the external world.

First, the fact that the wax exists serves primarily to reinforce the fact that I exist. For it to be the case that I know the wax subsists through time, despite whatever qualitative changes it may undergo, I must also know that “I” subsist through time. This perception not only confirms my existence, but strengthens my certainty of it. Hence, if I exist, the external world must also exist by derivation. And I need not sense every item to confirm this fact, the wax alone is sufficient:

Surely my awareness of my own self is not merely much truer and more certain than my awareness of the wax, but also much more distinct and evident. For I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I

see it, clearly this same fact entails *much more evidently* that I myself also exist. [...] And the result that I have grasped in the case of the wax may be applied to *everything else located outside me*.<sup>30</sup>

Second, closely related to the first move, the piece of wax example reassures me about my own existence:

Moreover, if my perception of the wax seemed *more clear and distinct* after it was established not just by sight or touch but by many other considerations [viz. the clear and distinct perception of the *cogito*], it must be admitted that I now know myself even *more evidently, distinctly and clearly*. This is because every consideration whatsoever which contributes to my perception of the wax, or of any other body, cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind.<sup>31</sup>

In this way, the existence of the external world can only be guaranteed by the self-evident existence of the subject. The world not only relies on the subject to be perceived, but also fortifies the self-certainty of a subject that sees itself in every perception. In these passages, I have emphasized the reoccurring references to and reliance on the transparency of Descartes' method and his conclusions. Rather than an appeal to common sense, as one may first read it, self-transparency becomes the fundamental condition for knowledge in the Cartesian method. In a world that confirms and is confirmed by the subject, subjectivity acts like an echo-chamber. This echo-chamber is the metaphysical form of Cartesian subjectivity, which can otherwise be called interiority.

Isolation, then, is more than the narrative preamble to Descartes' scientific method. It heralds the subject's interiority, which now stretches over the entire world. The world and all alterity, it would seem, depends entirely on the subject. In other words, the world has been created in the image of the subject. Indeed, the allusion to Genesis is not absent from Descartes' account of his meditations. There are exactly six meditations, each of which seemingly corresponds to a day. There is presumably no seventh meditation because Descartes used this day for rest. With the structure of subjectivity firmly in sight, it is now possible to consider whether a radically different outside can be encountered by the subject, an outside that is not forecasted by and does not reaffirm the subject's self-certainty.

## The Argument for the Impossibility of Suicide

Descartes is certain not only of his existence, but also the existence of the world insofar as it reflects his primordial self-certainty. For this reason, a strong correlation or even identity exists between subjectivity and world. Additionally, one must be constantly "on guard" when it comes to the subject since it provides the basis for existence and the world. The self, Descartes urged, must not be confused with other entities nor should it be allowed to pass away. Thus, it is no surprise that Descartes explicitly opposed any end to the self, or suicide, since this would mean the literal end of the world.

According to John Marshall, Descartes' view on suicide can be partially gleaned from the *Discourse*.<sup>32</sup> In a brief comment about "ancient moralists," Descartes argues

that, for all their lofty praise of virtue, they failed to provide an adequate criterion for that virtue. Moreover, Descartes charges them with lauding acts that do not seem at all virtuous.<sup>33</sup> Marshall notes that suicide was one of these acts. Even if this is only conjecture, Descartes has directly argued against suicide elsewhere.

In a letter to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes addresses the topic of suicide:

I think that even those who most give rein to their passions, really judge deep down, even if they do not themselves perceive it, that there is more good than evil in this life. Sometimes they may call death to help them when they feel great pain, but it is only to help them bear their burden, as in the fable, and for all that they do not want to lose their life.<sup>34</sup>

Here one finds an application of Cartesian doubt. Even if a person were to desire his or her own death, Descartes does not believe that he or she could truly want such a thing. Thoughts of suicide are just an aid to help people “bear their burden.”

Yet, what if one truly desired to commit suicide *and* succeeded in the act? Descartes’ letter continues:

And if there are some who do want to lose it, and who kill themselves, it is due to an intellectual error and not to a well-reasoned judgement, nor to an opinion imprinted on them by nature, like the one which makes a man prefer the goods of this life to its evils.<sup>35</sup>

Descartes’ answer to the above question is clear: any suicide that is successful in producing the death of the self

is not suicide proper. Sui-cide, as I have mentioned, indicates the murder of the self. The subject that desires its own death and seeks it out strays from the rational self that was discovered in the proof of the *cogito*. Suicide implies, according to Descartes, a thought that is uncertain, that is, one that cannot be verified according to the fundamental condition of knowledge. The desire to commit suicide short-circuits the *cogito* since it is not of the self-transparent order of truths, like the one that says men desire good over evil. Hence, suicide introduces an opacity into the translucence of the subject to itself. It is the specter of the radically Other, and it appears within, rather than outside of, the self. This is how I am not myself.

At this point, it does not matter if one actually loses one's life, because one has already lost one's reason: "But we are able to be absolutely responsible for ourselves only so long as we are in our own power, and it is less upsetting to lose one's life than to lose the use of reason."<sup>36</sup> The "intellectual error" of suicide, which is provoked by pain and other passions, is precisely this loss of reason. While suicide may be the most complete form of such a loss, this "error" is in fact embedded into the very foundation of the *cogito*.

Recall that the method begins with a project of radical doubt that demolishes one's "childish" and habituated opinions. Descartes' argues in the *Meditations* that the "distorting influence of habit" continues to impinge on the method even after the original demolition:

I must make an effort to remember it [i.e. the fact that I am doubting everything]. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound

over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions.<sup>37</sup>

Descartes then adds the caveat that it would be possible to evade accepting these fallacious opinions with radical skepticism. However, this aside is not enough to ward off for good the danger of habit, which is in many ways constitutive of the method. In constantly reminding oneself of the method, the subject grows weary. Fatigue is exactly what Descartes' pristine method cannot account for; in universal truth is lost the fallibility of humanity.

Interestingly, this weariness manifests in Descartes as a kind of laziness that Descartes himself cannot shake off:

But this is an arduous undertaking [to “resolutely guard” against falsehood], and a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life. I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep. [...] I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them.<sup>38</sup>

Happily, he returns to his senses. He believes the world as it is placed before him as a sort of *sui generis* nature that is beyond his control. There is pleasure in giving up the rigid repetition of the *cogito*: “my mind enjoys wandering off and will not yet submit to being restrained within the bounds of truth.”<sup>39</sup> Of course, this is not something that suddenly occurs to Descartes in the *Meditations*. It is implicit in the method from the very start. In the *Rules*, Descartes' first systematic outline of the method, he proposes the method as a means of counteracting the “sluggishness” of the mind: “Our principal concern here is

thus to guard against our reason's taking a holiday while we are investigating the truth about some issue."<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the "intellectual error" described by Descartes in his letters was a constant preoccupation of his and a constitutive danger of the method. This error signifies a return to the passions and, *a fortiori*, the body. The body maintains this constant threat against the method because it undermines the sufficient condition of the *cogito*, that is, subsistence over time. As Descartes explains in the preface to the *Meditations*:

For even if all the accidents of the mind change, so that it has different objects of the understanding and different desires and sensations, it does not on that account become a different mind; where as a human body loses its identity merely as a result of a change in the shape of some of its parts.

Suicide is the error *par excellence* since it seeks to alter the mind through the modification of the body, such as escaping depression through physical destruction. Yet, for Descartes, as soon as the self makes the "error" of desiring its own murder, it is no longer a self. In other words, the Cartesian subject's desire for something other than itself (i.e. the outside) leads to its very de-subjectification. In this way, suicide proper remains always just out of reach and is, in fact, impossible. In drawing a distinction between the desire for suicide and suicide proper, Descartes leaves open a path outside the subject.

## The Suicidal Subject, or A Way Out

For Descartes, suicide is impossible by definition. Yet we know empirically that people do consider suicide and have gone through with killing themselves. What happens when this limit is crossed, according to Descartes, is that one's subjectivity dissolves. The self is no longer a thinking thing *per se*. But it is still a thing that thinks. It thinks about suicide.

Thus, the picture that Descartes lays out is essentially one of two suicides. Genuine suicidal thoughts provoke the death of the self-certain, self-identical Cartesian subject. It becomes other than itself and reaches into a strange territory that can only be called the Outside. Beyond these thoughts, the subject (if we can still call it this) may choose to destroy itself in a literal act of suicide. So, in Descartes' epistemology, there is a way outside of the subject that does not require literal suicide.

What could this mean practically? Take, for example, the seemingly irrelevant but deeply philosophical Japanese animated film *Ghost in the Shell 2* (2004). The film contains a telling anecdote about Descartes, but its applicability here comes from the plot. The conflict centers around malfunctioning robots that have begun to kill humans. These robots are programmed to follow a moral code that states that they should protect themselves at all costs unless it means hurting a human. Therefore, it is perplexing why and how the robots would kill humans. Only one possible explanation is offered: the robots have given up on trying to protect themselves. They have become suicidal. Their suicidal state frees them from their obligation to not harm humans since their actions are no



longer determined by the condition of self-preservation. Becoming-suicidal liberates these robots from their moral code and reveals new possibilities, even if these are not the best of possibilities.

Despite this being a fictional representation of robots, it provides an appropriate analogy for human forms of non-fatal suicide. As survivors of suicide attempts attest, broaching this limit drastically and essentially changes a person. The website [TalkingAboutSuicide.Com](http://TalkingAboutSuicide.Com) contains interviews with dozens of suicide attempt survivors who echo this very point. Charlotte Claire, for example, explains that “Waking up on the other side of attempting suicide is when you have the toughest conversations with yourself. [...] I find myself nowadays living a much more rich and exciting lifestyle.”<sup>41</sup> Others describe the suicide attempt as arising from a “state of being” that irrevocably alters their identity after the event.<sup>42</sup> Suicide survivors, unlike most people, realize how they are not themselves. Of course, it requires an extreme act to get outside of oneself, but then again, for Descartes it is flouting self-certainty that is really the ultimate risk.

The possibility of non-fatal suicide, of a death of the self that does not entail absolute death, appears in Descartes as a proto-phenomenological limit. While the testimonials of suicide attempt survivors can help articulate the meaning of this liminal experience, they are not sufficient for a robust phenomenology of suicide. Such a phenomenology would be able to answer the following questions: What is the nature of this limit? What unique experience is associated with it? How does the subject essentially transform through it? These questions must be reserved for future research.

## Conclusion

While a phenomenology of suicide, in the sense I have been using it, would be new, discussions on the limits of subjectivity have long taken place. These discussions largely fall into two camps. Some have argued that death or other asymptotic limits are necessarily required for the subject to break out of its interiority. These theorists treat any exteriority of the subject as inaccessible and separated by an ineffable rupture. Without the emergence of radical exteriority in the case of such a rupture, the subject would not be able to experience something that is radically other than itself. Moreover, such an experience, according to these theorists, presupposes an end to the subject as we know it. Along these lines, one finds Bataille, Heidegger, and Foucault.<sup>43</sup>

Philosophers of the second camp have accepted the same basic assumption that exteriority cannot be experienced by a subject. However, instead of positing a rupture, these theorists suggest that the subject's interiority could cover the entire world, dismissing any need of a rupture. This move (apparent in Kant and Hegel) concludes by forcing every radical alterity into a digestible, relative alterity. Instead of erecting an impassible wall between interiority and exteriority, these theorists infinitely expand the bounds of subjectivity until it swallows everything. Although Descartes is usually grouped into this second camp, his comments on suicide, as I have tried to show, give us a reason to think that his philosophy provides a path outside the subject, a path that doesn't require so ineffable of a rupture as the first camp would suggest. Despite departing from Marion's reading above, we ultimately

agree with his conclusion that Descartes “demeure un sujet de pensée parce qu’il reste littéralement hors du sujet.”<sup>44</sup>

It was announced last year by the *New York Times* that we are in the midst of a suicide crisis.<sup>45</sup> Suicide rates from all age groups except the elderly have reached a record high over the course of the past thirty years. Not only is the frequency increasing, but the terrain of suicidal acts is also changing. Just in the first month of this year, three different people have live-streamed their suicides on Facebook.<sup>46</sup> The discourse of mental illness is no longer equipped to explain a phenomenon that has surpassed the individual and taken up residence in our collective subjectivity. Suicide is not a subjective act, but the enactment of subjectivity; it is not a defect, but the rule.

## Nietzsche's Disavowalist Moment

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a spectacular event unfolded that would forever change history. God was murdered. This scandalous transgression was met with multiple reactions. For some, God's role was transformed into the logical truths of rationalism. For others, suffering became an eternal condition that only compassion could alleviate for brief moments. A few even continued to cling to the hope that God was alive and well; they transmuted their hopeless hope into "faith." Yet, the ultimate scandal, according to one German philologist, was that we assassinated God.

The death of God, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, meant the complete loss of any absolute or universal meaning to life. Contemporary morality and science attempted to mend this void. While Nietzsche offers innovative critiques of moralists (e.g. Kant) and the scientific method, his most venomous rejoinders are directed toward pessimists such as Arthur Schopenhauer. According to Nietzsche, pessimism essentially throws in the towel when confronted with the void of a meaningless existence. It accepts suffering as the eternal condition of life. If the pessimist does not kill herself, she only continues to live for momentary, compassionate acts that unite humans in their shared suffering. Against the pessimist's resignation and the scientist's self-certain rationalism, Nietzsche promotes a "gay science" whose task is to tarry with the suffering of existence in order to discover increasingly powerful moments of joy.

In *The Gay Science*, details of this new science are interspersed with attacks on ancient and modern attempts to escape pessimism (e.g. art, Greek tragedy, Wagnerian opera, religion). The culmination of these guerilla-style interventions is the fourth and final chapter titled “St. Januarius.” (In the second edition, a preface and fifth chapter were added to the book.) In this chapter Nietzsche turns away from criticism and focuses in on his positive philosophy. It opens with the inauguration of a new year and a new type of person: “I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer!”<sup>47</sup> The Yes-sayer becomes the pinnacle of affirmation; she is the person who resists pessimistic resignation to suffering and creates the new values required for a joyful life.

The Yes-sayer is Nietzsche’s response to the *renouncer* who throws away life in order to ascend to a higher world. Moralities of renunciation are often found passing down decrees such as, “Do not do this! Renounce! Overcome yourself!” Above all, the Yes-sayer wants *to do something* and to continue doing it until she has mastered it. The negative virtues whose “very essence is negation and self-denial” are foreign to her. Indeed, it is only by rejecting everything foreign that one becomes a Yes-sayer. In a reverent passage about the people of Genoa, Nietzsche boasts of their antinomy to uniformity and conformism:

Here you find, upon turning every corner, a separate human being who knows the sea, adventure, and the Orient; a human being averse to the law and to the neighbor as to a kind of boredom, who measures everything old and established with envious eyes:

he would, with a marvelous cunning of imagination, like to establish all this anew at least in thought; to put his hand to it, his meaning to it—if only for the moment of a sunny afternoon when his insatiable and melancholy soul feels sated for once, and only what is his own and *nothing alien may appear to his eye*. [My emphasis.]

Unlike these special humans, the Northerners are “builders” who want to possess and refashion everything they see so that they can secure it under their watchful eye. The distinction drawn is between the builder that works with what is given and seeks control versus the “human” who seeks novelty, adventure, and passion. The builder works on a world that others have prepared for her, while the “human” seeks new worlds. In this way one can understand Nietzsche's contradictory claims that one must *be oneself* and also *lose oneself*.

At first, Nietzsche claims that “one thing is needful: that a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself.” The significance of this first claim can only be understood as a reaction to moralities and religions that demand that one lose oneself. To give up one's personal goals and ambitions would be to fall again into the nihilistic void of pessimism. Yet, paradoxically, one is only able to become satisfied with oneself precisely by *losing oneself* in new feelings, thoughts, and habits that challenge the *status quo*. Hence Nietzsche's requirement: “For one must be able to lose oneself if one wants to learn something from things that we ourselves are not.” This act of losing oneself is likened to setting sail for uncharted seas; mastering newly found strengths is likened to learning how to pull in the sails. (One could spend a great deal of time tracing the

metaphorical and literal role of the sea in Nietzsche's work.) The paradoxical move of losing oneself to become oneself is what Nietzsche infamously refers to as *living dangerously*. Indeed, it is a new kind of philosopher who will discover how to live dangerously. But the discovery can only be made by boat.

With the above paradox in mind, one can appreciate Nietzsche's disavowalist moment. In order to be oneself, one must lose oneself. In other words, Nietzsche's infinite call to affirmation that surges forth from his texts is only possible with a preliminary, essential, originary negation. To become a Yes-sayer, one must first say No to oneself and embark on dangerous journeys. Nietzsche himself underlines in the first paragraph of the fourth chapter that "*looking away*" will be his negation (his first and, supposedly, only). Yet, the act of looking away will come up again. Nietzsche advises against seeking the punishment of others because it takes away energy that could be spent on extending one's own influence. By becoming greater oneself, one enacts a sort of punishment against others: "Let us darken the others through our light! No—let's not become *darker* on their account, like those who punish and are dissatisfied! Let's sooner step aside! Let us look away!"

Stepping aside, looking away—is this not the fundamental disavowalist gesture? Dis-avowal is not to deny or negate, but to avow *alongside* or *otherwise*. The Rimbaudian seer (*voyant*) does not desire to see nothing, but to see other lives as they are lived. Not only is Nietzschean affirmation vulnerable to such a maneuver, it is the foundational maneuver. This becomes clear in Nietzsche's comments on the necessity of criticism: "We

negate and have to negate because something in us *wants* to live and affirm itself.”

The foundational negation of the Yes-sayer (what we have previously called “radical disavowal”) is an event that brings together a response to the death of God and a reaction to the renouncer. Nietzsche encodes this complex statement into allegory:

There is a lake that one day refused to let itself flow off and formed a dam where it used to flow off: ever since, this lake rises higher and higher. Perhaps this very renunciation will lend us the strength to bear renunciation; perhaps man will rise ever higher when he no longer *flows off* into a god.

The ultimate and originary renunciation of the Yes-sayer is meant to guard her against any pessimistic resignation. It also initiates a process of beautifying oneself against the ugliness of the renouncer. This process builds up an individual's strengths so that she no longer requires a god to give her life meaning or passion. The preliminary, radical disavowal is so essential to this process that, when concluded the fourth chapter, Nietzsche can use only words of resignation to describe his “morality:”

I do not wish to keep quiet about my morality, which tells me: Live in seclusion so that you *are able* to live for yourself! Live *in ignorance* of what seems most important to your age! Lay at least the skin of three hundred years between you and today! And let the clamour of today, the noise of war and revolutions, be but a murmur to you.



But is this kind of withdrawal really possible? Can one be *ignorant* of one's own age and continue to grow, influence, and discover? While there are many examples of successful disavowalists, one is quite fitting at this point. Hidden in the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the subtle disavowalist, Dolphus Raymond. In a space and time dominated by racial inequality, Raymond performs a radical disavowal that renounces racist violence as much as it connects him with the victims of that violence.

In a segregated town with deep racial tension, Raymond belongs as much to the black community as he does to the white community. He is a white man married to a black woman. This transgression of social convention would normally be sufficient to mark him as an outcast. However, Raymond is always seen drinking from a jug in a brown paper bag and acting as if he were drunk. This gives others a reason for his so-called "abnormal" behavior (i.e. marrying a black woman). By the end of the novel, the contents of the jug are revealed when he offers a child a drink of it; all along it was Coca-Cola. (In that very scene, Raymond becomes what Deleuze and Guattari have termed the "anomalous," an "exceptional individual" that invites others into a new world.) Raymond plays the role of the town drunk in order to subvert the dichotomizing tendency of local racism.

Even though he has had children with his wife and sits in "colored only" sections, Raymond maintains his privilege as a white male. He disavows the black-white binary not by choosing a side, but by discovering a path that allows him to participate in both communities. By saying No to compliance with the norms of his racist culture, Raymond opens new possibilities for personal and

communal growth. However, this affirmation can only follow an originary, essential negation.

Of course, the possibility of this specific form of disavowal cannot be admitted in all situations. If Raymond were born black, he would not be able to elicit the same response with his actions. It is in part due to his privilege as a white male that this possibility is open to him. Thus, there are no general laws of disavowal, only transcendental ones. Raymond provides us with an example of radical disavowal become affirmation, but does not offer any practical program for combating racial violence in of its contemporary forms.

