This dissertation traffics in the resurrection of the dead. In the sense of the Latin *disserto*, *dissertare*, it treats of the past as it flits by; it continues to discuss the archaic media that hold it fast in thrall and in which it is so entrenched: dead language, dead letters, voices from the grave. This is an exercise in failure. Sourced from the nightmare of hereditary doom, the following trial elaborates an understanding of poetic language as a state of exception and attends to the dialectic inherent in the law: an oscillation between the violence that establishes a limit and the violence that interrupts it. Haunting this relationship is always a third: the great criminal; the sovereign; the poet; the liar; the third man; the parasite; the Conqueror, who brings Death itself a sentence. In the critical preface, drawing on the work of Georges Bataille, Walter Benjamin, Marcel Duchamp, and others, I develop a notion of the creative act as a process of loss and a theory of poetry as excess—the irrational discourse that is opposed to rationality everywhere, the inscrutable, pure information, the interruption that troubles the signal, the beyond-sense given in any communication system, of which poetic language is a clearly marked case. This is to be a record of such ill-fated activity.

INDEX WORDS: Evil, sanctity, guilt, noise, infrathin, violence, excess
ROPES, OR, THE LAW

by

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For Ropes, to be washed in the blood of the lamb.
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Special thanks due to Kafka, the great source of these pages, for writing his diaries and those endless, seamless letters, and for succor; to Wm. Blake, for exertion; to Lautréamont, for sailing; and to all other hosts, named and unnamed; to J & J at Our Lady, for this bug; to Jed, to whom my debt is impossible and for his impossible analogies; to Andrew, for razor-sharp insight and total grace; to Adam, for such great care; and to my professors in the wake, especially TR, Messina, and Mary Ann; to my parents who have done everything; to their forebears that they might pardon me at last; and to my dear Jack, for her boundless help in this, of course, but also for pure patience and gentilesse.
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“Literature is not innocent,” Georges Bataille declares in the preface to Literature and Evil (1957): “It is guilty and should admit itself so” (2). He demands this confession neither to absolve literature of its crime nor to fetishize its abjection as such, but to highlight its apparent sovereignty as a state of exception aligned with the sacred. Literature, in other words, should claim its rightful territory. In Bataille’s theory, this guilt—which is always extreme guilt—is a direct result of literature’s impossible liberty. In the excessive devotion literature requires, Bataille locates its defining characteristic: “Literature is either essential or nothing. I believe that Evil—an acute form of Evil—which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a ‘hypermorality’” (1). Like the great health Nietzsche characterizes in The Gay Science (1882) as “dangerously healthy” (247), Bataille’s conception of the excessiveness of literary guilt indicates that its realm of supreme Evil likewise encompasses supreme Good (sanctity). Bataille privileges abjection because it is, in his view, the “only path” to sanctity, the literary domain par excellence: “The commitment to supreme Evil is indeed connected with the commitment to supreme Good, both being linked to each other by the stringency to which the other aspires” (LE 151). Indeed, a model of pure malignancy on this scale would seem to annihilate the dialectic of moral relation entirely, a transgression violent enough to disappear such boundaries.

Throughout Literature and Evil, Bataille argues that the demand of literature, as the quintessential form of communication, requires both writer and reader (sender and receiver), to
push their roles to the limit: the author must be dedicated fully to the process of loss, “to go beyond the wretch within himself” (163), but the reader, too, must be transfigured: “If there is to be communication, the person to whom the process is addressed momentarily changes himself into communication (the change is neither complete nor lasting, but it does, strictly speaking, take place: otherwise, there is no communication)” (161). The fleeting nature of this transformation evidences the trouble with the drive towards unity, or the totalization of the artwork. Despite the extremity of Bataille’s theory of literature, it is important to note the fervor of his desire to distinguish the literary as a form of communication as such, related in its excessiveness, that is, its potential for sovereignty, to Walter Benjamin’s concept of divine violence, a discussion I will take up later in this preface.