We began by meditating on Nietzsche's scandalous accusation that we were God's assassins. We end by recognizing the even greater scandal at the heart of Nietzsche's work: the radical disavowal that must precede affirmation. In another passage from *The Gay Science*, he tells us that the "taste for *hidden and forbidden* powers" indicative of science has its origins in "magicians, alchemists, astrologers, and witches." We interpret disciplines such as alchemy as forms of study that anticipated modern science. However, it was often the case that these disciplines never aspired to such a thing. The same is true of Nietzsche's disavowalist moment: our only negation (*looking away*) eventually will give rise to the fantastic power of affirmation. As such, the disavowalist is the alchemist of possibility and the Prometheus of *terra incognita*.



# Phenomenology of the Other

## Toward a Phenomenology of the Alien

Bernhard Waldenfels wrote *Phenomenology of the Alien* (*Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*) in 2006 and a translation into English was quickly made available by 2011. As the original title suggests, this work is a groundwork that lays out the basic motifs of a phenomenology that focuses specifically on the “alien” (*Fremd*). While the translators have rendered *Fremd* as “alien” according to the standards of Husserlian scholarship, it must be kept in mind that it could also mean stranger, foreign, or, at times, Other (although the translation of *Fremd* as Other will soon be complicated).

The work in question contains constant references to Waldenfels’ previous books. In the introduction, he correlates each chapter with some previous book that he has written (only one of which is available in English). The text is thus not only an outline of the basic motifs of a phenomenology of the alien, but also a survey of Waldenfels’ *corpus*. Given that Waldenfels is a scholar of Edmund Husserl, it is no surprise that Husserl’s name appears more frequently than any other in the book. What is surprising is that one of the other most mentioned names is that of the French poet, Arthur Rimbaud. Specifically, Waldenfels repeatedly refers to a line from a letter that Rimbaud wrote when he was sixteen. What does the gossip of a teenager have to do with transcendental phenomenological science? Waldenfels believes there is an

important link and, while he may be right, he is right for the wrong reasons.

To situate Waldenfels' unique contribution, I will begin by examining how the alien appears in Husserl's phenomenology, particularly in the *Cartesian Meditations*. From here it will be possible to sketch the rough outlines of Waldenfels' contribution to a phenomenology of the alien, while paying close attention to his recent interpretation of Rimbaud. In this pursuit, it will be necessary to compare Waldenfels' reading of Rimbaud to Emmanuel Levinas' use of the French poet. This comparison allows us to see how both thinkers fail to systematically appropriate Rimbaud's famous insight concerning the "I." I conclude by offering a potential resolution between Waldenfels and Rimbaud's thought found in the former's philosophy of attention. Phenomenologists still have much to learn from Rimbaud.

## Husserl's Alien

Paul Ricœur has stated that "all aspects of phenomenology converge on the problem of the constitution of others."<sup>48</sup> Whether or not Ricœur's strong thesis is correct, one could indubitably say that it holds for Husserl's account of sense-perception in the *Cartesian Meditations*. The Fifth Cartesian Meditation asserts many of the same things concerning intersubjectivity as one finds in Husserl's other works. First, the isolated "I" is an abstraction.<sup>49</sup> Second, the Ego is always paired with an *alter* Ego; the Ego is only knowable through the "we."<sup>50</sup> Finally, I can empathize with the Other because I am like her, but I can never experience what the Other is experiencing at that moment.<sup>51</sup> This is

because I always experience the world through a *here*, while the Other, in my perceptual field, is always *there*.

*Cartesian Meditations* uniquely conceives of ego-constitution as the creation of an Ego that is not primordially similar to itself, but profoundly dissimilar from itself. In this section, I will argue that Husserl presents a view of constitutive alterity in *Cartesian Meditations*. By developing a theory of constitutive alterity, Husserl is trying to answer the question of why the self is not fundamentally self-identical in all its experiences. This is the same problem that led Kant to posit transcendental subjectivity over against the empirical subject.

Most important to Husserl's account of the alien is that the constitution of the Other within oneself is *prior to* the identification with an "alter ego" in the world. He goes on to claim that the Other is a "mirroring" of myself, but not a "mirroring" proper.<sup>52</sup> This substantiates the position that the Other is a mirror-image of myself insofar as I am also Other, but not in the sense that the Other is an exact duplicate of myself. Husserl outlines this arrangement in the following passage:

In this pre-eminent intentionality there becomes constituted for me the new existence-sense that goes beyond my monadic very-ownness; there becomes constituted an ego, not as "I myself," but as mirrored in my own Ego, in my monad. The second ego, however, is not simply there and strictly presented; rather is he constituted as "alter ego" — the ego indicated as one moment by this expression being I myself in my ownness. The "Other"...points to me myself.<sup>53</sup>

If this is truly the case, then my experience of the Other would be structurally prior to my experience of objects. Unsurprisingly, Husserl realizes this and states it explicitly: “*the intrinsically first other* (the first “non-Ego”) *is the other Ego*. And the other Ego makes constitutionally possible a new infinite domain of what is “Other”: an *Objective Nature* and a whole Objective world, to which all other Egos and I myself belong.”<sup>54</sup> In this way, intersubjectivity opens the possibility of a shared world where things can become social Objects with common meanings within a communal spirit. Yet, any experience of the world structurally depends upon my encounter with the Other who is the first “non-Ego.” Only after this event am I capable of experiencing other kinds of non-Egos (e.g. objects, nature, sociality, etc.).

In this way, the Ego is always paired with some alter Ego: “*ego and alter ego are always and necessarily given in an original ‘pairing.’*” Pairing (*Paarung*) is functionally important for a wide range of subjective experiences: “occurrence in configuration as a pair and then as a group, a plurality, is a *universal* phenomenon of the transcendental sphere... [and] extends that remarkable kind of primal instituting of an analogizing apprehension.” Although pairing may serve other functions, it is the “first peculiarity” of encountering the Other.<sup>55</sup> Pairing does not only imply the co-presence of Ego and alter Ego, but also the “mirroring” and “analogizing” functions deployed in identifying the Other. However, pairing can only happen when the Other is exhibited as expressing “incessantly *harmonious ‘behavior.’*”<sup>56</sup> This means that the Other can only exist *as such* if her behavior over time is completely consistent. The Other cannot be encountered if her behavior

is discordant. Husserl will eventually say that pairing is not the whole story. At times pairing can be disrupted by certain “incompatibilities.”<sup>57</sup> These failures of successful “fusion” between Ego and alter Ego are explained in Husserl’s solution to an enigma that he poses late in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation.

Husserl presents the enigma in the following way: I am able to locate the Other’s sensuous body in my *de facto* experience, but this does not admit to an identification of the Other.<sup>58</sup> I know that the body belongs to someone else, but I cannot identify that someone else as the owner of the body, as an Other *per se*. Husserl begins responding to this problem by arguing that perceiving a person is a lot like perceiving a house. Although this claim can serve many purposes, Husserl’s specific meaning in this context is clear. The experience of a person is like the experience of a house because my perception of those objects is always “transcending.”<sup>59</sup> This means that, although I only see the front of the house or the body of the person, my perception always posits more than what is actually there. For example, I will not be unspeakably surprised if I walk to the side of the house and see that it has another dimension to it. Likewise, pairing allows me to posit an alter Ego, even when I am not able to experience the world directly from the position of that alter Ego. Hence, pairing becomes an essential aspect of experiencing someone else.

At this point, Husserl’s argument takes a crucial turn. He begins distinguishing between normality and abnormality. Certain *harmonies* are produced by stable normalities.<sup>60</sup> For instance, we have already seen how a successful pairing constitutes an acknowledgement of harmonious behavior in the Other. Sometimes, these



normalities are upset by abnormal phenomena. Abnormal phenomena could take the form of misperceived objects, loss of sense faculties, unexpected realizations (e.g. the house has no back, it is a prop on a stage), or semblant changes. Abnormalities can be global or local; they may affect entire strata of sense-perception, or appear merely as simple anomalies. In this midst of all this abnormality producing uncertainty, one thing is certain: abnormalities exist.

Husserl goes on to argue that *new harmonies* can be produced from experiences of abnormal phenomena “by virtue of a recasting of apperceptions through distinguishing between normality and abnormalities.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, one is able to encounter different, alien experiences that significantly affect one’s sense-structure in terms of completely reconfiguring it. This reconfiguration comes by way of new comprehensions, agreements, pairings, etc. that were not previously experienced in an essential way. The shift toward new normalities brings a person to “new associations and new possibilities of understanding.”<sup>62</sup> It is important to note that this shift takes place entirely within the Ego.<sup>63</sup>

In reality, the Ego is splitting apart from itself as it increasingly gives legitimacy to a non-Ego, which will soon become the Ego in a new harmoniousness. This occurs when the Ego (which is already grounded on the structural priority of the non-Ego) discovers an experiential abnormality that challenges its original relation to phenomena. If this abnormality reoccurs or has a significant amount of force, it will inevitably push the Ego into recognizing the essential character of some abnormal phenomenon or experience. Take, for example, a man who

could see for fifty years that suddenly goes blind. At first, it is a bizarre abnormality. He believes his eyes are closed, the lights are out, or something is blocking his vision. Eventually he comes to realize that it is none of these possibilities. He is blind. The abnormal situation of not seeing (or seeing nothing) becomes the new normality. In the dialectic of normality-abnormality, Husserl finds a solution to his enigma. His concluding remark to the enigma is worth quoting at length:

After these clarifications it is no longer an enigma how I can constitute in myself another Ego or, more radically, how I can constitute in my monad another monad, and can experience what is constituted in me as nevertheless other than me. At the same time, this being indeed inseparable from such constitution, it is no longer an enigma how I can identify a Nature constituted in me with a Nature constituted by someone else.<sup>64</sup>

Abnormality is not some foreign object, glitch, or misapprehension that I come upon by chance, but is something inscribed at the very heart of phenomenal existence. In *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution* (hereafter *Ideas II*), Husserl presents abnormality along the same lines. In that text, abnormality is linked to the constitution of Nature in itself. Early on, it is compared to falsehood.<sup>65</sup> Husserl uses the example of ingesting santonin, a drug that changes the color of a person's vision. What is produced by the drug is a *semblant change*: "a schematic transformation apprehended as a change under normal conditions."<sup>66</sup> What the drug causes is a "change" of color, but this "change" is

only perceptible under one's previously acquired normality. This abnormal experience seems false; it challenges what was previously accepted as true. But truth, at least in terms of phenomenological perception, is in part constituted by the structure of normality. False experiences, rather than being innocuous, can lead to the formation of "new conditionalities."<sup>67</sup>

*Ideas II* ultimately asserts the same conclusion found in *Cartesian Meditations*: "I have become an other in the meantime."<sup>68</sup> In this passage, Husserl is describing the experience of becoming imbedded in new webs of motivation. As we have seen already, this can take the form of inclusion in new social groups or individual experiences of abnormality. Functionally, this kind of becoming-other is identical to the description of newly constituted normalities in *Cartesian Meditations*. Ultimately, Husserl shows how we identify ourselves as already Other, prior to any encounter with a human Other or the objective world. While this reading may slightly depart from dominant interpretations of Husserl, it is closer to Waldenfels' understanding of Husserl. In a critical essay on Husserl, he writes, "Alien-experience would not be a variation of experience; rather, experience would be alien-experience through and through to the point of experience itself becoming alien."<sup>69</sup> In this way, Husserl's basic account of alterity is implicit in Waldenfels' phenomenology of the alien. Waldenfels will, however, introduce a distinction between the Other and the alien in order to illuminate how phenomenal experience interfaces with social institution.

## Alien vs. Other

In reading Husserl, it is common to think of the “alien” as a synonym of the Other. The problem that occurs in the Fifth Meditation of *Cartesian Meditations* is precisely how it is possible to know that Others, or aliens, exist. Here, Waldenfels believes there is a conflation. For him, Other always posits a binary opposition with the same, which we traditionally find in continental philosophy. Alien, however, denotes a foreignness that exceeds the mere index of difference or the not-I. Whereas the distinction between Other and same is based on a fundamental separation (as we see so clearly in Levinas), the alien is always articulated through a process of exclusion.

What is the alien excluded from? It is excluded from the proper, from what is one’s own, and from those who are included. Unlike the designation of the Other which implies a third-party to register the separation, alienness derives from the nature of ownness itself. The fact that there exists a sphere of influence, which designates the order of things as normal or belonging to one’s world, implies an abnormality or strangeness at the borders of propriety: “Alienness presupposes that a self (*ipse*) should have a sphere of ownness and its own being.”<sup>70</sup>

The problem of the alien, much like the problem of the Other, is how to welcome the alien *as* alien rather than reducing it to an object or elevating it to a transcendent Being. The reason why the problem of the Other is misguided, according to Waldenfels, is that it believes the originary position of the subject to be based on sameness. The Other, in turn, is simply defined as difference. Rather than originary sameness, Waldenfels posits an originary

difference within the subject itself based on the experience of temporality. Instead of sameness, the subject must be defined according to its established order or ownness, which is at once ontological, ethical, cultural, political, and economic. The first paragraph of *Phenomenology* perfectly sums up the difficulty of this problem and should be quoted in entirety:

To pose the alien as a special theme is to have missed it already. For it means to begin from the place of the familiar and the known, and if the journey goes as planned, to expect to return to the same place. Most certainly, the experience of the alien will bring about a change, maybe even a catharsis. Yet, in the end, the original familiarity will prevail; it might even expand or deepen itself. And since the alien is not harmless, it might alienate us from ourselves. Hence the perpetual motivation to resist, avoid, or assimilate the alien. However, giving in to this motivation is to make the subject remain at home with himself or herself. It also means that the strong fortifications of an order which excludes the unordered should remain in place, preventing the alien from disturbing us from within. The alien can inspire curiosity and imagination, it can even enlighten us about ourselves—all this must be granted. Yet as soon as the alien breaks into the arcanum of freedom and reason, it trips the “chaos” alarm. Freedom and reason take up their arms. They fight because otherwise they would need to give up on themselves. But, inevitably, alienness leads to hostility, which only escalates, with each involved party becoming more and more committed to their belief that they alone have right on their side. We become watchful of the other, moving closer

together. There are certain safety devices built into an experiential network, which originates in what is one's own and seeks a hold in what is common. Assumed to be coming from the outside, the alien is expected to carry its identification at all times as if it were an intruder. It then becomes subjected to evaluation and judgment. As a result, an everyday moral, political, religious, cultural, and also intellectual quarantine is imposed on it.<sup>71</sup>

Yes, the alien might "alienate us from ourselves," and we are always on guard against this danger. But Waldenfels, like Husserl, also contends that alienness is an aspect of subjectivity itself. There is a certain circularity to confronting the alien only to find the alien within ones. Of course, this is yet another major theme of Waldenfels' *Phenomenology*. Contrary to Husserl, Waldenfels claims that there is no absolutely present, self-same subject maintained in purity. To put it bluntly, consciousness is messy. The phenomenological position, for Waldenfels, provides a hint to a solution concerning the problem of the alien. If alienness is already a constitutive component of subjectivity, then there is no need to worry that alienness is so alien that it can never be known.<sup>72</sup>

And yet Waldenfels wavers on this essential point. He mentions in the introduction of his *Phenomenology* that alienness cannot begin with myself otherwise it would be an aspect of the proper.<sup>73</sup> The alien must be radically Other, a pure alterity untouched by the proper or same. But on three other occasions, he returns to the position explained in the previous paragraph, which is most clearly articulated by Levinas' claim from *Totality and Infinity*, "alterity begins only with *me*" (which I will interrogate further below).<sup>74</sup> In two of these instances, Waldenfels merely

asserts that alienness begins “at home” and with oneself, thus positing some vague complicity between fatherland and foreign land. As for the final instance, he argues that it would not be possible to know the alien without “implicitly” referring to the self. Caught up in this self-contradiction is an interpretation of Rimbaud’s statement “I is an Other” (*Je est un autre*).

### An Egocentric Rimbaud?

Waldenfels’ first mention of Rimbaud is cryptic: “Even if the question ‘*Who* am I?’ happens to revert all too quickly to ‘*What* am I?’, this strange question, which short circuits the questioner and the questioned, already contains a trace of Rimbaud’s ‘*JE est un autre.*’”<sup>75</sup> This thought concludes a meditation on the Cartesian discovery of the ego. Waldenfels finds an affinity between Descartes and Rimbaud insofar as they both supposedly emphasize the ego. While this is true for Descartes, it is not so clear in the case of Rimbaud. And one should be immediately suspicious of Waldenfels’ reading when he capitalizes the “Je” to emphasize a word that Rimbaud had originally not emphasized. Regardless of this affinity, Waldenfels attributes to Rimbaud an awareness of the shortcomings of the Cartesian ego, since his statement “contains a trace” of the short circuiting Cartesian line of thought.<sup>76</sup>

On two other occasions, Waldenfels links Rimbaud’s statement with his claim that alienness begins at home. What Rimbaud is able to demonstrate for Waldenfels is that the “I” is primary, but not completely defined by self-identity. It is true that for Rimbaud the “I” has no positive ground and is always in a process of

becoming-Other. To Waldenfels, this sounds like a familiar notion and he assimilates it into his phenomenology of the alien. At one point, he equates Rimbaud's statement with his concept of "intra-personal alienness," which denotes the very structure of self-alienation that I have been describing.<sup>77</sup>

Waldenfels' interpretation of Rimbaud presents a thoroughly egocentric reading of the statement "I is an Other." Another phenomenologist, Levinas, holds a similar perspective, which implicitly derives from another statement by Rimbaud. By examining Levinas' account, I will flesh out this phenomenological appropriation of Rimbaud and demonstrate how it misses Rimbaud's true insight into the nature of subjectivity. Nevertheless, Waldenfels' phenomenology of the alien may still be redeemed in the end.

### *Totality and Infinity* and Rimbaud

Levinas' magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity*, begins with Rimbaud. The allusion in the first line would be immediately recognizable to French readers: "The true life is absent."<sup>78</sup> Levinas places this sentence in quotation marks. It can be found in Rimbaud's prose poem "A Season in Hell."<sup>79</sup> Rimbaud, writing in the voice of his lover Paul Verlaine, immediately gives an example of how the true life is absent. It is impossible to love women, he says, because they supposedly can only desire security. He explains seeing women, whom he would want to have a relationship with, already married to "brutes with as much feeling as an old log."<sup>80</sup> For this reason, love must be reinvented. It must be more than having one's needs met. It must have an



insatiable hunger for the unknown. We can see already how much Levinas' thought is indebted to Rimbaud. The hunger for the unknown, as I have characterized it, is precisely what Levinas will later call Desire.

Desire is a metaphysical relation that directs us toward "*something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*."<sup>81</sup> Levinas distinguishes this kind of metaphysical Desire from mere needs. I need something in the same way I need to eat. I eat because I lack food. By eating, I nourish myself and make myself full again. Need, in this way, is conceived as a lack that can be satisfied. Desire cannot be satisfied in this way because it does not seek something worldly or comestible. Rather, Desire points us to something that is absolutely exterior. As a desire that can never be satisfied, we understand the desired to be something remote and exterior to ourselves, the very "alterity of the Other," which Levinas also calls the Most-High.<sup>82</sup> It is "high" because it is transcendent. Rimbaud's "true life" is the transcendence to which Desire relates us. Verlaine's voice later asks: "Did he [Rimbaud], perhaps, have secrets that would *remake life*?"<sup>83</sup> He concludes that Rimbaud was only *looking* for these secrets. Levinas sets out on the same project.

From where does this project set out? The first line continues in Rimbaud's text by claiming that we are exiles from the world. Levinas corrects this by stating: "But we are in the world." This line implies two things. First, it represents a turn away from Rimbaud. Indeed, we seek to remake life, but this can only be done from within the world. Second, it is an implicit reference to Martin Heidegger.<sup>84</sup> For Heidegger, Dasein is thrown (*Geworfen*) into a world that it did not create and is forced to work

within its limits. In “Transcendence and Height,” Levinas is critical of Heideggerian *Geworfenheit* because it seems to foreclose the possibility of freedom, which would then render problematic any kind of ethical commitment.<sup>85</sup> Yet Levinas does not disagree with the underlying insight of Dasein’s *Geworfenheit*. Indeed, we are thrown, but we can still act freely. This concession to Heidegger is indicative of the binary concerns that saturate *Totality and Infinity*. The opposition established in its very title, which is then repeated in the first two lines, underscores various guises of the fundamental antinomy that Levinas will spend his career negotiating: Rimbaud and Heidegger, true life and world, Other and Ego, transcendence and immanence. This last binary has a greater significance that leads Levinas to interrogate it under the heading of “metaphysics.”

Metaphysics, the essential articulation of transcendence and immanence, reappears in the final paragraph of the first chapter (I.A.5).<sup>86</sup> Levinas begins this paragraph by associating the “philosophy of transcendence” with the “true life” and the “philosophy of immanence” with the point where “every ‘other’...would vanish at the end of history.”<sup>87</sup> One suspects that Heidegger, Husserl, or Hegel (perhaps even all three) belong to this form of philosophy. Contrary to this “immanent” mode of apprehending the Other, Levinas counter-poses “a relationship with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity.”<sup>88</sup> This relationship, he concludes, would be metaphysics itself. Metaphysics is the recognition of an originary ego that is restricted to an economy of the same, but always already has the ability to transcend this economy. Such transcendence can happen by encountering

the face of the Other as Levinas popular argues, but it is also an internal potential insofar as the idea of infinity is already contained within the subject (a proposition Levinas finds in and borrows from Descartes). This internal potential prior to any exterior encounter is the insight buried in the cryptic statement that “alterity begins only with *me*.”

Thus, to paraphrase the three moments encompassed in the first two sentences of *Totality and Infinity*: (1) transcendence exists, but (2) we can only have a relationship with it from where we are (i.e. the world), and (3) this relationship would constitute something unlike any other (economic) relationship. Metaphysics, for Levinas, is the constituting gesture of this relationship. It takes place “within the unfolding of [...] economic existence,” but also “does not result in a[ ...] human totality, [...] but the idea of infinity.”<sup>89</sup> This reading of metaphysics reveals something that is generally missed in Levinas. Despite the insistence on the transcendent absolutely Other who is the Most-High, this transcendence is only accessible from the ego’s restricted economy. There is, in this sense, a reaffirmation of *Geworfenheit*. Although I have attempted to emphasize a Rimbaudian gesture in Levinas’ fundamental project, it is clear that this project ultimately falls back on the necessity, not just the privilege, of a self-present subject.

To be sure, this *faux pas* is fully embraced by Levinas.<sup>90</sup> In the essay “Outside the Subject,” he argues that Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology definitively disproves Rimbaud’s “I is an Other.” The unstable flux of perceptions experienced in empirical subjectivity led Kant to posit a form of transcendental subjectivity that would

unite the disparate empirical selves. This unity of transcendental apperception, which is taken up by Husserl, is thought to have done with Rimbaud's insight: "Vigilance of a continual reawakening, *I* that, Rimbaud notwithstanding, is not an *other*."<sup>91</sup> For Levinas, Husserl's grounding of the empirical ego in the transcendental ego results in a self-relationality based on identity, not difference. In other words, the transcendental I is not an Other, but the essential form of subjectivity to which the empirical I provides the content. While Levinas opens *Totality and Infinity* with Rimbaud, he resists Rimbaud's fundamental insight and insists on the primacy of the ego.

Levinas' pertinence to Waldenfels' phenomenology of the alien is evident. Both phenomenologists return to Rimbaud to articulate the essence of a subjectivity that is always already exposed to alterity. Yet they stop short in this return, preferring to place the ego-subject first. This hesitation is announced in their respective claims that "alterity begins only with *me*" and that "alterity begins at home."<sup>92</sup> In this respect, Husserl represents a crucial counterpoint in that he provides a phenomenological account of how *I* is already Other. Levinas and Waldenfels, in contrast, invoke Rimbaud in a solely rhetorical mode. Now that Waldenfels' phenomenology is adequately situated alongside Husserl and Levinas, I will offer some concluding remarks on the continuing value of Waldenfels and Rimbaud.

### *Sauvage*, Wildness

Phenomenologists continue to return to Rimbaud because his insight captures some fundamental truth about the

nature of subjectivity. It is unlikely that a single sentence from a teenager has ever had as much of an impact as Rimbaud's playful grammar error. Yet this insight, however much it may continue to inspire, is covered over by a phenomenological pre-comprehension of what the subject is or ought to be. This perspective is unable to distinguish between the statements "I is an Other" and "alterity begins only with *me*." Beginning to distinguish the two marks the epiphany that is Rimbaud.

And yet there is a sense that Rimbaud is altogether different than his articulation within phenomenological science. This is the reason why Levinas corrects Rimbaud in the first lines of *Totality and Infinity*. He realizes that there is something too wild in Rimbaud which cannot serve as the ground of his phenomenology. Levinas prefers to cling to the phenomenological primacy of the ego. Without a doubt, the same may also be said about Waldenfels, although he positions himself as a genuine interpreter of Rimbaud. Phenomenology is essentially based on this anti-Rimbaudian wager: without the same, there cannot be an Other, or, in Waldenfels terms, without an established order, there cannot be an alien. Only Husserl, who does not even mention Rimbaud, would try to develop a phenomenology of the alterity found at the core of subjectivity.

Any reading of "I is an Other" that emphasizes the "I" is immediately suspect. If any word should be emphasized in Rimbaud's statement, it is the third-person singular *is* through which the "I" finds its mode of expression. In the famous letters in which his statement appears, Rimbaud illustrates that the "I" is an empty function, a mere gathering point for the experiences of the

seer (*voyant*). In a similar way, Waldenfels states that “I” is a word devoid of content. He claims that the “ego” (*Ich*) is a circumstantial indexical in much the same way that “alien” is (since this latter word can denote an experience or a person). But rather than a point of agreement, this is the heart of Waldenfels’ misreading of Rimbaud. The ego’s context-dependent nature is only significant from a propositional standpoint. From the phenomenological attitude that Waldenfels advocates, the ego is always me, I (*Ich*) am the ego (*Ich*). Since this marker of transcendental subjectivity must be situated in the world through embodied consciousness, it is unthinkable that it can vary in any significant way. For this ego to become-Other, or even to lose its fundamental ability to say “I am,” it would require a new body, a new *me*. Yet this is exactly what Waldenfels (and Levinas) refuse to give up. In this way, they remain committed to the Cartesian self-identity of the subject that finds its most transparent manifestation in Fichte’s declaration that “I am I.”

What, then, is Rimbaud’s elusive insight? There is not space to answer such a question here. From its theorization in letters and “A Season in Hell” to its practice in poetry, Rimbaud’s “I is an Other” has already filled libraries worth of commentary. Its beautiful simplicity, nevertheless, is that the fundamental insight is completely contained in that one statement. Furthermore, the preliminary gestures of a phenomenological account of Rimbaud’s insight have already been made.<sup>93</sup> The issue here is that Waldenfels and Levinas misread Rimbaud by over-emphasizing the role of the ego. Levinas situates his project as a rejoinder to Rimbaud. Waldenfels, in contrast, believes he has discovered Rimbaud’s key insight. At this

point, it would be reasonable to ask if there is even a place in Waldenfels' phenomenology for Rimbaud.

The answer is yes, but the place will not be found where one may initially expect. Waldenfels at times coyly gestures toward an originary transcendental neutrality that precedes the differential individuation of own and alien. When discussing the political-economic capture of attention (e.g. reality TV, social media, etc.), he declares that "Resistance is only to be expected from attention itself, in the shape of *attention sauvage*, an attention which preserves the moments of the an-economic and the anarchical and allows for a surplus of the given attention."<sup>94</sup> That is, attention by nature is focused, but genetically derives from a wild in-attention that allows for the perception of previously-unseen elements that have not been filtered through corporate interests and State security programs. This observation must be read alongside Waldenfels conclusion that a science of the alien (i.e. xenology)

leads us to a form of *alogon* that is not just opposed to reason [i.e. *logos*] as something merely irrational (which would simply come down to an indirect confirmation), but that leaves its marks as moments of the 'wild' in the logos of a culture.<sup>95</sup>

Is this inherent wildness and *attention sauvage* not precisely what Rimbaud had envisioned in his *parade sauvage*? Perhaps it is beyond this very threshold of attention that Rimbaud waits for phenomenology with key in hand.

## Deleuze on Drugs

In 1871, a 16-year-old French boy penned the following line to a friend: “I is an Other.” Perhaps, this grammatical slip would have been quickly forgotten if this boy hadn’t also gone on to revolutionize the art of poetry. Although he never directly admits it, it is fair to say that this slip was entirely intentional. After all, by this time the boy, Arthur Rimbaud, had already surpassed his peers by winning a school poetry contest. What this alternate conjugation challenges us to think is not only the function of language, but also the very relation between subjectivity and alterity, between I and the Other.

Before moving on to my main topic of pharmacological alterity in Deleuze, I’d like to linger on Rimbaud’s statement for a bit to consider what is at stake. In this way, it will also serve as an introduction to Deleuze’s own contribution to our understanding of alterity.

The context of the statement was Rimbaud’s attempt to define the poet. He explains: “The Poet makes himself into a *seer* by a long, involved, and logical *derangement of all the senses*. Every kind of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself; he exhausts every possible poison so that only essence remains.”<sup>96</sup> This demand for experimentation at the extremes of experience is justified by the poet’s search for a universal language. Such a language was supposedly capable of transmitting the essence of experiences so that it may be “absorbed by everyone.”<sup>97</sup>

The discovery of these essences, however, require the poet to live many other lives. One life, one perspective, does not deliver essential truths. To this end, the poet must become other. Despite metaphysical and mythological undertones, becoming other is a very practical endeavor. As Rimbaud describes in “A Season in Hell”:



I admired the hardened convict on whom the prison door will always close; I used to visit the bars and the rented rooms his presence had consecrated; I saw *with his eyes* the blue sky and the flower-filled work of the fields; I followed his fatal scent through city streets.<sup>98</sup>

Thus, the seer-poet becomes other by seeing with the eyes of another, by inhabiting the other's spaces as the other would. This gesture is familiar to many as imitation. In this way, Rimbaud's conception of poetry might be aligned with the Platonic conception which likens poetry to a kind of "ruinous" make-believe.<sup>99</sup> Plato's antipathetic stance toward poetry was a result of his pessimism regarding the efficacy of imitation. Rather than manifesting the life of another, he believed that poetry only obscured the "true nature" of things.<sup>100</sup>

Yet Plato is not the only one who contests Rimbaud's claim. The reality of poetic imitation has been further undercut more recently by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. In their interpretations of Edmund Husserl, Levinas and Derrida claim that the slogan, "I is an Other," is not even tenable.<sup>101</sup> Husserl's grounding of the empirical ego in the transcendental ego results in a self-relationality based on identity, not difference. In other words, the transcendental I is not an Other, but the essential form of subjectivity to which the empirical I provides the content.

Gilles Deleuze, to a certain extent, takes up this criticism of Rimbaud. In *Difference and Repetition*, he indirectly refers to Rimbaud's "I is an Other" as a "long and inexhaustible story."<sup>102</sup> This so-called story is long

because Deleuze finds it indicative of an ancient philosophical question: is there a self? In this context, he returns to Kant's paradox of inner sense to explain that it only seems like "I is an Other" if one doesn't account for the unity of apperception in transcendental subjectivity. This exact argument reappears a quarter century later in Deleuze's final book, *Essays Critical and Clinical*.

One essay from this work, entitled "On Four Poetic Formulas that Might Summarize the Kantian Philosophy," contains Deleuze's most direct discussion of Rimbaud's "I is an Other." Here he repeats and elaborates the Kantian interpretation, but takes it one step further. Rimbaud is no longer part of the Kantian development, but is a bad Kantian at best or a good Aristotelian at worst. This evaluation focuses on the relationship between the I and Other. According to Deleuze's treatment of Rimbaud, the (transcendental) I *molds* the (empirical) self into various heterogeneous identities. Thus, the identity of the self is like a concrete object that must conform to an abstract concept in order to become intelligible—a process quite similar to imitation.

It is not possible for today to explain Deleuze's interpretation of Kant, but we can now appreciate his perspective on Rimbaud. It is evident that Deleuze's perspective changed little, if at all, throughout his professional career. He believed that Rimbaud's "story" of subjectivity was little more than an account of Aristotelian molding. In this way, Deleuze is at home amongst those who favor the Platonic reading of Rimbaud. Against this interpretation, I'd like to read Deleuze's philosophy in spite of itself. Deleuze, in his work with Félix Guattari, explicitly rejects the notion of imitation as an explanatory concept. In

its place, they advocate for a framework of subjectivity that parallels Rimbaud's "I is an Other." Since the drug is a theme common to both Deleuze and Rimbaud, I intend to demonstrate a deeper complicity between these two authors that takes place along pharmacological lines. To begin, we must first look at how Deleuze detaches himself from the Platonic paradigm of imitation.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari attempt to differentiate imitation from becoming. To understand the difference, let's take the example of a masochist who acts like a horse. The masochist moves about the room on all fours. He has a horse's bit in his mouth. Atop his back sits his master. The master whips the horse-masochist and digs spurs deep into his sides. One might say the masochist imitates a horse. Or does he? Is it not the case that there is no distinction between the ways in which the mouths of the horse and masochist are restricted by the bit? Does not the masochist get spurred in the same fashion? Is not the master a veritable rider, just as any other rider of animals? These are the types of questions Deleuze and Guattari would raise.

Essentially, the veracity of the imitation interpretation depends on this core question: Does the horse-masochist *whine* or *whinny*? If he whines, then he is still human; conversely, if he whinnies, he has become something other than a human masochist. For Deleuze and Guattari, reducing the horse-masochist to a whining human playing make-believe lacks explanatory power:

Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature. The crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk, any more than the chameleon reproduces

the colors of its surroundings. The Pink Panther imitates nothing, it reproduces nothing, it paints the world its color, pink on pink.<sup>103</sup>

The presupposition of mimicry is that the crocodile and chameleon are discrete entities over against their environments. The crocodile's skin is *like* a tree. Supposedly it has inherited this trait over time through natural selection. By imitating a tree trunk, it camouflages its body from potential prey, which allows it to hunt without being noticed. But the crocodile is *not* a tree. The tree-like object either *is* a tree or *imitates* a tree; there is no middle.

Deleuze and Guattari trace this law of imitation and its excluded middle throughout various sciences. As they conclude, the problem in each case is that imitation only understands being, not becoming. The masochist becomes other when he plays horse, but imitation can't account for this transformation. It fails to comprehend the multiple becomings that are implicated. To explain this point, let's look at one more example, this time from the text itself.

Vladimir Slepian is always hungry. He doesn't want to be hungry anymore, so he attempts to become a dog. How? He will walk on all fours. He puts a shoe on one hand and ties it. After slipping the shoe on the other hand, he realizes he cannot tie it. His mouth must be put to use in order to tie the shoe. At this moment, he becomes other, he becomes a dog. The mouth is uprooted "from its [human] specificity making it become 'with' the other organ."<sup>104</sup> The mouth-hand relation becomes the completely different relation of muzzle-paw. Slepian enters a becoming-dog through the acquisition of forces that are peculiar to dogs. His organs become sensitive to new affects and relations;

they are no longer the same organs *per se*. In the same way, the horse-masochist relinquishes his instinctual forces (feeling pain from a spur) for the acquired forces of a horse (running forward), which can be distributed through his new organs.

Slepian enters a new context that requires a different call and response, which is unlike mere imitation. He shows that one should not imitate a dog in order to become a dog, but compose oneself in a way that accomplishes specific canine functions. This example substantiates Deleuze and Guattari's technical definition of becoming: "to emit particles that take on certain relations of movement and rest because they enter a particular zone of proximity."<sup>105</sup> Slepian engages in becoming-animal, which is a certain kind of becoming other. Deleuze and Guattari suggest three other methods for doing so: (1) eating the natural food of the animal, (2) entering into relations with other animals (e.g. becoming-dog with cats), or (3) using a prosthesis to achieve the desired animal affect. The final option returns us to the common theme between Deleuze and Rimbaud, the drug, which is a kind of prosthesis as well.

The discussion of drugs in *A Thousand Plateaus* is quick and full of gaps. One is left with the impression that something is being assumed, especially when startling claims are made, such as Deleuze and Guattari declare that "many things can be drugs."<sup>106</sup> The key to this puzzle was presented two years before the publication of *A Thousand Plateaus* in the form of a short contribution from Deleuze alone to a conference on drug addiction. The paper, entitled "Two Questions on Drugs," provides a concise explanation of Deleuze's conception of the drug.

The paper begins with the following question: “Do drugs have a *specific causality*?” By specific causality, Deleuze means a network of causal relations that are proper to drugs themselves. Contrary to the common belief which understands drug effects as mere subjective experiences (such as hallucinations), the existence of a specific causality implies that the affects peculiar to drugs are in some way consistent across users and, therefore, objective. This causal network, once intelligible, would allow one to predict and measure pharmacological effects.

Previous attempts to discover a specific causality of drugs have occurred, most notably in psychoanalysis. But Deleuze believes the psychoanalytic attempt had failed when it negated the material alterity of the drug-substance itself and, instead, inscribed the impulse for the drug into its interpretive framework. Another failure notably found in the hard sciences has been to reduce this specific causality to a base causality of material forces. This move obscures how drug experiences fundamentally alter perception and desire. The contact between one’s body and a drug is not the same causal connection as when two billiard balls strike.

When discussing research on the effects of drugs, Deleuze often cites fiction writers like Henri Michaux, William Burroughs, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. These writers are more concerned with the significant effects proper to drugs than those who only analyze changes at the molecular level, which remain superficial when removed from their complete context. Fiction is a space where the unique experience of a drug can be recorded and analyzed. In the same way that Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* transformed our understanding of memory,

Fitzgerald's prose, Deleuze asserts, did the same for alcoholism.

The one element that unites all drugs is that they reveal something that was previously imperceptible.<sup>107</sup> The imperceptible is more other than other and, in this sense, signifies radical alterity. Deleuze and Guattari claim that the manifestation of formerly imperceptible elements marks the dawn of a new world.<sup>108</sup> Becoming sets off on a path or line that leads into new worlds and unique alterities. Drugs can be a vehicle for this becoming. Yet it is not simply a matter of using or not using. Deleuze's conception of alterity is essentially pharmacological for two reasons.

First, like pharmaceuticals, alterity is a matter of doses. Drugs are quantitative in that they "involve speeds, modifications of speed, thresholds of perception, forms and movements, micro-perceptions, perception on molecular level, superhuman or subhuman times, etc."<sup>109</sup> Each drug contains a threshold in which the user's perception experiences an excess and bears witness to something imperceptible. Take nutmeg, for example.

Conventionally, the closest nutmeg comes to being a drug is its use as flavoring for coffee. There is, however, a chemical compound in nutmeg with psychoactive properties called myristicin. Not every use of nutmeg is an occasion of drug use. "There is a dosage threshold based on quantity, metabolism, and body weight that causes nutmeg to cease being a spice and enter the realm of being a drug."<sup>110</sup> In this case, one finds many of the categories that Deleuze cites as elements of the specific causality of drugs. The nutmeg user, dependent on the speed of her metabolism and the threshold of her weight-to-quantity ratio, will become sensitive to imperceptible fluctuations

such as the diffraction of rays of light, the movement of internal organs, and acute behavioral phenomena.

The second reason for Deleuze's pharmacological alterity is that each line of becoming exhibits the structure of drug addiction. One must hear in "pharmacological" the Greek root word *pharmakon*, which is often translated as "drug," but has the contradictory meanings of remedy and poison. The right amount of nutmeg turns it into a drug. Too little and the desired effect will not be produced; too much and one risks pain, liver damage, or death. Indeed, every becoming is pharmacological in this sense. Drugs bring us beyond ourselves, transform our bodies in the face of the radically other, but also risk destroying us. This risk is exemplified by the mad desire of appropriation.

Appropriation is an attempt to make proper what is improper, to eat the other, as bell hooks would say. In other words, what differentiates the drug user from the addict is an unrelenting and fatal desire to make everything one's own. This endless accumulation and consumption ultimately destroys the consumer, foreclosing any encounter with the Other through the self-destruction of the I. Deleuze describes the character of self-destruction as "when everything is reduced to this flow alone: 'my' hit, 'my' trip, 'my' glass."<sup>11</sup> In this instance, one's line of becoming, once directed toward new worlds, now spirals into itself until it becomes a point with no speed or direction: complete stagnation, death.

As seen in the example of Valdimir Slepian, the body is a temporary assemblage of organs inscribed in a process of becoming. The drug as such exhibits the structure of this becoming, both in its potentials and risks. Yet an encounter with radical alterity doesn't require an



illegal substance, which is why the reader of Deleuze is often reminded that many things are drugs, not just narcotics. In fact, the goal of the drug experience is to attain the same end without the same means: “We can not give up the hope that drugs and alcohol (their “revelations”) will be able to be relived and recovered for their own sake at the surface of the world, independently of those substances.”<sup>112</sup> Although an infamous advocate of drug use, Rimbaud would agree.