For Bataille, sovereignty seems both possible and necessary to literary production. He writes: “Literature is communication: a sovereign author addresses sovereign humanity, beyond the servitude of the isolated reader” (160). In the book’s final chapter, he characterizes Jean Genet’s “failure” in precisely these terms: “I can assert that the consecrational operation, or poetry, is communication or nothing. Genet’s work, whatever a commentator may say about it, is neither sacred nor poetic because the author refuses to communicate” (161). Genet’s failure centers on what Bataille describes as an interest in shallow transgression, or transgression for its own sake, in other words, which serves only to affirm the violence implicit the law; in this way, Genet’s work appears as a closed system in Bataille’s reading.¹ Genet writes not to address an audience, Bataille asserts, but only to amuse himself: “Genet’s indifference to communication means that his tales are interesting, but not enthralling” (164). This level of extreme fascination is the crucial point, as it implies a giving over into the realm of transgression. Genet does not

¹ Cf. Derrida in “Edmund Jabes and the Question of the Book,” Writing and Difference (1967): “Every exit from the book is made within the book. Indeed the end of writing keeps itself beyond writing…if it is
achieve this state of exception because his interest in abjection aims at the production of shock effects; it remains only a simulation, a kitschy double of the luxurious squandering Bataille calls literature. Sovereignty, he explains in the third volume of *The Accursed Share* (1949), which takes the term for its title, is everywhere a concept “opposed to the servile and the subordinate” (197). As a result, Genet appears as a “bourgeois” figure in Bataille’s lexicon, in that his work affirms his ultimate servility.

The value of the state of sovereignty, in its rejection of the servile, is displayed “with an ostentation that sometimes goes with a profound baseness”; however, Bataille is careful to note that such display also cheapens this value, and, as a result, he remains mindful of “the apparently lost sovereignty to which the beggar can sometimes be as close as the great nobleman, and from which, as a rule, the bourgeois is voluntarily the most removed” (197-98). He continues: “Sometimes the bourgeois has resources at his disposal that would allow him to enjoy the possibilities of this world in a sovereign manner, to which he strives to give the appearance of servile utility” (198). In a paradoxical turn, Bataille goes on to assert that sovereignty is itself a fraud that can only ever take the form of an apparition or a shade, maintaining that “sovereignty must inhabit the realm of failure…we cannot talk of Jean Genet’s sovereignty as if such a thing as the accomplished form of a real sovereignty existed. The sovereignty to which man constantly aspires has never even been accessible” (*LE* 165-166). This assertion is confusing on its face, but Bataille draws a distinction between the desire for sovereignty that is “eager for royal dignity,” an impossibility destined to fail, and the irrational striving, the energetic exertion with which one might try to grasp this spectral “momentary grace” (166). As is always the case in Bataille’s theory, literary value is tied to the pathological realm of activity he designates *expenditure*. 
In the beginning, one might say, all the world was literature—that is, the wilds. A core concept of Bataille’s economic theory (from which his poetics is derived), the notion of sovereign value is directly related to his concept of *la part maudit* (the accursed share), an excess energy manifest in the consumption of wealth without labor (i.e., pathological pleasure). The sovereign figure holds the power to bypass the rule of law and the limit on prohibition: “We may call sovereign,” Bataille explains, “the enjoyment of possibilities that utility doesn’t justify (utility being that whose end is productive activity). Life beyond utility is the domain of sovereignty” (*AS* III: 198). This zone does not profit; it wastes. It does not include the possibility of success and fulfillment, only degradation and loss. Beyond mere utility, beyond the belt of the horizon, that bounding line separating productivity from the realm of expenditure, an unrestricted domain of becoming crackles: it is an underworld, a generative zone of heedless, excessive energy, pure exuberance, and incessant interruption: a world without end—namely, ART. As a manifestation of its sovereign value, literature’s admission of guilt is therefore a declaration of its special favor, its fundamental exception. The allocution is not required in exchange for a reduction in punishment, but is given up endlessly, luxuriously, as literary transgression is without limit; the energy that drives the creative act is lost, as it must be, a reminder of the antiproduction that literature always is.