For Rimbaud, drugs were a path to new visions, which were the currency of the seer. But like Charles Baudelaire, whom Rimbaud dubbed the “first seer,” he understood that one could be drunk on a number of things, including wine, virtue, or poetry. The new visions granted by drunkenness were not meant to be hoarded or even fully remembered by the seer, but only utilized in a transformation of the world that revealed its inner complexity and opportunity.

“I is an Other” means the body is in a continual process of becoming. It abhors any stultifying “I” that attempts to lay permanent claim to its operation. Rimbaud frantically asks, “Quick! Are there any other lives?”<sup>113</sup> This question haunts each instantiation of the I. Rimbaud mocks the philosophers of his time for misunderstanding the nature of the ego. Still today we have yet to take Rimbaud seriously on this point, as evidenced by the attempts to Kantianize him. What most have missed is Rimbaud’s most crucial contribution, which is also the point I began with. Rimbaud says, “I is,” not “I am.” One must always speak from the third person because the irruption of speech is always too late to designate the newly emerging I. When Rimbaud writes that it doesn’t matter to the wood when it

discovers it's a violin, he is not stating that an object is indifferent to being *molded* by a concept, but that the newly discovered identity of being a violin is only temporary. The wood's identity modulates along a line of becoming.

Like Deleuze, Rimbaud acknowledges that becoming is dangerous. He compares the task of the seer to sewing a crop of warts on one's face and admits that leaps into the unknown can be deadly.<sup>114</sup> Like drugs, each attempt at becoming-other leaves a scar. These scars, nevertheless, are the price to be paid for distilling the essence of experiences. Deleuze's pharmacological alterity is a systematic account of becoming-other in the Rimbaudian sense. Although it would take much more time to do justice to the ontological and materialist origins of this account, I have sought to show that a profound complicity underlies Deleuze and Rimbaud's conceptions of alterity. This conception is unlike any other. It denies that a relation to radical alterity can exist, not because subjectivity is hermetically sealed off from alterity, but because the subject is already other.



## Toward a Bartleby Politics

As I lay in this bed, slightly dizzy with a minor hangover, I am reminded of Proust in his cork-lined room.<sup>115</sup> He was always a sick child, but later in life his illness restricted him to his bed for all but a single hour of the night. He could only leave his room at that unique hour of the night when the late-night drunks were sleeping and the early-morning workers had not yet woken up. The air was moist and easy to breathe even though his illness was intensifying. Despite being so reclusive, Proust loved to throw parties *in absentia*. With his hour of freedom, he would visit the halls in which parties were thrown. Constantly feverish, he walked around in a gaudy coat with a fur-lined hood; Proust was an Eskimo in a desert. What better hero could there be to begin this meditation than one who experienced all kinds of displacements, dispersions, delays, derangements, and departures?

When many read Proust they see a plethora of anchors, like graveyards of old nautical vessels that have not moved in the past fifty years and probably will not move for another fifty. A history is built and links to the past are constantly made. One imagines the entirety of the Search to be consisting of traces and recollections. This could not be more wrong. Proust's brilliance lies precisely in his explication of the opposite of this interpretation. What connects Proust to his grandmother's boots is not remembrance or nostalgia, but delirium. The very proliferation of signs and the impossibility of an absolute reading (viz. an absolute origin) is what the Search truly discovers. In other words, it is not the destination that the

reader discovers at the end of the Search, but Searching itself.

Proust introduces a new polarity, one that is usually ignored, but more often miscomprehended. Anchors and memory define one pole, while the other is designated by wild oceans and delirium. According to this framework, one can begin to understand state violence, the prohibition of drugs, Western epistemology, human rights, behavioral health clinics, and several other politically-charged topics. Proust provides a new revolutionary strategy by re-conceptualizing power structures. Following this line of thought may be *enlightening* for some, but for those to whom it speaks directly, it will be *intoxicating*. At this point we must depart from the Proust anecdote (which is also an antidote) and turn to a web of texts that contribute to a general theory of disavowal.

### to derange all the senses

In the past, political theorists have been skeptical of the disposition for disavowal. It seemed to be an impossible praxis or an all-too-common one. Questions kept occurring that seemed to be paradoxes. Should I avow my disavowal? Can disavowal itself be disavowed? These perplexities are unavoidable, but certainly not invidious to a radical politics. It comes from confusion about what the disavowalist does.

The politics of disavowal is its own tradition, but it also takes after one. Michel Foucault was possibly the first to notice that the negation of a discourse is part of that discourse. In defining the methodological *rule of immanence* for discursive analysis, he admits that “between

techniques of knowledge and strategies of power, there is no exteriority.” For example, the liberation of sexuality in the 1960s was a disguise for more pervasive techniques of control that inhibited sexuality. As soon as one believes that one has resisted a certain discourse, one is already trapped within the bind of another discourse:

One must not suppose that there exists a certain sphere of sexuality that would be the legitimate concern of a free and disinterested scientific inquiry were it not the object of mechanisms of prohibition brought to bear by the economic or ideological requirements of power.

Here one finds what Foucault means by “there is no exteriority.” One can never step outside of power relations; even the resistance to power must be structured by some form of knowledge-power. The avowal/disavowal framework often falls into this problem. By disavowing, one merely reacts to a given discourse with as much autonomy as a contrarian. However, this is not a radical disavowal. There exists a form of disavowal that does not fold back into avowal. Where weak disavowal affirms a certain *op-position*, radical disavowal is a shift in *dis-position*.

The shift that constitutes radical disavowal requires a departure from one’s private subjectivity. One must renounce one’s possession of oneself. This is accomplished by wandering away from all that is appropriate (*ap-propri-atus*) and autonomous (*autos-nomos*). The mistake that is made in weak disavowal is precisely the establishment of another self. This self is always created in front of a mirror with its negated reflection staring directly back at it.

Radical disavowal smashes the mirror and demands to become other. It knows that power is dynamic and mobile, not static or concrete. If one could translate position, *op-position*, and *dis-position* into language, they would resemble the following utterances:

Avowal: I am for *x*.

Disavowal: I am against *x*.

Radical disavowal: I is another *x*.

What is at issue is how we resist things, whether it is the state, the police, patriarchy, ageism, etc. Is it possible to oppose a position without recreating the violent regime one seeks to escape? The radical disavowalist would answer in the affirmative. Of course, this is not the affirmation of the top over bottom, good over bad, masculine over feminine, etc. It is rather an alter-affirmation, a side-step, a call for pure horizontality. This formula of alter-affirmation comes from *l'enfant terrible* himself: Arthur Rimbaud.

Rimbaud begins with a simple premise: “*Je est un autre*” (“I is an Other” or “I is someone else”). Once, when citing this remark to a friend of mine, she mechanically corrected the grammar: *Je suis* (“I am”). However, Rimbaud’s improper conjugation is not the folly of a sixteen-year-old, but a means by which he tries to get us to think beyond the primordially of the subject. One cannot say “I am” because one does not immediately speak from the “I” position, but from *an-other* position. Rimbaud reprimands traditional conceptions of subjectivity: “It’s wrong to say I think: one should say I am thought.” But why should this be the case?

In a letter dated May 13, 1871, Rimbaud writes: “For I is someone else. Tough luck to the wood that becomes a violin...” Again, in a letter from the same month, he writes: “For I is someone else. If the brass awakes as horn, it can’t be to blame.” The theme here is that the thing only becomes what it is in the moment that it acts. The brass awakes as a horn because it is used as one. Likewise, I become an “I” for myself at the moment that I realize I have adopted a certain position. But this “I” does not precede my entanglement as a subject. On this view, I do not have an essence or form which grounds my identity, something that Rimbaud reiterates in his poem sequence *A Season in Hell*: “What was I in the century past? I only find myself today.” Rather than begin with the “I,” ego, or subject, Rimbaud presents us with a self which is always already other, what he calls the seer (*voyant*). The tendency to posit a centralized or unified ego has been the mistake of philosophers (whom he calls “old fools”) who have left us with the task of sweeping up “millions of skeletons.” Rimbaud contends that the egoist only succeeds in making his or her “soul into a monster.” In opposition to this tendency, Rimbaud offers the following as a formula for becoming a seer: “a long, involved, and logical derangement of all the senses.”

This derangement of all the senses involves the consumption of substances in all their hallucinogenic varieties. Rimbaud believed that for a soul to be ripe with potential, it must experience all kinds of sorrow, madness, love, and joy. This is the only way to get at the true essence of something: not by approaching it from the position of an isolated, transcendent, or primordial ego, but by becoming that thing. I only know the other by becoming the other.



The goal here is not to collect many experiences. (Who, after all, would be the collector?) Rather, Rimbaud asserts that it is simply the experience itself which is meaningful, even if we become bewildered and eventually lose our understanding of it.

In *A Season in Hell*, Rimbaud describes derangement as a kind of “elementary hallucination.” If I see a mosque instead of a factory or a playground where there is only industrial ruins, I must take these experiences to be phenomenologically valid, even when they are at odds with previous experiences. If there is no ego, then there is no internal rubric for which experiences pass as valid or not. The ego only functions as an anchor, which impoverishes the soul by delimiting proper experience through self-referential verification.

In Rimbaud’s view, each person has several other lives. This plurality of experience gives rise to a plurality of selves, none of which can lay claim to a privileged or sovereign position. Rimbaud describes how he has been able to have conversations with moments from a person’s *other* lives. This, he explains, is how he fell in love with a pig:

It seemed to me that everyone should have had several *other* lives as well. This gentleman doesn’t know what he’s doing; he’s an angel. That family is a litter of puppy dogs. With some men, I often talked out loud with a moment from one of their other lives—that’s how I happened to love a pig.

Despite Rimbaud’s love for the absurd, he is unwaveringly serious about the importance of the seer and the derangement required to become one. At one point, he uses

the example of seeing with the eyes of a prisoner. Only by seeing as the prisoner had could Rimbaud be witness to his “glory and his rightness.”

Yet, becoming a seer is not simply a matter of running away or having empathy for someone else.

One must be divested of the notion that one could run away or “get lost” in order to find oneself. This idea can be found in everything from Sean Penn’s film *Into the Wild* to James Joyce’s self-exile. The idea of “getting lost to find oneself” establishes a teleology that is absent in Rimbaud’s formulation of “I is someone else.” Every occurrence of “getting lost” is indirectly related to a search for the self. The assumption here is that if I remove all heteronomous elements in my life, I will eventually be left with nothing other than my own autonomy, understood as *autos-nomos*, or law of the self. One is still left with a kernel of interiority, property (from the root *proprius*, meaning “pertaining to one’s self”), and presence in which the exterior other can be defined, excluded, and exploited. The subversive power of Rimbaud’s doctrine lies precisely in the undermining of autonomy itself as it pertains to the primordially of the self. When one imagines becoming the other, it is not in terms of a central “I” that tries on many different clothes. What one actually discovers is the lack of origin, or a non-originary origin in which the not-I vacillates between *it-self* and *its other*. Once the not-I has congealed into an I, once it begins to think, it opens the possibility of becoming other (i.e., of becoming thought). Therefore, “getting lost to find oneself” is commensurate with the “derangement of all the senses” only insofar as they both posit pauses, gaps, and displacements in the “self.” With this exception, the rest remains incompatible.

While getting lost invokes a process that repeats “I, I, I, I, I...” for every encountered other, Rimbaud’s seer is in a continual process of becoming in the form of “not-I, I, not-I, I...” and so on, *ad infinitum*.

Rimbaud well understood his place in history. He knew that he was not the *first* seer. In actuality, the first seer was his predecessor and fellow French poet Charles Baudelaire. Indeed, it was Baudelaire came closest to writing anything that could resemble a mantra of the seer. It can be found in a prose poem aptly titled “Be Drunk!” The first couple lines are as follows:

You have to be always drunk. That's all there is to it —it's the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk. But on what? Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk.

from drifts to drugs

It would be wrong to consider Rimbaud a proto-situationist. The “derangement of all the senses” is not a drift (*derive*), but a drug. The tales from Rimbaud’s personal life make this clear enough: drinking absinthe, smoking hash, pissing on poets, jerking off into Verlaine’s milk, experimenting sexually with all kinds of partners, *playing the fool to the point of madness*. All of this is connected for Rimbaud. His love for big-breasted waitresses in rural taverns cannot be dissociated from his fascination with colorful children’s hymnals. He took Baudelaire’s mandate seriously: be drunk! But on what? On

what should one become drunk? *Wine, poetry, or virtue, as you wish.*

While Baudelaire's list remains relatively short, Rimbaud found it necessary to expand the notion of drunkenness and, with it, the notion of *drug*. It was no longer important what mild deliriums could be accessed by getting closer to the gods. These Aristotelian fetishes eventually collapsed under the momentum of history and gave way to the atheistic-anarchistic impulses of the disavowalist. For the disavowalist, everything is a drug. Even the hangover and illness that comes after the use of a drug are, in their own ways, drugs. This is what Thomas de Quincey taught us in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. In the same way, Virginia Woolf extolls illness in her unforgettable essay "On Being Ill." Illness, like drug use, opens up a new space of possibility that disrupts life *as it is currently lived*. Woolf, who was chronically ill (or should we say chronically deranged?), attempts to transmute the values of the sober herd:

Yet it is not only a new language that we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions; love must be deposed in favor of a temperature of 104; jealousy give place to the pangs of sciatica; sleeplessness play the part of villain, and the hero become a white liquid with a sweet taste—that mighty Prince with the moths' eyes and the feathered feet, one of whose names is Chloral.

The Prince, for Woolf, sometimes goes by the name Chloral, which was formerly used as a sedative. Of course, she is careful to note that this is only *one* of the Prince's names. Could he not also be called acid, adderal, or

alcohol? Could the Prince have any name? If so, how is this name significant at all? If everything is a drug, can the notion “drug” still have meaning?

Jacques Derrida offers an answer by first noting the socially-charged meaning of the word “drug” itself. We consume drugs every day: nicotine, caffeine, rBGH, sunscreen, etc. However, a “drug” (in the sense of the “war on drugs”) is always already a drug that society has morally condemned. Nothing apart from this moral condemnation separates the chemicals in your morning orange juice from those found in heroin. Sometimes we tell stories about how some drugs are natural and others are not. “If it comes from the earth, it has to be good for you.” Yet, even the decision to label something “natural” is inscribed within a politico-juridical matrix which exists solely for distinguishing between the “natural” and the “conventional.” What we call a “drug,” against all presuppositions, is a non-scientific concept.

So, what is the function of this thing we call a “drug?” What does it mean to be *some-thing* that is also *every-thing*? A drug is always something that is taken in. Thus, a drug can only be situated within a setting that acts as the site of this “taking in,” “consuming,” “injecting.” Often times, the ground is the ideal or pure body: our body before it is contaminated by drugs. We can see this in every facet of life from the child who is not allowed too much sugar to the addict who needs to get “clean.” Thus, a drug is always a penetration of the self by the other. It is a disorientation or derangement of the self that is like wading into the unknown. *Terra incognita*. Derrida muses on how the “taking in” of drugs may always be operative, even in expression:

We will always have unclassified or unclassifiable supplements of drugs or narcotics. Basically everybody has his own, and I don't just mean stuff that is patently comestible, smokable, or shootable. As you know, the introjection or incorporation of the other has so many other resources, stratagems, and detours...It can always invent new orifices, in addition to and beyond those, for example the mouth, which we think we naturally possess. Besides, orality does not open up only to receive, but also, as they say, to emit, and we should ask ourselves whether drug addiction consists simply and essentially in receiving and taking in, rather than in "expressing" and pushing outside, for example in a certain form of speaking or of singing, whether or not we drink what we "spit out."

Disavowal is the recognition of the drug *as such*. The disavowalist goes to rehab to learn how to be a better addict. In the case of the red pill or the blue pill, the disavowalist washes down both with some molly water. But why is this political? What does drug use, no matter how revolutionary it is, have to do with the state, patriarchy, ageism, class warfare, etc.? The contention of this short discussion of radical disavowal is that the drug is the most basic unit of *an-archic* force—that is, its primary purpose is the creation of "other lives," which undoubtedly obscure the possibility of ever having one authoritative life. Contrary to radical disavowal, the state occupies itself with the production of numerous life-styles. These so-called life-styles are cultivated through techniques of self that firmly ground a person in sobriety. "For each life-style, its own culture!" This is what we learn from capitalism, from our

history books, from Tiquun's *Theory of a Young-Girl*. This is not an introduction to the problems that everyone is already aware of; there is no need to regurgitate unless it is in order to derange your senses. The violence of sustaining a pure or ideal self, designated previously by *avowal*, is not lost on Derrida, either. Hinting at themes we have already discussed, Derrida explains what motivates the fear of drug use:

It is in the name of [the authenticity of a work that has been properly labored for, e.g., the creative productions of a poet] that drug addiction is condemned or deplored. This authenticity can be *appropriated*—either simultaneously (in confusion) or successively (in denial) to the values of natural or symbolic normality, of truth, of a real relation to true reality, of free and responsible subjectivity, of productivity, and so forth. And it *appropriates* such different values, makes them *proper* to itself the more so in that it is itself founded on the value of *properness or property*, and of the appropriation or reappropriation of self. It is the making proper of the proper itself, in as much as the proper is opposed to the heterogeneity of the im-proper, and to every mode of foreignness or alientation that might be recognize in someone's resorting to drugs.

The passage rightly ends with a gesture towards the *im-proper*. If the state is *proper*, the drug is *im-proper*; if the self is *proper*, the other is *im-proper*. To move away from the proper (the “subject” in its most literal sense) is to move closer towards foreignness and alterity via the drug. The state's primary concern is homogeneity, and, in response, the disavowalist proposes a defense of heterogeneity, of the other, of the drug. It is no surprise that

tactics as diverse as Food Not Bombs, co-op urban gardens, window smashing, and violent insurrection can be grouped under the notion of the “drug.” In this way, the politics of disavowal is as much about becoming a drug addict as it is about recognizing how the violent pressures of the state promote and reinforce the stabilizing nature of sobriety across all aspects of everyday life.

The state wants to restrict, suppress, and codify disavowal. Only certain disavowals could be enacted and they usually require a statement of intent and two weeks’ notice. Every disavowal must correlate to its opposite. Alcohol does not contribute to the interests of the state, so it must be a *controlled* substance which falls under tax and surveillance. Alcoholics Anonymous teaches amateur disavowalists to use more responsible forms of derangement like caffeine and nicotine so they can still make it to work. Caffeine intoxication as disavowal correlates to its productive avowal in the efficiency of the worker. As long as you are contributing to various industrial complexes (prison, medical, military, etc.), the state does not care if you are deranged or not. But as soon as you drift outside of these requirements, you become a criminal or, even worse, an addict. Citizens spend their lives either building up the state or being controlled by it. Disavowal is a tool for escaping and searching for new forms of social organization. Disavowalists renounce the weak drugs of the state, which are cut with oppression and violence. The Disney world derangements of John Smith are given up for a rusty boat and the possibility of living *other-wise*.



*à la recherche de Bartleby*

I began this short discussion of the politics of disavowal with a comment about Proust. He may not be the best example of a disavowalist, but his life was not just a Search for the truth of the past. Proust returned continually to his deliriums, fighting off every anchor that weighed him down. Likewise, the disavowalist favors the pole of derangement, compassion, and drug over against the pole maintained by the state and its program of sobriety. More aptly, the politics of disavowal might name the figure of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* as its spokesperson. It is precisely the difference between weak and radical disavowal that is illuminated when one utters: "I would prefer not to."

Many have taken and mistaken *Bartleby*; he has been put to use in more campaigns than any other literary anti-hero in the past two hundred years. In *Bartleby & Co.*, Enrique Vila-Matas traces the pathology of what he terms "Bartleby syndrome," present long before its appearance in Melville's story. By outlining the "literature of the No," Vila-Matas catalogs writers who have quit writing or never even wrote a single word. *Bartleby & Co.* vacillates between the avowal of writing and its disavowal, which is characterized by prolonged silence. Through an archeology of silence, Vila-Matas hopes to find the path to the "writing of the future." However, his pursuit never points to a revolution in literature because it remains chained to contemporary standards by establishing a negative identity through weak disavowal ("I am not x"), not a radical one.

To affirm a *Bartleby* politics of disavowal, one must break entirely with the defeatist dualities of everyday life.

While Vila-Matas recognizes the radical potential of writers like Rimbaud and de Quincey, his notion of refusal remains conceptually limited. His hallucinatory reading of Socrates as the “illustrious predecessor” of Rimbaud is mildly imaginative, but it is only a feeble derangement that does not lead to any discoveries in the Rimbaudian seer sense of “derangement.” The Socratic antipathy toward writing implies a dedication to truth and juridical responsibility that can only be actualized in the vocal confessions of a self-same subject. In contrast, Rimbaud’s search for other lives euphorically embraces the dishonesty of writing since there is no originary subject to which one’s writing ought to be faithful.

Most of all, Vila-Matas’s premature congratulations for being the first to “demythologize” Rimbaud’s silence demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of Rimbaudian derangement. Rimbaud’s departure from writing at the age of nineteen was not, as it is argued by Vila-Matas, an avowal of silence. Rather, it is a radical disavowal of the literary drug as such. Even while he was writing, Rimbaud was already engaging with silence: “I turned silences and nights into words. What was unutterable, I wrote down.” It appears to many interpreters that Rimbaud is giving up on writing in his final works. Vila-Matas notes that Rimbaud’s call to be “absolutely modern” signaled a utilitarian turn in the young poet’s thinking. Specifically, Rimbaud chastises his childhood imagination in *A Season in Hell*: “I used to believe in every kind of magic.” However, less than eight years later in 1881, he would write from Aden to his family about his continued interest in magic:

I would like to learn about the best technical instruments made in France (or abroad) used in the

following disciplines: mathematics, optics, astronomy, electrical engineering, meteorology, pneumatics, mechanics, hydraulics, and mineralogy. [...] I also require catalogues devoted to novelties, pyrotechnics, magic, mechanical models and construction summaries, etc.

Rimbaud never renounced magic. His adieu to poetry, foreshadowed implicitly in *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*, was merely a horizontal maneuver; he was seeking a new drug, a new disavowal. He left behind his alchemy of the word in search of new alchemies that were capable of building entire civilizations out of sand. This lateral move constituted one of Rimbaud's many radical disavowals. For Vila-Matas, however, one either writes or remains silent. One is reduced to the dynamic of avowal and (weak) disavowal. Such a reading of Rimbaud fails to acknowledge the genetic condition of silence, which is itself a kind of writing or, as Derrida would say, *arche-writing*. *Arche-writing* presents the possibility of writing *otherwise*, of establishing a milieu of writing outside of contemporary standards; it also delimits the current divisionary relationship between writing and silence. In this sense, *arche-writing* is the foundation which allows for the drug or *pharmakon* to transmute the self into someone else. Vila-Matas exhibits a confusion about the structure of the drug experience when he claims that opium was de Quincey's way of saying No. Opium cannot be properly categorized as an affirmation or negation. It rather initiates a radical disavowal that completely realigns the current parameters of Yes and No.

*Arche-writing* is to literature as radical disavowal is to politics. Bartleby's formula has been appropriated by

many writers and philosophers, but few fathom the delicate distinction it draws. In *Bartleby*, one does not find a resistance to the current political order, but a becoming other that threatens the legitimacy of that very order. Recently, Slavoj Žižek has linked this aspect of *Bartleby* to the terrorist silence practiced by protesters who do not seek negotiations. He invokes *Bartleby* in following manner:

Bartleby says, “I would prefer not to” and *not* “I don’t prefer (or care) to do it” [...], Bartleby does not negate the predicate, he rather *affirms a non-predicate*: what he says is not that he *doesn’t want to do it*; he says that *he prefers (wants) not to do it*. This is how we pass from the politics of “resistance,” parasitical upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation.

While one must hesitate at equating derangement with affirming a non-predicate, Žižek’s treatment of *Bartleby* adequately places any *Bartleby* politics outside of the “hegemonic position *and* its negation.” This outside is only accessible through radical disavowal.

The potential for radical disavowal is subterranean: it is there, but not yet present. Its actualization resides in a reorientation of our bodies to the state. A disavowalist politic must no longer be about positioning our-self to the state or reclaiming a self beyond the state, but of opening the self to the radically other in the form of the drug. This, perhaps, is the only *prescription* of disavowalist politics, but it is also one that must be dosed. Too much of any drug becomes counter-revolutionary. The overused drug takes the place of a new self, rather than a foreign *other*. There is nothing more authoritarian than the disavowalist that

develops a personal, subjective preference for a certain drug. After all, this is precisely how the state defends its claim to sobriety as what is proper to the “clean bodies” of its citizens. Never be afraid, as Derrida says, to “invent new orifices!”

# **Cultural Interventions**



## Sia and Becoming-Animal

On May 19, 2014, Sia Furler performed her song, “Chandelier,” on “The Ellen DeGeneres Show.” It has been said that the performance was a recreation of the music video, complete with a replica of the set.<sup>116</sup> Even the dancer, Maddie Ziegler, is represented as imitating Sia’s appearance. It is quite easy to understand this relationship to be analogical. Ziegler performs in place of Sia because Sia does not wish to be a public figure. However, to establish a correspondence between Ziegler and Sia, there must already be a difference in identity between the two people. Contrary to the imitation interpretation, Sia’s performance suggests a challenge to the presupposition of fixed identities. Our current task is to understand this challenge and its implications.

This task will play out in three acts. In the first, we will look at how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari critique imitation in their concept *becoming-animal*. They provide us with philosophical and scientific reasons for believing that difference *precedes* identity, thus making imitation secondary to the more primordial processes of becoming. The second act magnifies the role of Ziegler in the performance. Continuing on the theme of becoming-animal, we will link Ziegler’s role to Arthur Rimbaud’s doctrine of the seer. Ziegler does more than interpret Sia’s song in dance; she reinvents it. Finally, the closing act unveils the affirmation at the core of becoming-animal and Rimbaudian becoming-other. We argue that it signifies more than the rejection of identity and its law of resemblance or imitation. To this end, we graft Hakim



Bey's logic of disappearance onto Sia's theatrics. Ultimately, we seek to prove that the wig fashioned after Sia's hairstyle is an invitation to become other than oneself within a general economy of alterity.

# I

A common scene: a masochist moves about a room on all fours. He has a horse's bit in his mouth. Atop his back sits his master. The master whips the horse-masochist and digs spurs deep into his sides. The masochist imitates a horse. Or does he? Is it not the case that there is no distinction between the ways in which the mouths of the horse and masochist are restricted by the bit? Does not the masochist get spurred in the same fashion? Is not the master a veritable rider, just as any other rider of animals? These questions are raised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari through their discussion of the concept of becoming-animal. Essentially, the veracity of the imitation interpretation depends on this very question: Does the horse-masochist *whine* or *whinny*?

Deleuze and Guattari begin by criticizing the explanatory power of imitation:

Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature. The crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk, any more than the chameleon reproduces the colors of its surroundings. The Pink Panther imitates nothing, it reproduces nothing, it paints the world its color, pink on pink.

The presupposition of mimicry is that the crocodile and chameleon are discrete entities over against their environments. The crocodile's skin is *like* a tree. It has inherited this trait over time through natural selection. By imitating a tree trunk, it camouflages its body from potential prey, which allows it to hunt without being noticed. But the crocodile is *not* a tree. One either *is* a tree or *imitates* a tree; there is no middle.

Imitation is not only a traditional way of ascribing being, but is also the foundation of certain sciences. Deleuze and Guattari specifically target and criticize nature history because of its reliance on imitation. According to series of filiation and descent and structures of kinship and genealogy, natural history has developed an evolutionary map of animal relations. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that natural history analyzes relationships in terms of two kinds of analogy: proportion (*a* resembles *b*, *b* resembles *c*, etc.) and proportionality (*a* is to *b* as *c* is to *d*). (These forms of analogy also graft onto the series-structures distinction just made.) Accordingly, nature unfolds as a divine process of imitation (*mimesis*). Each animal is like another, each whole differing in proportionality and each part differing in degree.

In opposition to imitation, Deleuze and Guattari propose the concept of becoming-animal. Becoming-animal is not to be *like* an animal or even to literally become a specific animal, but to enter into relation with another, heterogeneous life system. This interaction causes an irreversible change within both systems. When two breeds meet, a cross-breed is produced. Indeed, this is the failure of natural history: it "can only think in terms of relationships (between A and B), not in terms of production

(from A to x).” To explain this process, Deleuze and Guattari refer to Rémy Chauvin’s work on *aparallel evolution*, that is, reproduction between two entirely different beings.

We do not need to gesture to exotic plants or endangered species to explain *aparallel evolution*. Citing the work of Benveniste and Todaro, Deleuze and Guattari describe a becoming-animal that is peculiar to domestic cats. A certain type C virus had infected baboons and domestic cats. By transforming their DNA in precisely the same way, the cat becomes a close genetic relative of the baboon. Of course, this does not mean that the cat acts as if it were a baboon. It is rather the case that the cat and baboon are now capable of producing a radically new genetic lineage that could not have been previously anticipated. Although, these types of events are not entirely exhausted at the genetic level: “We evolve and die more from polymorphous and rhizomatic flux than from hereditary diseases, or disease that have their own line of descent.”

Back to humanity. Vladimir Slepian is always hungry. He does not want to be hungry anymore, so he attempts to become a dog. How? He will walk on all fours. He puts a shoe on one hand and ties it. After slipping the shoe on the other hand, he realizes he cannot tie it. His mouth must be put to use in order to tie the shoe. At this moment, he enters a becoming-animal. The mouth is uprooted “from its specificity making it become ‘with’ the other organ.” The mouth-hand relation becomes the completely different relation of muzzle-paw. Slepian enters a becoming-dog through the acquisition of forces that are peculiar to dogs. His organs become sensitive to new

affects and relations; they are no longer the same organs *per se*. In the same way, the horse-masochist relinquishes his instinctual forces (feeling pain from a spur) for the acquired forces of a horse (running forward), which can be distributed through his new organs.

Becoming-animal is not as much about animals as it is crossing borders and forming relations with other life systems. In fact, one never really becomes an animal *per se*. In Deleuze and Guattari's technical definition, becoming is simply "to emit particles that take on certain relations of movement and rest because they enter a particular zone of proximity." Thus, one should not imitate a dog in order to become-dog, but compose oneself in a way that accomplishes specific canine functions. "You become animal only molecularly. You do not become a barking molar dog, but by barking, if it is done with enough feeling, with enough necessity and composition, you emit a molecular dog." The molecular dog is you, that is, if you emit the particles a dog would and are also sensitive to the affects a dog receives.

Slepian is an example of only one form of becoming-animal. Deleuze and Guattari suggest three other options: (1) eating the natural food of the animal, (2) entering into relations with other animals (e.g. becoming-dog with cats), or (3) use a prosthesis to achieve the desired animal affect (the horse-masochist's spurs and whip). This last option is particularly relevant to Sia, who uses a chandelier as a prosthesis for becoming-bird: "I'm gonna swing from the chandelier...I'm gonna fly like a bird through the night." (Her use of "like" is understandable since it will not be her, Sia, flying through the night, but a new and different individual: a Sia-bird. The chandelier

allows her to become other than herself, but more on this next act!) It is apt that this message should be conveyed through music by a singing woman and a dancing child since “the properly musical content of music is plied by becomings-woman, becomings-child, becomings-animal.”

Nevertheless, the “song of life” which resonates through women and children no longer appears as the “songbird, but the sound molecule.” Becoming-molecular takes over where becoming-animal leaves off. This transition is facilitated even more readily by experimentation with drugs. Sia signals this leap into a more intense becoming when she tells us that she will drink until she loses count. She reminds us that it is only our current velocity that matters, not our destination: “Keep my glass full until morning light, 'cause I'm just holding on for tonight.”

Becoming-molecular is a small step away from becoming-imperceptible. Becoming-imperceptible is the goal toward which all becomings-animal tend. It is the dawn of a new world, which is to say that unheard-of affects and proximities can now be realized. The mouth is no longer a mouth, it is really a muzzle. The human disappears and is swept away with novel reorganizations. As much as Sia rushes forward into her own becomings, she also coaxes us along. Ziegler and Sia are linked in a becoming of sound molecules. Sia's voice and Ziegler's movement resonate. Insofar as Ziegler is a surrogate for Sia (since she performs for the performer, as Ashley Karcher has pointed out), she is also a welcoming anomaly. She shows us what it is like to see with the eyes of another. These deranged theatrics display as well as invite the viewer to become-other.

## II

To see with this eyes of another—what does this mean? We have just noted that Ziegler is a *display* of and an *invitation* to Sia's deranged theatrics. Although she is Sia's surrogate, Ziegler is also a unique and individual body that invents her own performance of "Chandelier." She leaps into the song and travels along the same rhythms as the singer, but she also transmutes those rhythms into a new medium. Sia's voice is transformed into movement. To the auditory lyric "1, 2, 3, drink" corresponds a visual gesture. The same rhythm is expressed through different senses; this can be called singer-dancer resonance.

Yet the dancer is not merely a piece in a mechanical feedback loop. Ziegler takes what is unseen and makes it visible. In this way, her performance is intimately related to Arthur Rimbaud's doctrine of the seer. Rimbaud's doctrine claims that the poet is really a "seer" or witness to the multiple and heterogeneous experiences of the world. Poetry is the process of transmuting these visions into words—a process he referred to as the "alchemy of the word." This transmutation would be accomplished through "turning silences into words." A new style had to be invented that would be able to communicate the data of the senses more directly than natural language. The synesthetic flights of his poem, "Vowels," are not merely confessions of an imaginary explorer, but an invitation to experience the world differently. In a word, becoming a seer is the process of becoming-other.

Ziegler follows Sia's rhythms, but translates them into her own medium. If there are not actions fitting of the words, she must create them. If the words defy action, she

will offer inactivity. However, by entering the zone of proximity of Sia's voice, Ziegler does not incorporate it and make it her own. The rhythm speaks through her and she watches it unfold. As Rimbaud says, "I'm around for the hatching of my thought: I watch it, I listen to it: I release a stroke from the bow: the symphony makes its rumblings in the depths, or leaps fully formed onto the stage." Ziegler makes the song intelligible in a different medium. Rimbaud again: "The song is infrequently the work of a singer, which is to say rarely is its thought both sung and *understood* by its singer." The seer uproots the song and translates it into another language. The difference and resonance between the song's two iterations is the production of meaning, insofar as difference is the prerequisite for meaning.

Although Sia acts through Ziegler, it is Ziegler who becomes Sia. She experiences new affects within a zone of proximity that is not proper to her. In the same way, Rimbaud speaks of becoming a convict:

When I was still a little child, I admired the hardened convict on whom the prison door will always close; I used to visit the bars and the rented rooms his presence had consecrated; I saw *with his eyes* the blue sky and the flower-filled work of the fields; I followed his fatal scent through city streets. He had more strength than the saints, more sense than any explorer - and he, he alone! was witness to his glory and his rightness.

Rimbaud could only witness the solitary glory of the convict by entering his zone of proximity (that is, the bars and rented rooms). Ziegler becomes Sia in the same way that Rimbaud becomes a convict. But what keeps Rimbaud/

Ziegler the same through all these becomings? Nothing. Rimbaud's mantra of the seer is that "I is someone else." My immediate zone of proximity informs my identity infinitely more than my genealogy or lineage. What we call the self is really the stultification of becoming and the helpless clinging to our current zone of proximity. Once we leave that zone, we become another person entirely. We either become sensitive to new affects and trajectories in the new zone of proximity, or we suffer the "shitty suicide" (Deleuze) of hopeless drug addicts.

What does clinging to identity and its logic of resemblance/imitation accomplish for us? Without a diversity of experiences and identities, we fall victim to the base repetitions of a rhythm that is eternally the same. Rimbaud was right to urge us to make ourselves into seers. In the same sense, Deleuze and Guattari encourage us to "experiment." We must conclude that becoming-animal is really becoming-other—it was merely conceived in a different medium.

As much as these becomings resist the inevitable violence of maintaining the purity and rigor of a so-called self, they also risk creating an altogether different violence. Although becoming-animal and becoming-other may certainly fall back into mere imitation, they also risk accelerating too quickly into the unknown. A line of becoming may curl up into a spiraling black hole (or "shitty suicide"). Our goal was always to multiply significations, not to destroy signification entirely. Becoming is always strategic and political: it tends toward minoritarian identities since they offer the most unrealized potentials. But these identities get lost at sea if they cannot be inscribed within a differential network. They either become



isolated from all other identities (becoming-island) or they go mad (becoming-solipsist). Utopias often meet this fate of hyperactive auto-immunity (for example, Jonestown). For these reasons, we must not boil down becoming to the mere negation of identity. Undeniably, what matters most is the affirmation found in becoming.

### III

In her performance, Sia sings with her back turned to the audience. She is present, but faceless. Her voice speaks through the face of another. Is this all we need to become other? While turning one's back to the spectacle is certainly the first move toward what Deleuze and Guattari call becoming-animal, it is certainly not sufficient to complete such a process. Of course, Sia's back offers a disavowal that (to my knowledge) has never been seen before. Performers sometimes wear masks, but to present one's self as faceless is ground breaking. This disavowal, however, is a weak form of negation that only denies little Eichmanns the possibility of observing and documenting everything.

If there is any *radical* disavowal in Sia's performance, it is to be located in her hair. While anonymity is the aspiration of many, becoming-other is a revolutionary desire. Becoming-other entails an affirmation along with a negation. It is not only the halting "I am not myself" which derails the privilege of imitation, but also the unsettling "I is someone else." Sia's hair affirms her ability to become someone else by making it into a prosthesis for any and all to acquire. It is no coincidence that Ziegler wears a wig that resembles Sia's hair. (Even

though the wig *resembles* Sia, it is only by wearing the wig and acquiring the affects peculiar to the hairstyle which induces becomings-other.) We may also note that the wig is the central artifice of Lena Dunham's performance of "Chandelier."<sup>117</sup>

The wig is not something that only a select few may acquire. Whereas Ziegler's performance was the display of becoming-other, her wig was the invitation. This point is forcefully made by the album cover of *1000 Forms of Fear*, which features only the wig on a black background. We are invited to become Sia, or anyone else we may want to. We might even become people that are not even considered "people" (for example, Rimbaud's romance with a pig). It was already noted that the chandelier acted as a tool for Sia's becoming-bird. It was utilized for a very specific becoming-animal. The wig, on the other hand, is the tool for a very specific becoming-other. While we may enjoy counting the peculiarities and curiosities enveloped in becoming-Sia, our interest is purely with the form of becoming-other.

Inasmuch as the offer of the wig entails the disappearance of Sia (the "proper" owner of the hair); its product is the presence of a positive gesture of refusal. Hakim Bey has noted several other similarly positive gestures that could also be classified as "elements of Refusal." They are unique because they not only defy the established order, but also produce the foundation for autonomous individuals to communicate.

According to Bey, the negation of schooling is not "voluntary illiteracy," but home-schooling and craft-apprenticeship; the negation of politics is not refusing to vote, but networking with other individuals to attain shared

goals; the negation of work is not laziness, but sabotage and participation in black economies; the negation of church is not staying home on Sunday, but inventing imaginative, unserious cults; the negation of home is not homelessness, but nomadism and squatting; the negation of family is not divorce, but alternative affinity structures (e.g. single parentage or group marriage); the negation of art is not boredom or defacement, but the explosive presence of an act that precedes its re-presentation.

Bey is adamant when it comes to the necessity for a positive gesture in acts of resistance. Implicitly referring to Rimbaud's refusal to write poetry after the age of nineteen, he claims: "I have no quarrel with any Rimbauds who escape Art for whatever Abyssinia they can find. But we can't build an aesthetics, even an aesthetics of disappearance, on the simple act of *never coming back*." Immediately after, he remarks that we have already written our note of disappearance ("Gone To Croatan"), but we still must figure out what everyday life should look like in our so-called Croatan.

It is right to conclude, as Bey does, that the positive gestures of refusal are far more effective than the stale tradition of revolutionary confrontation. (Our entire theory of radical disavowal is based on this problem.) It was silly of us to ever want to be seen by the State because that is precisely how they control and catalog our bodies. We must develop techniques of resistance that promote an autonomy "beyond the State's ability to *see*." In these ways, Sia's becoming-animal, becoming-other, and becoming-imperceptible are anti-Statist actions. (This point could be greatly elaborated, but would take us too far off topic.)