Still, Bataille argues, in its very heedlessness, literary expression gestures towards the possibility of communication, however fleeting: a kind of “miraculous opening” in the unintelligible. He explains: “The world is always richer than language, especially if we extract a momentarily recognizable perspective from an immense disorder. Language then impoverishes reality, and it must do so; otherwise we could not glimpse what is not visible to begin with” (255). The reduction identified here results from the gap between primary sensory experience
and the language that represents it. A reader might be taken away by this passage some time into the past, to a much different context: bourgeois London on a summer’s day in 1923, a reverie in fiction, in which Clarissa Dalloway recalls a similar sudden flash, where she “felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed” (Woolf 32). The moment cannot be made whole; it flows over the borders of her recollection. This inner experience can only ever be “almost expressed,” as language is only ever almosting it, to borrow Joyce’s protean phrase, which characterizes the loss inherent in representation.2

Versions of this idea ripple through the art of modernity. We see it in the simultaneity of Cendrars and the Delaunays, the parole in libertà of the Italian futurists, Stein’s density, Schwitters’ Merz-bilds, Joyce’s lumpmusic (i.e., his tumble of styles), on Pound’s wet black bough, in the rise of collage everywhere, and so on—in more instances that I have room to list. All of this work can be connected through a shared attempt to register the seemingly impenetrable wash and excess stimulation of modern life, the sheer noise of which shocked the body. The mass experience of art in the wake of the technological reproduction made clear that the relationship between art and artist, artist and audience had undergone a radical reorganization. Ushering in an outpouring of discontinuous styles in art, this rupture likewise demonstrated as outmoded aesthetic statements that privileged the desire for traditional notions of unity in the artwork, such as Yeats’s assertion in 1936 that “form must be full, sphere-like, single,” from the preface to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (296). This claim appears in the

2 The context has Stephen Dedalus trying to work through a half-remembered, half-revelatory dream from the night before as he walks along the limit beach in episode three (Uly. 3.366-67).
context of his critique of Pound. Yeats continues: “Even where there is no interruption, [Pound] is often content, if certain verses and lines have style, to leave unbridged transitions, unexplained ejaculations, that make his meaning unintelligible” (296). In sum, Yeats argues, the collage technique fails to get “all the wine into the bowl” (296). It fails, quite simply, because there is too much wine.

The horizontality of collage allows all elements to operate as equivalencies within the field of the artwork; that is, by transferring its objects into new contexts, collage makes each element equally foreign. In this way, the discontinuous surface serves as an example of what Bataille terms the informe (formless): a form that is without clear limits and in which resemblance is eroded. Disparate elements, having been removed from their original context and fit into the discontinuous assemblage, cease to resemble themselves; they dissolve into solution within the vast field of formlessness, a smooth space of radical becoming.

Bataille’s chief statement on the informe appears in the dictionary sequence of his journal Documents (a publication of the dissident surrealists, which ran for 15 issues between 1929-1930), making this concept an early iteration of what he later terms heterology—the study of that which is wholly other. Bataille describes the informe as a concept intended “to bring things down in the world” (qtd. in Formless 38). Bataille’s dictionary entries are always treated as opportunities to subvert the idea that the meaning of words could be expressed in their totality. The dictionary operates, as Bois and Krauss put it, “as one big quack: nothing stirred up Bataille’s blasphemous energy more than the definition of words, which he called ‘their mechanical frock coats’” (16). “Whatever [the informe] designates,” asserts Bataille, “has no rights in any sense, because it does not make any sense, and because that in itself is unbearable to

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reason” (qtd. in Formless 79). He illustrates the informe by referring to the example of spittle in one place and a squashed spider in another: here is an image of art as a mashed bug.