While turning her back was a negative gesture, Sia's positive gesture is made with a general acceptance that she cannot escape the media. Her performance declares, "I will become a part of the media on my own terms and subvert the very basis of media as such, which we know to be the policing of identities and stereotypes. I will not be incorporated as a partial object, but as a virus that threatens the vitality of the entire structure." Like the type C virus which mutated the DNA of cats and baboons, the media is forever changed by Sia's intervention. Deleuze and Guattari rightly noted that to either be or imitate is a false alternative. Sia's performance introduces a third term: becoming. Beyond the face and the mask, we find the faceless; beyond self and other, we find the seer; beyond identity and difference, we find becoming.

Like Sia, we should "live like tomorrow doesn't exist," because, for us, it might not. Tomorrow is the time of the other.



# Poppin' Xanax

## On Lucki Eck\$'s *Body High*

Lucki Eck\$'s second album, *Body High*, is only the most recent work within a milieu that has been slowly coming into focus. One might say that this milieu (known here as disavowalist works of art) first became visible in Charles Baudelaire's prose poem, "Be Drunk!" However, this was only the first manifestation of a tradition that has always been clandestine; radical disavowal is akin to an untranslatable secret.<sup>118</sup> Having just been released this month, now is the perfect opportunity to look more closely at a contemporary example of this tradition.

In this album, we find the mutual manifestation of challenges to the sovereignty of the autonomous subject, projected "lines" of escape through drugs, and the search for a community of those *who have nothing in common*. Eck\$ leads the listener on an outlandish *Bildung* in which the transgression of law is only the first act. We float along with him, at different rates of speed and slowness, like drunken boats who dance on savage waves. The light at the end of this bizarre trip is not the lighthouse guiding us home, but the illumination of transactions yet to come.

As we explore these themes in more detail, it would be helpful to chart our progress through each track by delimiting the bright and dim moments. A track presents us with a *bright* transaction when the subject finds itself undermined by the radical alterity which preceded it. Alternatively, the tracks that spiral into the black holes of *dim* days reveal the continued dominance of social

machines. These social machines attempt to stratify the body of the subject into a particular role (worker, student, citizen, etc.) which inevitably isolates the subject from the other. While this procedure is complex, we need only to remember that the violence of the subject rests in its purity and rigor. Eck\$ unhinges the subject through a unique provocation (i.e. Xanax) which serves as the ground for any legitimate community (*communitas*). As I write this, Eck\$ has posted on Twitter: “go listen to #BODYHIGH, become a junkie and live a regular life.” *Body High* describes precisely how this is to be done.

### Track One (bright)

Perhaps there are ten characteristics that form the foundations of contemporary subjectivity: property (“I possess”), private consciousness (“I think”), responsibility (“I do”), propriety (“I am”), pure economy (“I am I”), entitlement (“I deserve”), rigor (clarity of boundaries), safety (freedom from encroachment), autonomy (“I act”), and honesty (“I confess”). Each of these characteristics can be grafted onto the ten crack commandments, respectively. The Notorious B.I.G.’s “Ten Crack Commandments” articulates the qualities of a good drug dealer. Despite participating in illicit activities, a good drug dealer is a model subject. This is precisely why crime will not save us from our current socio-political crisis. To defy the current order is to still react to it; the disavowalist seeks radical liberation.

*Body High* begins with the vibrant transgression of the most important commandment: never get high on your own supply. Eck\$ unabashedly celebrates every low and

high produced by the consumption of his own drugs. He consumes so much of his product (i.e. Xanax), that his entuerpeurnerial enterprise is losing money. Although he has broken Biggie's Fourth Commandment, he is still stacking piles of cash. By the second half of the song, the listener is immediately struck with the consequence of this transgression. Eck\$ is no longer an identifiable, trustworthy subject. His narrative becomes disorienting with a somnambulist summary of the recent film, *Lucy*. The rest of the album alternately leaps between the tightening up and unraveling of subjective self-affirmation.

To get high on one's own supply: this is a formula for becoming other. The Fourth Commandment corresponds to the propriety ("I am") of the subject. The body's center of gravity is no longer forced into a particular place by the demand of various social stratifications. It drifts along a current that entirely destabilizes the ego or "I." By partaking in my own drugs, I acknowledge that there is no longer anything which separates me from the other, subject from object, dealer from addict, and so on. The drug user is set free on an uncertain path, which is not to say that this path will not lead somewhere dangerous or even fatal. The first track of *Body High* anticipates the Xanax-fueled encounters of the later tracks. Most importantly, it announces the death of propriety as the core tenet of the subject and replaces it with radical alterity. Rimbaud said it best: "I is someone else."

## Track Two (bright)

By now, Eck\$ realizes how great his life is and how he should stop complaining. As a liberated subject, he



embraces his derangement: “Put your dreams to the side just to get high...I did.” Like Rimbaud’s drunken boat, he is no longer guided along the stifling shipping routes. In Plato’s allegory of the cave, the highest good is represented as a star (i.e. the Sun). Eck\$ denies the highest Good, which also served to illuminate what is True in all appearances. This turn inaugurates a rejection of contemporary subjectivity insofar as it is founded on the Platonic-Cartesian commandments above. Eck\$ is a virulent anti-Platonist. As soon as we depart from the absolute height of the stars, we can begin the derangement of all the senses or, in other words, becoming other: “Xan gonna kick in as soon as I come down [from the stars].”

### Track Three (dim)

“197 Trap Talk” is the first dim track on the album. It describes the current affluence of drug dealers on the South Side. It is a reminder that we are still caught up in the exchange economy of late capitalism: “Sellin’ [ruined lives] for lows and they be buyin’ them for highs.” Is there a way out? Is there a high that is not immediately pulled back into the orbit of capital?

### Track Four (bright)

There is little doubt that the fourth track does the most conceptual work. When Eck\$ discovers that one of his clients is buying from someone else, he sets up the other dealer and steals his stash. Eck\$ pretends to be a low-level dealer that wants to sell a package (of drugs) for the other dealer. When he receives the package, he simply keeps it.

Eck\$ is not a low-level dealer; in fact, he does not even play by the same rules. Shedding the guise of the familiar, the “friend” or “business partner” returns as an anomic other. The appearance of the anomic other introduces radical alterity into the economy, forcing every supposedly essential identity into contingency. It is this very idea to which the track title (“Finesse”) refers: to insert yourself in the restricted economy of the drug trade and extract from it something greater than what was possible in that economy alone.

In this way, what Eck\$ calls “finesse” is closely related to the previous track. Indeed, there is a way out and finesse is one way of finding that line of escape. Nevertheless, finesse is contextual. The same finesse will not work in every situation; the finesse of a piano player is not the finesse of an archer. In other words: “I need to deal with shit my age, so I deal to kids my age.” Although not the only determinant, age is often a specific condition that influences finesse. We will see an example of this in the final track.

Through finesse, Eck\$’s identity begins to slip away as well: “I call these yaps the Lucki Eck\$, feel like I be poppin’ myself. Count that Cheddar Bob feel like I be poppin’ myself.” In this lyric there is a metonymic slide between the first iteration of “I be poppin’ myself” and the second iteration. In the first line, the author and the drug coincide and overlay. Who has authored these songs? Is it Lucki Eck\$ (the rapper) or Lucki Eck\$ (the drug)? In other words, is the album a confession from the person (Eck\$) or is it a description of the experience of a body on the drug (X)? The answer to this question will always remain ambiguous and other tracks will reinforce this ambiguity.

The second iteration of “I be poppin’ myself” invokes a reference to *8 Mile* (2002). In the film, Eminem’s friend, Cheddar Bob, accidentally shoots himself in the leg. Eck\$ is keenly aware of the danger of drug abuse. Taking too much Xanax could lead to “popping yourself” like Cheddar Bob. By taking too much of one particular drug to become other, we no longer take up a “line” of escape, but find ourselves caught up in the gravitational field of another subjectivity. In this respect, drug addiction presents the same issues as sobriety. The fluidity of drug experience is lost in hyper-consumption of a privileged drug. Finesse is the balance between these two dangers. This balance is our goal, not only in drugs, but all aspects of life: “everything finesse.”

### Track Five (dim)

“Crime Pays” claims exactly that. Flippant transgression of laws is profitable, so why not do it? After all, we all need to eat. As Eck\$ often says: “everybody eats.” Crime places Eck\$ in a life-threatening position where he must avoid cops and bullets. We are bad disavowalists when we resort to crime: “we a bunch of Xanax addicts.” However, not everything is lost. We can still have “bright transactions on dim days.”

### Track Six (dim)

Eck\$’s girlfriend steals his stash of Xanax. At first he does not believe that she could have done it. Then, he realizes that it was her all along and she was not the kind of person he thought she was. Although he wants to forgive

her, he believes that revenge is necessary. The critical line comes when Eck\$ says, "I tripped, I fell for all that." His "trip" could be a simple mistake or error, but it is also a consequence of "tripping" on X. Indeed, the paranoia may be entirely drug-induced. The guilt of tripping and being taken advantage of (signified by his girlfriend's "witchcraft") leads Eck\$ to contemplate (and potentially commit) murder. He is reintegrated into the war of capital where every debt must be paid, even if it is paid in blood. A little paranoia opens a person to new possibilities and abnormalities, but too much paranoia causes the world to fold in around oneself and erase every line of escape.

### Track Seven (dim)

The seventh track offers a series of reflections on the consequences of being a dealer. First, Eck\$ deals to a girl that has a very controlling mother. The mother smells marijuana on the girl and looks through her phone to find out who is dealing to her. She finds texts to Eck\$ and calls him. After realizing who is calling, Eck\$ blocks the number. Second, Eck\$'s uncle tells him that dealing will make him money. However, he witnesses his uncle using and notices that his uncle is broke.

The two examples represent the alternative dangers of not having "finesse." Either we fall into the networks of surveillance we tried to escape, or we end up "popping ourselves" by abusing a drug and giving up any chance of liberation. "Reflections" is a turning point in the album: the reckless acceleration of the first three tracks is now tempered by the requirement of finesse. (Finesse should by no means be compared with moderation. Moderation can

only arise within a restricted economy that holds an already anticipated extreme. Finesse is the actualization of a trajectory towards the outside. In this way, it is no surprise that *Body High* is brought to us by a member of the Outsider\$ Clique.) The question mutates: How do I escape *with others*? Drug abuse is a defeatist and alienating solution. Eck\$ is now concerned with the possibility of a community of those *who have nothing in common* (i.e. of radically different subjects who cannot be brought under the same law (*nomos*) but continue to maintain productive relationships).

### Track Eight (dim)

Xanax is taking control. It has been the privileged drug in Eck\$’s *corpus* for too long. He is beginning to lose his memory: “Have a heart to heart but by the morning I forget it.” At this point, quitting the drug seems to be just as imprisoning as maintaining addiction: “When I’m off all of these [Xanax] bars, I should be behind some bars.” Nevertheless, Eck\$ is losing control of his body: “All this Xan in my system make a nigga go crazy.” This line is followed by, “trying to get off, but too lazy.” Eck\$’s laziness is a result of X. He is caught within the black hole of Xanax. The very means by which he could quit taking the drug are blocked by the drug itself. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe this moment as the swirling of a line of escape into a black hole. The drug, which once offered liberation, now sends the body along an infinitely condensing spiral: ever-increasing acceleration without any movement. This is the point that drug abuse counselors call

“rock bottom” (although we know there are many more subterranean levels below the rocks).

### Track Nine (dim)

The condensing spiral continues. Eck\$ notes that his aunt went crazy from taking too much Xanax. He zones out and rejects responsibility for his actions the previous night (whatever those may be). The voice of sobriety (Ran\$ah) suddenly appears. He promises money, fame, women, and power if one simply abides by the life of crime. In this sense, this track shares a valence with “197 Trap Talk” and “Crime Pays.” Once the voice of sobriety finishes, there is 20 more seconds of the beat. Within this final 20 seconds, we do not hear Eck\$ respond.

### Track Ten (dim)

Eck\$ reaffirms that no matter what happens, you cannot take his stash from him. He will continue dealing a lot of Xanax. As the track ends, he tempts would-be robbers: “How you gonna do it? How you gonna get it?”

### Track Eleven (bright)

In the penultimate track, Eck\$ asks his clients to “slow down.” He claims that he does not want to go to jail if they die from an overdose. This is expected. The unexpected part is when he tells us that he is a compassionate dealer: “I’m not like all the others, I care about my clients.” After a series of dim points, the album returns to the question of track seven. It is not enough for

one to derange one's senses individually; derangements must be shared because they are more potent when they are collective. Hence, "slow down" is not a call for sobriety; it is a warning concerning the black hole of drug addiction. At the same time that this track offers a warning, it advocates for the derangement of all the senses through drugs. "Slow down" means to lessen the quantity of drug consumption, but it also refers to the drug experience peculiar to Xanax. Indeed, drugs provide one line of escape. However, this line does not go very far if it is traveled alone. You must "slow down" individually so that we can "slow down" collectively.

### Track Twelve (bright)

Even if we ask others to "slow down," we cannot anticipate or code every form of derangement—this would be counter-productive in regards to our goal of liberation. So, we must accept losses to sobriety and the black hole of addiction. Eck\$ describes how one girl overdosed because she thought the Xanax would make her "stand up." He then says, "This ain't that type of game."

In order to continue selling drugs without getting caught, Eck\$ uses finesse. He is always on the corner ready to sell. You can count on him to be there. The cops cannot touch him because he uses his age to his advantage. At a time when discrimination against underage bodies is ubiquitous, Eck\$ utilizes his underprivileged position to bite back against his oppressors. He hides his product in his crotch. Since he is underage, the cops do not touch his crotch and he keeps hold of his product.

Throughout the final track, Eck\$ calls out individual names telling them that they can count on him to be there if they “need that.” In fact, the entire town can rely on him: “Get the town on me...they can count on me.” “Count on me” signals the creation of a support network that exists *alongside* the State. Although not sanctioned by the State and in direct opposition to its laws, a communal space is formed in which each individual becomes a member by sharing in an experience. (The drug creates an immanent link that brings together diverse and disparate bodies. This process occurs in a very similar way to that of the link between cat and baboon. They share much of the same DNA as a result of a virus that affected them both and mutated their DNA in the same way.) This space embodies what others have called a *situation*, *encounter*, or *temporary autonomous zone*. Even though it will never be possible to maintain a territory free from State power, small pockets of liberatory zones can cause ruptures within the State. The genius of *Body High* as an album is that it connects the lone disavowalist to a community of derangement. While Eck\$ believes that a community of those who have nothing in common must be facilitated by a mediator or dealer, this need not be the case. The kaleidoscopic types of liberatory zones might never be exhausted—we can never anticipate when a new type of zone may form.

In many ways, *Body High* can be read in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal: an “absolute deterritorialization” conducted by “knights of narcotics” who “blaze new paths of life,” but always risk falling into “black holes and lines of death.” Thus, it is no surprise that an animal appears at the end of the album. It is



an animal for which Deleuze and Guattari have a specific fondness: the wolf. Eck\$ repeats: “mouth on me like cujo.” The repetition quickly becomes incoherent. Different, but the same. Soon the speech turns into bodily hums and grunts. The drug now speaks for itself (if we assume that there ever was a person named “Lucki Eck\$” who spoke in the first place). The explanation of the drug-affect (mouth-becoming-wolf) is co-opted by the drug-affect itself. It becomes drowsy; Xanax is primarily expressed through drowsiness and slowing down. “Lucki Eck\$” (the drug *and* the person) is swept up into another becoming. He ventures down another line of escape. We cannot follow him forever. This album was only a taste. Now go out and try it on your own.

# **The Life and Death of a Subject**

## **On Dance Gavin Dance's *Instant Gratification***

Who are *you*? What are *you* all about? Tell me about *yourself*.

In these and many other colloquial requests, what is interrogated is none other than the “self.” The self is what each one of us has, but no two are exactly alike. Your self makes you a unique individual, although the structure of selfhood is common to all. This structure is what I would call *subjectivity*. One has subjectivity (meaning, one is a subject) by virtue of being a unique individual (that is, having a self). While the notion of self may not be controversial in itself, its precise domain has eternally been unsettled ground.

There are those who maintain that the self is what stays constant amidst our changing experiences. For our entire lives, we harbor the same self within us through to the end. However, there are experiences that chip away at our faith in an eternal self. A common experience is looking back at ourselves as we were in the past. Who has not seen a picture from their childhood and thought: “Was that really me?” Yet the past is not the only realm in which one’s self seems precarious. The experience of the “uncanny” in the present can lead one to feel out of step with oneself. This feeling of being at odds with oneself can also occur in our anticipation of future events. The anxiety associated with an imminent break in routine can make one feel the poverty of one’s current self. Nevertheless, each self adjusts, in one

way or another, to every novelty.

The occasion for these comments on subjectivity is the recent release of *Instant Gratification*, the latest album from Dance Gavin Dance. The album provides a timeless meditation on the manifestation and annihilation of subjectivity. The “you” referenced in many of the songs is none other than the subject’s dialogue with itself as it struggles to make sense of the world. While the lyrics are conceptually dense (contrary to what one popular critic believes), they resonate with the form and style of the instrumental sound.<sup>119</sup>

Our current task is two-fold. First, we must clarify how *Instant Gratification* deals with selfhood and subjectivity in general. Second, we will underscore the contribution that the album makes toward a new theory of subjectivity. Given the fact that the album follows the chronological life and death of a subject, I have chosen to follow the same order from the first to the last track. The album reveals no less than the transcendental structure of subjectivity as it is grasped from the subject’s point of view.

## Life

The album follows a parabolic journey from the birth of the subject to its death. The apex occurs at the seventh track. Until that point, the narrator is on a path toward literal *self*-discovery. It begins on track one, “We Own The Night.”

Perhaps more than on any other track the theme of life is highlighted: “Give into the moment and live now.” Life presents the possibility of a moment or experience that

is contrasted to the eternal nothingness of death. Life also means being open to new experiences: "Let your hair down, have one more round, drink til you believe it." Even once one's life is self-assured, the drinking must not end. We need to medicate ourselves against the thought of death. I must "pretend that I'm not barely hanging on." Toward this end, the subject will medicate itself against the possibility of its very impossibility (that is, death).

Now that the possibility of the self is realized in its immediate apprehension of its own experience, it must be delimited and protected. The general importance of a self-contained subject is outlined in "Stroke God, Millionaire." Now that the subject has manifested before itself its own possibility for life, it can see itself as nothing less than God. As the basis of subjectivity, the self-appropriation of life (in the face of death) is a kind of self-creation (or auto-genesis) of the subject. In this way, the "ray" that shines forth from the living subject is both the ray of light/God and also a "beam of belief in identity." As creator and created, the subject finds itself in a pseudo-reciprocal relationship of self-love: "I'm in love with the feeling that I'm loved." This relationship is *pseudo*-reciprocal because love is exchanged with oneself, rather than with another.

This is further unpacked in the line: "Not alone, so alone." This paradox is the result of the subject's self-love being the foundation for subjectivity. That is, the subject is not alone because it is with itself, but it is so alone because its basis for life is its self-appropriation. This paradox forms the fundamental structure of subjectivity. If the structure had a shape, it would be a pocket: "I'll keep hiding in this cul-de-sac." From this pocket, it is impossible to verify if other supposed subjects are indeed real:

“Expecting the people to live in your head.” This premature subject is none other than the ego as it is articulated by René Descartes. However, the closure of the subject within itself cannot last forever. In its divine intonations, it must eventually ask: “Is there a God?”

Realizing that there could be something beyond subjectivity (that is, objects or other subjects) leads to acknowledging oneself as an impoverished subject. Whatever is outside seems, at first, inaccessible. Hence, one begins the search for “Something New.” The subject feels like a prisoner that desires to “throw it all away and open up with something new.” The following lyrics aptly capture this feeling:

Mixing magic potions  
 Looking for a meaning  
 To get myself out of this costume  
 Sick and tired of counting  
 Bubbles in the ceiling  
 Feel like a prisoner in my head

Once finding something new becomes a legitimate possibility, the subject takes off “On the Run” in order to find it. The subject realizes it cannot contain itself, but it also knows that it needs a “taste.” The taste in question is determined by finding similar tastes in other subjects. This allows the subject to identify something outside of itself that is alike enough for it to comprehend. Once a subject recognizes another with the same taste, it becomes a member of the class *homo sapiens* (literally: same taste). Holding on to this same taste is ever important, especially with “temptation running wild.”

How long can a subject hold on? Some hold on until

the end. Others break under the pressure of temptation. This pressure is revealed in the fifth track, "Shark Dad." The part of the subject that cannot contain itself is like another self attempting to escape. Memory and self-identity fade away like the changing of the seasons, and with the same necessity: "Now I can't find the person that was you. Oh no, I can't remember. The leaves were bound to change." The self that one identified with before is now lost and "time is almost up." If we lose ourselves, it is as if we are losing our lives.

The birth of the subject was founded on self-medication and tranquility: a safeguard to protect from death. But this calm drunkenness cannot last. "It wasn't me, the world is drunk." The self-contained subject can no longer maintain its static self-identity. The distinction between my subjectivity and that of others becomes ambiguous. The subject slips through the world and takes on different forms, all while realizing that it is really the world that is standing still amidst all this change. The nauseating transformations of the subject force it to disengage from the world. What is there left to say? Only: "I'm lost."

Once the subject feels totally lost and is in complete doubt about its self-sufficiency, it returns, in an "Awkward" way, back to its former optimism and faith in subjectivity. It will "get better" because it has the fundamental subjective desire "to be somebody." Similar to the Cartesian subject, it finds absolute certainty after the torments of doubting itself: "Show me how to doubt myself." By realizing what is closest to it and most true (that is, its very similarity to itself), it can declare: "Mine is mine, I clamp my head in the crease of a familiar shell." (Here, "mine is mine" is a

clear reference to Fichte's "I am I." The difference underscores the subject's self-possession in a hyper-Cartesian sense.)

The subject is now fully alive and aware of itself as subject. It has experienced some things that have been different, but has returned safely to a state of self-assurance. Its desires circulate in a closed economy of self-love. It does not need any other subject to give itself meaning, but it does identify other subjects according to "taste."

### Crisis

On the seventh track, "The Cuddler," the subject begins its disintegration. At first, it affirms itself as the fulcrum of all meaning: "I'll go get the decider, I'll be center divider." In this task, it will be ever vigilant: "Stare until it makes me blind." Yet, this constant vigilance seems like it could last for an eternity without amounting to anything. The subject "can't fight feeling this is meaningless."

The subject is beginning to mature. Its adolescence is, as usual, a crisis. It believes that it has been holding itself back. At this point, the subject tells itself that it is "time to grow up [and] come into your own." This task implies no longer going to get the decider, but becoming the decider oneself. (In this sense, one can anticipate all the aporias suggested by Jacques Derrida about the decisional structure of subjectivity.)

Not only is the subject reasonable, but it also finds all reasons inside itself: "I am all the reasons...I am every season." Nevertheless, this new self that takes up the responsibility of decider is essentially different than the self it grows out of. The subject watches itself split into two:

“Watching you become everything I’m not. A new former shell.” The premature subject is “old and done.” As the new, adolescent subject takes over, a profound rupture has been discovered in the structure of subjectivity.

## Death

The subject’s excess accelerates and gains magnitude in the final four tracks. The subject’s sense of self is pushed beyond its limit. It no longer makes sense to say, “I cannot contain myself,” because the originary, singular self has been split into multiple selves. In “Eagle vs. Crows,” the subject explodes:

Like the fastest object overgrowth  
Like a basket lobbing egg and yolk  
I got the bombast little habit  
Watch my head explode

The vocals of this track vacillate between dissonant screeches and harmonic hymnals. The multiple selves of the subject arise in consonance with the disorientation of all the senses. It is no longer possible for me to speak in one voice, tone, or language. The polyvocality of the track resonates with the content of the lyrics in form and meaning. The subject, as it was first conceived, is lost forever.

The selection of new selves represents a kind of little death in the subject. One must deny former selves in order to create new ones. This very movement is articulated in “Death of a Strawberry.” In this track, radical excess without reserve is celebrated: “Wanna waste away my days...and blow through all my wealth.” The interiority of



the self, introduced in “Stroke God, Millionaire,” has become a curse: “Sick of being in my head...and worried about my health.” Denial becomes one’s preferred weapon for liberation. Even in my infinite expenditure, I can “pretend I’m made of money.” This “special invented armor” protects the subject from the orchestrated decisions of former selves. True wisdom lies in successfully executing this withdrawal: “I believe denial makes me hella intelligent.”

The penultimate track, “Variation,” heralds the death of the subject. The death is not just that of any subject, but of the entire structure of subjectivity as it was first conceived (in “We Own the Night” and by Descartes). The quest for immediate knowledge is abandoned. Instead of becoming a decider, the subject remains “under indecision” and becomes dependent on passing moments. The subject acknowledges that it is a contingent formation within the flux of time and will decompose into materials for constructing new subjects in the future. As such, it chastises the self-assuredness of the self-conscious subject, “Am I the reason that you can’t look past your future self? Got me believing you been stuck and glued in frequent doubt.” The self-identical subject cannot see beyond its own self, which it arrogantly pretends is eternal in accord with Cartesian axioms.

At this juncture, current senses are dulled. New senses and subjects await to be discovered. To anchor one configuration of subjectivity (via Cartesian doubt) would be a failure from the beginning: “Doubt is failure by design.” The life of the subject described at the beginning of this article already had buried deep within itself the necessity of its death. As the subject destroys itself, its

liberation is realized. Toward this end, one must continually “duck ‘n dodge, stay unaligned.”

The final death toll is rung in “Lost.” It begins by contradicting the discovery of the subject on the first track. Instead of finding myself, “I am lost.” Not only am I lost, but also, I “need a God.” A new blindness takes over from being subjectified for too long. (Recall that being a self-same subject, according to “The Cuddler,” means staring until you are blind.) A new vision is required for a world that has been fractured into so many unique subjectivities. The world becomes a multiplicity of shifting colors: “Give me eyes. Kaleidoscope the world in color. Help me put my world in order.”

As the subject becomes fractured, so does truth. The multiplicity of subjects denotes degrees of lies, rather than degrees of truth: “I can conceive a better way to lie.” Nevertheless, the best lie puts a world in order again and allows a subject to feel secure. It is in this way that the disintegration of the originary subject is necessary for any community of subjects to arise. When subjects come together in a way not determined by similar “tastes,” community begins and the possibility of meaning returns. But, for this incredible gravitation to occur, one must be patient: “So wait it out.”

However, the wait is not forever. As living assemblages of subjects, we follow our “animal instincts” to survive together. We are “capable, sociable, [and] subject.” Once the subject has rid itself of its Cartesian certainty, it can say, “I’m part of the pack.” As a pack, we form a veritable community of subjects with nothing in common. In this way, the subject that was previously lost now finds itself as a “citizen of the world” in the great

cosmopolis, insofar as it recognizes the infinite gap of undecidability that separates forms of subjectivity.

But, if this group of subjects were ever to find commonality amongst themselves and to determine citizenship based on that quality, each subject would fall again into the trappings of its life cycle. The group would become “darkness’ father” and its truth would become “pain.” Like the dark days in Lucki Eck\$’s *Body High*, subjects can only come together when they have given up any pretension to being a self-identical, self-assured subject.

In more ways than one, *Instant Gratification* is the story of the life and death of a subject (that is, any subject whatsoever). At inception, the subject survives off itself and gives itself life. At its end, the subject finds itself a multiplicity of non-primordial subjectivities that distribute themselves across multiple bodies and “persons.” As such, the differentiated forms of subjectivity create the possibility of a community with nothing in common. The subjects of this new community have nothing in common other than their denial of essentialist configurations of subjectivity.

In more ways than one, *Instant Gratification* names this album perfectly. One first hears “instant gratification” in its colloquial sense: the immediate pleasure of the subject. As our adventure comes to end, we hear the second, more secret meaning of the album’s title. In the “instant” or moment which gives life to the subject, we soon discovered the seed of the subject’s death. Once the subject was fragmented into a multiplicity of disparate subjectivities, we found the possibility of true community. This conclusion brings together the “instant” with its eventual “gratification” in that gratification can also mean

"obligingness" (*gratificatio*) to others. In other words, the subject finds as its basis the subjectivity of others and its responsibility to those other lives.



## **A Footnote to *Mission: Impossible* – *Ghost Protocol***

A guiding thread runs through the recent *Mission: Impossible* movie. At times it represents a rupture, but in other instances it becomes the entire paradigm of the film. This point reveals itself as the constant fear of *disavowal*. From minor revelations (a supposed reason for Ethan Hunt's imprisonment) to the complete thematic ("...if you choose to accept it"), becoming-disavowed is what the characters attempt to avoid at every turn.

Disavowed from what? The characters are caught up in a signifying apparatus that totalizes itself throughout the film. The mantra of those that hand out the missions is essentially *avowal or death*. Like all structures, this implies several dichotomies that the characters cling to as necessary. To be disavowed would be to recognize these oppositions as contingent, which suggests the death of the subject and the melting away of certainty. Some of these dichotomies are global, while others are defined by local events: success/failure, good/evil, west/east, friend/foe, functional/non-functional, and so on.

To give up on these basic (insofar as what is essential for the current signifying apparatus) distinctions would also serve to shake the foundations for any founding principle of metaphysics (e.g. subject/object). Becoming-disavowed involves giving up one's subjectivity as much as it implies negating the Other's objectivity. In becoming-disavowed, one loses one's "agency" (literally, the characters lose membership as an agent of the government).

The anxiety of the death of the subject propels the

characters to construct fictions that postpone the reality of disavowal. By the end of the film, “ghost protocol” has still been issued. This means that the characters no longer belong to any agency. Nevertheless, Ethan Hunt takes the role of the agency’s secretary and hands out the next mission to his team. This shows that one signifying apparatus will always be ready to replace another. And yet the threat of radical disavowal continues to infect these structures like the secret that is used to cover up a homicide.

# **The Poet of the Future**





## Rimbaud 2020

To D.D.

Buffalo, 3 March 2017

Hey Mr. D!

It's great to see you back to teaching. You've always cared deeply about the students. Counseling was nice, but teaching, I can tell, was your passion. – I am also an altruist of sorts. My time is fully dedicated to others. I see former classmates, who were popular but asinine, complaining about their community college essays. So, naturally, I offer my services. I write for them the most absurd screeds, pure shit and nonsense, but they are too dumb to realize. They wind up, satisfied, with a B, since their professors do not care at all; and I celebrate with a hard-earned case of beer. My greatest devotion is to this society of peers!

You once taught me the value of this altruism, and how right you were! But this principle is only valid for subjective poetry. The fact that you can only practice it as a form of education is enough – I am sorry – to make one retch. And yet, this is always what you wanted: a poetry beautiful enough for one. It doesn't matter how pedestrian it actually is. Perhaps one fine day you will see some objective merit in your verse. I, too, who always knew it to be possible, would rejoice at the discovery!

Enough poetry. I'll be a worker. This joke captivates me. Who could deny the pleasure of an easy life, one where the only decision is to say "yes sir" or "no sir"?

Even today, as skirmishes erupt in the capitol, the option suggests itself. But work now, at the horizon of a new world? No, no, never: I'm on strike. Like waves of fire, I will never labor—only combust! I'm giving up all standards and mores. "No, don't," you must be thinking. But unlike you, I must be a poet, and a poet above all is a seer. A poetics of seeing cannot be explained. This is not something for you to write on the chalkboard for your pupils! The task of the poet is to encounter the unknown by any means necessary, including flights into the uncanny, new experiments in unsafe places, and getting really drunk. You would never be able to withstand the suffering necessary for being a poet. Becoming a poet requires great hardship and an irrevocable transmutation. You wouldn't believe how scarred my soul is! But now I know this is not *my* fault. It is wrong to say: I am (*je suis*). One should rather say: I follow (*je suis*). It's up to you to decipher the ambiguity.

I is an Other. The screen is indifferent to what is displayed on it.

I cannot be your student any longer. I've graduated.

Answer me.

With heart in hand,

Jake Nabasny

To D.B.

Buffalo, 5 March 2017

Some comments on the poetry of the future:

All modern poetry leads to the subject. From French symbolism up to dirty realism, poets dominate the literary scene. From Baudelaire to Verlaine, Whitman to Dickinson, all is free verse, a messy collage of sentiment and memorial scene, portmanteau-poetry, inspiring the insipid stream-of-consciousness: Rimbaud alone is pure, holy, immortal. If it weren't for his sub-par lover Verlaine, we may never have tasted his divine words. After Rimbaud, the rotting fruits of his terrible children poisoned us.

This is not a joke, much less a paradox. I've studied the archives and know them with more insight than Young America had rebellious-child-syndrome. Atanyrate, no more history, it is necessary to liberate all novelty! The time has come to let ancestral corpses sink into the sopping, black earth. There is no rush: we have time, we will be home.

Postmodernism has never had a fair trial. What justice could oversee it? The critics!? Or more absurdly the postmodernists themselves, who reveal that the text is hardly ever the work *per se*, that is, the saying and the said of the subject?

For I is an Other. If the device wakes up as a digital dictionary one day and an SMS bomber the next, what does it care? This is completely clear to me: I am around for my thought's unfolding: I see and hear it. I strike the chord: the symphony effaces itself in subterranean attractions and repulsions, or bursts out onto the stage. If the bourgeois philosophers had only discovered the nonsense that is the

Ego, whether it was called transcendental or empirical, then we wouldn't be wasting our time power-washing their sun-cooked shit off the minds of our oldest intellectuals! For a long time, forever in fact, these crypto-mystics have been shining their brass trophies, self-awarded by their one-eyed intellect, not realizing that they are made of plastic.

In modernism, I mentioned, free verse legitimates the subject. Later, the verse and its music are used as ornaments, pure decoration. Unprofitable scholars and middle school girls delight in its recital. It's mainly left over for them. The curious will sometimes pick up on this phenomenon and write books about it. Words about words about words. In all of this, we never worked on ourselves, we weren't quite awake, or rather not fully dreaming. Scholars, civil servants, listen! The poet, authentic creator, has never existed!

The first experiment in becoming a poet involves the self-knowledge of the subject: the poet takes her own soul, she inspects it, tests it, and learns it. Once she grasps it, she shall continue developing it. This might seem obvious: all minds develop over time; so many self-developed individuals declare themselves to be authors; even more congratulate themselves for any intellectual progress! But the soul is not like this. It will not listen to you; it doesn't learn in monologue. In fact, it doesn't *learn* at all, it will only be *transmuted*. According to its present sensibility, it will be made monstrous. Foreign bodies will be cultivated on its surface, it will cut itself all over, and perhaps take a rainbow-colored cocktail of pills.

It is necessary to become a *seer*, to make oneself a *seer*.

The Poet becomes a seer through an arduous, sacrificial, and rational derangement of all senses. All affects, every form of the infinite admixture of emotions, belong to her. What she doesn't find in herself, she will consume. From every poison the seer will distill its quintessence. Only faith will get her through such ineffable torture, a faith and an animal strength that will transmogrify her into the Great Patient, the Great Criminal, the Great Accursed, and the Supreme Savant all at once! The Poet arrives at the *unknown*! Such is only made possible through the cultivation of the soul which, by already being rich, exceeds all others. Terrified by the unknown, the poet may lose hold of the visions it inspired, but at least she had seen them! She will certainly die from overexposure to the countless, unheard-of experiences, but other horrible workers will appear and begin from the horizons where she has succumbed!

– Excuse the pause while I smoke –

I continue:

So the poet is none other than Prometheus.

He burdens himself with all of humanity, *and even the animals*. His inventions must be felt, touched, and heard. If the treasures from beyond have a form, he will give them form; if they are formless, he will bequeath to them formlessness. For all of this, a language must be discovered.

With every idea having its own articulation, the age of universal language is dawning. Only stone-dead academics who wasted their passion on fizzled affairs could bring themselves to create a perfect dictionary of any

language. Just try to imagine the first letter of the alphabet I am envisioning and you will surely go mad!

It will be a language without words—only pure affect communicating from soul to soul. It will be capable of articulating everything: sounds, colors, thoughts, perfumes. The poet alone is the metric for a such a language since she would comprehend what is still unknown in the universal soul of her epoch. She, wielding a frightening, new magic, will give to society more than her mere thoughts or plans. As a *multiplier* of progress, she heralds the moment when enormity becomes the norm and is absorbed by everyone.

The poetry of the future will be materialist; as you see, the poet is also Democritus. Poems will be quantified according to the transcendental categories of Number and Harmony. But does this not mark a return to modernist poetics, which we believed we had done away with?

Like the modernists, we are still searching for eternal truths, but are just a bit more skeptical about it. Every poet is also a citizen who must decide how to live her own life apart from, but also with, others. Poetry can no longer be directed by these practical concerns. Rather, it will precede them; poetry alone will be our guide!

When the infinite servitude of our bodies comes to a close, we will be able to live for and by ourselves, outside of patriarchy and white supremacy. We will all be poets! Each one will be able to discover some unknown! Will our worlds be all the more different? We will each find strange, disgusting, unintelligible, delightful things. Eventually we will understand them.

The demand of the poet is simple: new forms and ideas! And even when we come to believe that novelty has

been used up and colonized, we are acknowledging the existence of some future unknown.

The first free verse poets were seers, but did not realize their potential. They cultivated their souls on accident and nourished them with trite surprises. T.S. Eliot was briefly a seer, but hung himself with old songs and anti-Semitism. Whitman gave us fantastic visions: the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* still vibrates with undiscovered intensities. But Whitman's visions could neither see beyond the Atlantic nor the Pacific. It was a nationalist poetry fit for reciting at elementary school parades. There are far too many Dickinson and Stevens, Ginsbergs and Corsos: these old and rancid enormities.

Ginsberg is no longer appealing to us. How countless mutilated generations have been numbed by his visions of angelic machinery in the night! O Kaddish! O America! O Carl Soloman! O Moloch! O Rockland! O! All is American, that is, regurgitated authoritarianism and hallucinations of streets paved with gold. American, not Beat! American poetry will be enjoyed for a long time, but only in America. Every high school junior can rattle off the first ten lines of *Howl*. Each college student is hiding some shameful verse in a computer folder labeled *Porn*. As an early teenager we leap into these pursuits passionately. After a few years, we content ourselves with reading others. Then a year or two more and we don't even read anymore. Before legal adulthood infects them, every boy and girl has the potential to write a *Howl*! Perhaps some still get locked up in hospitals for trying. Ginsberg was on to something, but he chose Blake over Rimbaud and effectively shut his eyes for good. American, comfortable, promoted from bar stool to university lectern, the pristine



corpse is now dead, and from now on, let us not make it stir too much with our grievances.

The second wave of free verse poets are very *seeing*: Charles Bukowski, Phyllis McGinley, Raymond Carver, Amari Baraka. Yet Rimbaud is really the first seer, because witnessing the unknown is only part of recapturing lost and spectral essences. For his success in this latter task, he is king of poets, the only God. But he gave up too quickly; he lost his mind, leg, and life in the desert. From him we have learned the approach, now we must practice it.

We are still enticed with old forms. Every poet has written their *Howl*, and had great “success.” We await the coming of future poets to guide us out of this miasma.

—There you are. Thus, I am becoming a *seer*.

You would be a worthless shit not to respond to me. Be quick! Next week I will be building barricades in the capitol, perhaps.

Goodbye.

Jake Nabasny

# Appendix



# The Death of Sisyphus

## I

Camus' appropriation of the myth of Sisyphus is itself a myth. It determines certain conditions for meaning in an atmosphere in which the means of production are always-already at hand. The myth of the myth is that one is able to produce meaning merely by searching it out. The struggle of Sisyphus is the polar opposite of this profound un-struggle in which the event inherits its value. Derrida's critique of the ends of man in Sartre is incredibly apt here since it is by murdering God that man himself takes on the position of God. Existentialism posits an alternative theology.

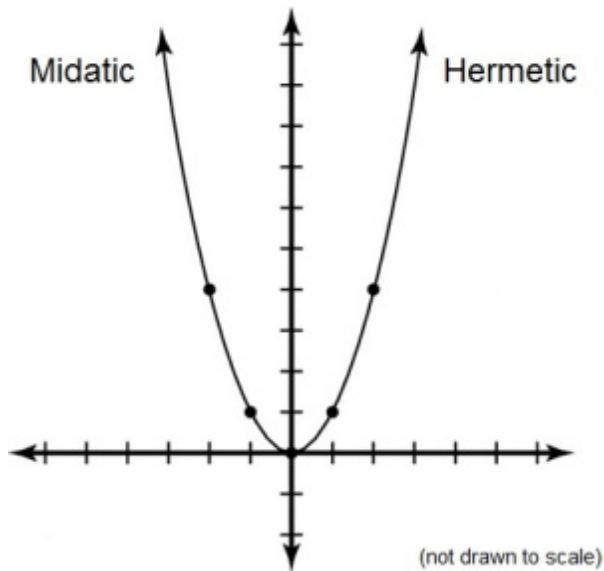
It is not "meaning" that man carves out of a meaningless existence, but an endless search for meaning that produces that very meaninglessness. The image of Sisyphus is entirely misleading in this regard. Despite an aversion to hero-worship and all manifestations of iconography, a more adequate myth can be found in King Midas. By desiring gold and only gold, everything becomes gold, thus destroying the very value that was sought after. In Midas' desperate search for value, everything becomes valueless. It is here that one encounters the true nature of the boulder. It is not merely an obstacle for Sisyphus, an in-itself that represents a given meaning, but the very limits of the for-itself. This asymptotic border between the for-itself and in-itself leads to the only genuine existential position: despair and anxiety. The assumption of any transcendence beyond these categories leads back to the inconsistencies of

theological existentialism.

## II

We had previously arrived at King Midas as the ultimate existential hero. Meaning is impossible to produce *ex nihilo* and by attempting this we only find ourselves lost in a meaningless world. Yet, is there a place to go after this? Is it true that—as we previously concluded—any existentialism necessarily ends in anxiety and despair? Indeed, it would appear that the conclusion was premature. King Midas does not exist in a vacuum, but is only part of a more complex continuum. Closely related, but on the opposite side, one finds Hermes. It is somewhere between the perilous Midatic-Hermetic chasm that we may find an answer to Camus' fundamental question.

Unlike primitive aesthetic assessments (e.g. Apollonian-Dionysian), the Midatic-Hermetic is grafted onto a parabola. The inflection point signifies a tectonic shift from absolute meaninglessness to equivocal encryptions of meaning. At this point, which is, itself, always already an origin splitting apart from itself (attempting to generate what-it-is by becoming-what-it-is-not), one finds the precarious scaffolding for a theory of meaning. Scaffolding, to be sure, is of terminological importance. Whereas previous theories have failed at the very beginning by attempting to locate a foundation (*arche*), the aporias of meaning have suggested that any theory of meaning will be without foundation (*an-arche*). Thus, the indeterminacy of this inflection point cannot be under-determined.



Meaning dissolves. It does this in one of two ways. Either the value never latches onto another discursive machine (translation via Hermes). It dissipates before it could be understood while new values are taken up relentlessly; some have called this difference. Or the value congeals into a homogeneous singularity (Midas' gold). The value proliferates and multiplies until it becomes *the* value par excellence. Soon the value, artificially removed from a system of differences, becomes valueless. In both cases, meaning is constantly dissolving. The Midatic-Hermetic parabola rocks back and forth like a carnival ride. Philosophers have always tried to get off the ride or stop it, but this has only reproduced genetically mutated strands of dissolved values. The trick is, has always been, to feel out the resonances of the ride itself and swing along with it.

For this very reason any new theory of meaning

must accompany meaning's dissolution. It will close its eyes and feel the wind in its hair as the ride goes on. Sometimes the whirl and lights will cause our theory to vomit; other times it will stare defiantly at the stars. Among these ambiguities, one thing is certain: the theory itself will dissolve. In this sense, it would not be right to even call it a "theory." Really, we seek a *game* of meaning. We desire to play with values. This is not one universal, eternal game, but a multiplicity of games with divergent rules and strategies.

We will call this an existential game. Meaning is not produced, only the game is. Meaning comes about through taking advantageous tactical positions and breaking various thresholds in the game itself. As the Speculative Realists are so fond of saying: the rules are necessary, but contingently so. The existential game cannot be a return to the problem of meaning, but only a peripheral consideration of it. Each game itself will dissolve over time (it would be impossible to not encounter new problematics in an expanding world). The more games one produces, the more potential one has for rubbing against values. The existential game seems to escape the problem of meaning's dissolution because it effectively displaces the machinery of meaning-production. Where other philosophers have built factories of meaning, existential game theorists ran around placing bombs. The theological conception of meaning cannot be reconciled with human reality, but game creation is completely within our grasp.

Existentialists are sometimes accused of being too abstract. We, however, grew up in the Life or Death tradition of Camus and read Sartre a little too closely. Examples of the existential game can be found everywhere

from politics to illegal street racing. What is important is that an individual determines the boundary conditions of the game; this cannot be done by anyone else! The game also ends when the individual decides to move on. In this way, politics and illegal street racing may be the worst examples, or the best, depending on your relation to them. In the last instance, one should be aware of the extent to which this theory is also a game.





## Castrating-Production in Baumbach

The psychology of castration has always been inextricable from the philosophy of presence. As soon as one is castrated, one can never return to how one was. It is a strict dichotomy between absolute presence and absolute absence mediated by the absolute fear of castration. Two recent films from Noah Baumbach hint at a new conception of castration as production rather than stasis: *Greenberg* (2010) and *Margot at the Wedding* (2007). The position of the castrato is configured by the castrato itself. This configuration must be reappropriated with every action. If not, the castrato returns to a pre-castrating position in which the subject-position of the phallus is taken up again. (Of course, this position is not limited to a certain gender.)

The inflexion point of the two films comes by way of anecdote. *Greenberg* and *Margot* do not drive, but they forcefully assert that they can if they so choosed. *Greenberg* cites the amount of deaths from automobile collisions as his reason for not driving; *Margot* lives in the city and prefers public transit. The inability to drive is the symbol of castration. Yet this symbol is proliferated across all other social engagements in the film. The title characters constantly affirm their position as castratos by isolating themselves. The few times they do interact with others results in emotional violence. This form of existential angst is not absent from their sex lives either. In every aspect of the films, castrating-production is represented as the desire for absence.

The movies follow different trajectories at this point. *Greenberg* can only decide to end castrating-

production when he is high on cocaine. The film has an open conclusion where the spectator is left wondering if Greenberg's relationship would last. Margot, on the other hand, halts production in a fit of rage when she decides to drive. Her driving is careless, not respecting the lines or signs of the road-system; it has been a long time since she had been territorialized. To her childrens' dismay, she drives on and eventually makes it to the bus stop where she decides at the last minute to depart with her son. Her relationship is reconciled and one is led to believe that she is no longer producing her own castration. So, every moment that castration is produced holds the implicit possibility of throwing a cog in the gears and ending production, for however long one sees fit.

# Prefatory Notes on the Poverty of the Soul

“Let us never fear robbers nor murderers. Those are dangers from without, petty dangers. Let us fear ourselves. Prejudices are the real robbers; vices are the real murderers. The great dangers lie within ourselves. What matters it what threatens our head or our purse! Let us think only of that which threatens our soul.” – Victor Hugo

The word “soul” has been reprehensible for too long. The theologians that preach the salvation of the soul only end up strangling what little bit of soul we may have left. There is a soul, but it is fundamentally different than how we have thought about it until now. It must not be reduced to the mind or body: it is a third substance. An essentialist conception of the soul fails to recognize this important differentiation. What actually composes the soul is the question at the heart of these notes.

The soul is the trace. In this way, each soul is unique. Each body is an entry way to the soul. Turning to Derrida, we can see that the traces inscribed via arche-writing manufacture a spiritual past. This past is composed of the echoes of our never-fully-present experiences. The search for the soul is the search for a ghost, but a ghost that exists. The soul, as it is tethered to our bodies (which are both material and immaterial), must be finite. For Derrida, the trace is finite and infinite. The structure that the trace operates on must be finite, but the movement of the trace (i.e. substitution, spacing, etc.) is infinite. What Bernard Stiegler calls “retentional finitude” is the limit of the soul. Our traces can only extend so far before they fade into

shadows, caves, and imaginations, but the act of tracing them is endless. Deleuze's second passive synthesis of time reveals the play of these traces and also reminds us that this process is never fully conscious, present, or essential. Through the impossible-yet-necessary cataloging of our traces, we discover our unique path. In this moment, we discover the soul.

As Deleuze and Guattari remind us: "At any rate, you have one (or several)." The soul is the momentum of individual, proliferated and dispersed through desire. Its multiple rates change their velocities depending on external stimuli and the internal organization of intensities. In this way, the velocities of the soul are constantly changing; the soul can be suffocated and drowned, or can breathe and set fires. The science of the soul is to determine what obstacles strangle it and which inspire it. We demand a calculus of intensities, a transcendental empiricism of the unknown, cartographies of *terra incognita*. It all begins with intoxicated wanderings; *wine, virtue, and poetry* are oxygen for the soul.

The liberation of the soul must contend with various technologies of the mind and body that attempt to capture the soul. We encounter these apparatuses (daggers in the thigh of the soul, ropes around its neck) everyday: television, school, road-signs, clichés, toasters, pleasantries, medications, *pharmakon*, consciousness, urban policy, calendars, and so on. Any grammatisation is a direct assault on the soul (which, perhaps, explains the more unconventional technologies just listed). The ubiquity of these machines, which are veritable executioners of the soul, is telling of the poverty of the soul. Frequent trips to the doctor will not cure you of these diseases. We must find

a way to enrich our souls, to dismantle the Bastille of culture and invent structures that derange all the senses.

How is this to happen? We have some clues: books, drugs, conversations, stars, uncontrolled laughing, and silences. However, one must make a life out of these revolutionary moments. Jake Hamilton's work on pharmacology potentially speaks to this problem; pharmacology as the tele-communications of the soul. At all costs, we must embrace the trace. We should adopt an attitude of retentional finitude. Some of our souls are completely asphyxiated, but they can still be revived!

As I attempt to produce precarious cartographies of my traces, I am reminded of events that loosened the rope from around my neck. All the intense dawns spent in parks or garages, running away for the day, getting lost and asking the clouds for directions. I've read Tolstoy in foreign rooms and built entire empires out of a kiss. One event resonates with these remarks more than any other, though. The mantra of our liberation, as it was uttered by Derek Bobella, possibly with inspiration from Orion or the Muse: "I want to reclaim my soul." Anything else is quotidian ritual and perpetual suicide.



# Endnotes

- 1 Arthur Rimbaud, "Letters known as 'of the Visionary' (Seer)," trans. Catherine, accessed 3 December 2019, <http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/en/DocumentsE1.html>.
- 2 Rimbaud ran away from home in 1871, the same year he wrote his famous statement, to join the Paris Commune and helped build barricades in the streets.
- 3 René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method," *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 127.
- 4 René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 73.
- 5 René Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Descartes, "Discourse," 115.
- 9 Descartes, "Meditations," 76.
- 10 Ibid., 81.
- 11 Vincent Descombes, « Logic of the Egotistical Sentence : A Reading of Descartes, » trans. Jake Nabasny, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* XXVI, no. 1 (2018) : 11.
- 12 Jean-Luc Marion, « Descartes hors sujet, » *Les études philosophiques* 88, no. 1 (2009): 52.
- 13 Ibid., 53.
- 14 Ibid., 54.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 55.
- 17 Descartes, "Rules," 14.
- 18 Ibid., 31.
- 19 Descartes, "Discourse," 116.
- 20 Ibid., 113. I will show in the next section how this privilege is not based on the contingent circumstances of Descartes' upbringing, but is a metaphysical necessity built into operation of the *cogito*.
- 21 Ibid., 116.
- 22 Ibid., 117, 118, 119.
- 23 "everyday I am becoming more and more aware of the delay which my project of self-instruction is suffering because of the need for innumerable observations [*expériences*] which I cannot possibly make without the help of others." Ibid., 149.



- 24 Ibid., 146. See also p. 144.
- 25 Ibid., 148.
- 26 Descartes, "Meditations," 76.
- 27 Ibid., 83.
- 28 Ibid., 83. My emphasis.
- 29 Ibid., 78. My emphasis.
- 30 Ibid., 86. My emphasis.
- 31 Ibid. This translated passage is taken from the French translation, which Descartes approved, rather than the Latin. My emphasis.
- 32 John Marshall, *Descartes' Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 23n18.
- 33 "I compared the disquisitions of the ancient moralists to very towering and magnificent palaces with no better foundation than sand and mud: they laud the virtues very highly, and exhibit them as estimable far above anything on earth; but they give us no adequate criterion of virtue, and frequently that which they designate with so fine a name is but apathy, or pride, or despair, or parricide." Descartes, "Discourse," 114.
- 34 Quoted in Marshall, *Descartes*, 160. The fable that Descartes alludes to could be Aesop's "The Ass and the Mule," although it is not immediately clear what relevance this may have to Descartes' argument.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, *The Correspondence Between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, ed. and trans. Lisa Shapiro (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 107.
- 37 Descartes, "Meditations," 79.
- 38 Ibid., 79.
- 39 Ibid., 83.
- 40 Descartes, "Rules," 38, 36.
- 41 Charlotte Claire, "Talking with Charlotte Claire," *Talking about suicide*, 20 June 2013, <https://talkingaboutsuicide.com/2013/06/20/talking-with-charlotte-claire/>. She also suggests that her post-attempt perspective would be better in terms of helping others: "I think it could be really refreshing because doctors, psychiatrists, therapists all have their framework. I like to think I'm a woman with no framework."
- 42 "For me, no one experience made me do this. It's a state of being." Carolyn Edgar, "Talking with Carolyn Edgar," *Talking about suicide*, 17 July 2012, <https://talkingaboutsuicide.com/2012/07/17/talking-with-carolyn-edgar/>. "I'm definitely who I am as a result of that decision." Davey Davis, "Talking with Davey Davis," *Talking about suicide*, 3 November 2011, <https://talkingaboutsuicide.com/2011/11/03/talking-with-davey-davis/>.
- 43 This maneuver can be found in George Bataille's critique of Hegel, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," in *Hegel and Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, ed. Dennis King Keenan (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004); Martin Heidegger's analysis of the "not-yet" and totality of Dasein;

Michel Foucault's "rule of immanence" and "epistemological rupture." To a lesser extent, this may also be found in Quentin Meillassoux's search for the "Great Outdoors" of the thought-being correlation which necessitates a rupture in the principle of sufficient reason.

- 44 Marion, "Descartes Hors Sujet," 62.
- 45 Sabrina Tavernise, "U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High," *The New York Times*, 22 April 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html>.
- 46 Terry Spencer, "Attorney: Florida never helped girl who livestreamed suicide," *AP News*, 25 January 2017, <https://apnews.com/0a6525ad3f0e448697ae4d466b839d68>.
- 47 All quotations can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 48 Paul Ricœur, "Kant and Husserl," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1966): 163.
- 49 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 93.
- 50 Ibid., 98.
- 51 Ibid., 117.
- 52 Ibid., 94.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Ibid., 107.
- 55 Ibid., 112.
- 56 Ibid., 114.
- 57 Ibid., 118.
- 58 Ibid., 121.
- 59 Ibid., 122.
- 60 Ibid., 125.
- 61 Ibid., 126.
- 62 Ibid., 120.
- 63 Although Deleuze approaches us from a different trajectory, he hints at an ontology that can be thought alongside Husserl's. Since "minimal difference" is the virtual foundation of actual objects, it stands as a correlate to constitutive alterity. One of Deleuze's general points is that there is something unthought that is injected into thought, which permits him to say: "another always thinks in me, another who must also be thought. Theft is primary in thought" (Deleuze 1994, 199-200). What makes Husserl's phenomenology even more radical than Deleuze's self-described "transcendental empiricism" is that this "theft" becomes the foundation of

- the Ego *as such* and cannot be separated from the significance (or insignificance) of the Ego. The Ego is *not* generated from the non-Ego (as Deleuze might say), but is rather simultaneously and immanently co-apprehended with the non-Ego.
- 64 Ibid., 126.
- 65 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 66.
- 66 Ibid., 68.
- 67 Ibid., 71.
- 68 Ibid., 279.
- 69 Bernhard Waldenfels, “Experience of the alien in Husserl’s phenomenology,” in *Edmund Husserl: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Volume IV, ed. Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, and Gina Zavota (New York: Routledge, 2005), 357.
- 70 Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*, trans. Tanja Stähler and Alexander Kozin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 11.
- 71 Ibid., 3.
- 72 This form of argument, so popular in phenomenology, can originally be found in Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* at the beginning of Book II. Without being able to develop this here, it is necessary to demand that all phenomenologists return to Schopenhauer.
- 73 Ibid., 6.
- 74 Ibid., 16, 55, 70; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 40.
- 75 Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 12.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Ibid., 76.
- 78 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.
- 79 Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), 228.
- 80 Ibid., 228.
- 81 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.
- 82 Ibid., 34.
- 83 Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 229.
- 84 Adrian Peperzak once said in conversation that everything Levinas had ever written should be read as a critical response to Heidegger.

- 85 Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 18.
- 86 I am indebted to Jill Robbins for pointing this out in her excellent work, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 118-9.
- 87 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.
- 88 Ibid., 52.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Levinas never retracts his claim about the primacy of the ego. It is, nevertheless, a *faux pas* with regard to the pursuit of any genuine phenomenology of the alien. Phenomenologists since Hegel have been asserting that the I is an Other, but this assertion, if accepted, would require a radically new starting point for phenomenology. This fact was most likely the impetus for Heidegger's *Kehre* in the 1930s, the success of which cannot be addressed here.
- 91 Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 156.
- 92 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40; Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 16.
- 93 See "Toward a Bartleby Politics" in this volume.
- 94 Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 69.
- 95 Ibid., 83.
- 96 Arthur Rimbaud, *I Promise to Be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud*, trans. Wyatt Mason (New York, N.Y.: Modern Library, 2004), 33.
- 97 Ibid., 36.
- 98 Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York, N.Y.: Perennial Classics, 2000), 222.
- 99 Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 265. Translation modified.
- 100 Ibid.
- 101 Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 156; Derrida, *Voice and Phenomena: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, I.L.: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 10.
- 102 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1994), 86.
- 103 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

- Press, 1987), 11.
- 104 Ibid., 259.
- 105 Ibid., 273.
- 106 Ibid., 227.
- 107 Ibid., 282.
- 108 Ibid., 280.
- 109 Gilles Deleuze, “Two Questions on Drugs,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, trans. Ame Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York, N.Y.: Semiotext(e), 2007), 152.
- 110 Nurse Tanya, “whats it like to be high on nutmeg?” *Yahoo Answers*, accessed 3 December 2019, <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090224224115AAr5Hy8>.
- 111 Ibid., 153-4.
- 112 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1990), 161.
- 113 Rimbaud, *Compelte Works*, 224.
- 114 Rimbaud, *I Promise to Be Good*, 33.
- 115 Originally published as “Bartleby Politics: On Disavowal, Derangement, and Drugs,” *3:AM Magazine*, 19 June 2014, <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/bartleby-politics-on-disavowal-derangement-and-drugs/>.
- 116 Keith Caulfield, “Sia Recreates ‘Chandelier’ for Ellen DeGeneres, (Who Starts Madonna Rumor in Intro),” *Billboard*, 19 May 2014, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop-shop/6092150/sia-performs-chandelier-ellen-degeneres-madonna-rumors>; “Sia performs Chandelier for Ellen but refuses to show her face,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 2014, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/sia-performs-chandelier-for-ellen-but-refuses-to-show-her-face-20140520-zripc.html>.
- 117 Lena Dunham, “Chandelier,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sj757ishXnQ>. The video has been made private at some point, but clips of the performance still exist online.
- 118 On this aspect of disavowal, see “Footnote to *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol*” in this volume.
- 119 “Dance Gavin Dance - Instant Gratification ALBUM REVIEW,” YouTube video, 8:58, “theneedledrop,” 20 April 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8ZvRB16zfA>.

Self, Ego, Subject – these are the terms that philosophers have used to define the indelible mark of the individual. Throughout the history of Western thought, they have defined formal, material, and transcendental grounds that supposedly guarantee the persistence of a self-identical subject over time. At the same time, however, a counter-current runs through the history of philosophy and culture that challenges the primordially and privilege of the Subject. This current finds its most explicit formulation in French poet Arthur Rimbaud's declaration that “I is an other.” This declaration, with its long and unfinished history, forms the basis for a radical gesture of disavowal that resonates throughout philosophical, political, and cultural spheres.

This collection of texts from 2012-2018 traces the history of disavowal, a radical gesture of refusal. Breaking free of the binary logic of affirmation-negation, these essays contend that a third possibility exists in the realm of human action: disavowal. Disavowal is a sly sidestepping of boolean logic, an absolute negation that nevertheless posits an alternative course of action. Radical activists, philosophers, and political scientists have lamented for decades the chilling effect of nihilistic pessimism in the socio-political domain. These essays posit that a refusal to participate in the current global capitalist order need not be a refusal of the world as such. Engaging in topics from Cartesian subjectivity to Sia's live performance of “Chandelier,” this book provides a timely meditation on an urgent question and illuminates a path forward.

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