The journal itself, which co-conspirator Michel Leiris later described as a “war machine against received ideas,” operated as a collage text, combining visual images with written text, ranging across a variety of topics, from non-western religious and artistic practices, archaeology, folklore, and pop culture, to modern art and aesthetics (qtd. in Formless 11). The most provocative example of this visual collage appears in issue 6, where stills from the Fox Movietone Follies of 1929 (a film about a hit dancing revue in which a young starlet named Lila rises to stage fame) are juxtaposed with Eli Lotar’s Abattoir (1929) (a series of photographs documenting a butcher’s stall in the Parisian La Villette) and Bataille’s dictionary entry on the abattoir in which he identifies the slaughterhouse as a zone of exception, writing that “the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a plague-ridden ship” (qtd. in Formless 46). Through their shared designation as forbidden zones, he thus connects the slaughterhouse to the religious temple. At a key point in this discontinuous series, a still image of the dancers’ legs all in a line, peeking from under a partition is positioned alongside a photo of roughly two-dozen dismembered cow legs propped against a wall in a little paved alcove outside the Paris slaughterhouse. In the collision of these images, the violence of the latter’s grotesque lineup ceases to be limited to the field of its own sphere; like the plague ship, it can infect the nearby landmass by merely corrupting the surrounding atmosphere. These cut legs bleed into the image of the dancers’ lithe members (and vice versa); both images communicate plague. The effect is most important: the violence of this collision begins a chain reaction so that the entire issue is effectively saturated, becoming a rumination on violence, art, the grotesque body, and the sacred. This is one of the key ways in which art in the age of technological reproduction operates: the
wine does not stay in the bowl; it saturates its objects, making them run over their borders in a grand *bleed-through*. In this way, art based on interrupting previous modes of stability introduces a new durational logic, a result not of narrative arc but of repetition, parataxis.

Another of the most famous and striking moments in the history of montage illustrates this slippage. In the opening scene from *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), a collaboration between Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, a man sharpens a razor by a window: the film cuts to an image of the moon. A woman sits staring straight ahead—cut to the moon being overtaken by a thin, angular cloud—cut to a close-up of what appears to be the woman’s eyeball (in fact a pig’s eye from the local butcher). The camera now makes this eye the moon’s enigmatic double. The man slices the eye with the razor, the audience everywhere recoils, and a gooey vitreous humor, the dissolution of the eye as a stable image of seeing, the mother of all eyes, as it were, leaks out, in a profound giving way. Such spillage, lamentable from a post in the discourse network of the nineteenth century, proves to be simply the cost of making water thereafter. It is only in the wake of this flood that the present study emerges.

Walter Benjamin theorizes the effect of this development in his seminal essay, written in exile in Paris during the 1930s, “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” (1936). Benjamin argues that technological reproduction has undercut the notion of “authenticity” in artistic production: the “here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place” (21). In Benjamin, the appearance of authenticity, which results from the concept of originality, the “mark of the history to which the work has been subject” (21), produces an *aura* that art wears as a cloak (to recall Bataille’s description of words wearing their definitions as “frock coats,” false emblems complete meaning). However, Benjamin continues, “the whole sphere of authenticity” dissipates in the wake of reproduction (21): modern media
technologies transform the process by which the human sensorium perceives and interprets information, a fundamental alteration in the relationship between artist and audience. In the wake of the violence this great technological wave has unleashed, Benjamin explains that people receive information only in flinches, modern life destroying the possibility of contemplation. He rejects the possibility of total recognition: to create an artwork is to enter into a system of distraction and loss. Dada features in Benjamin’s discussion as a key example of this phenomenon. He asserts that the Dadaists privileged the “uselessness” of their artworks as “objects of contemplation,” an approach that results in “a ruthless annihilation of the aura in every object they produced” (39). The Dadaists, he writes, “turned the artwork into a missile” (39). No longer a vessel fit for wine: removed from the ceremonies of polite society, art in Benjamin’s description becomes equivalent to a field of ballistics.

Friedrich Kittler also has this onslaught in mind when he describes the transition into the twentieth century in Discourse Networks 1800/1900 (1985). He writes: “When the one Mother gave way to a plurality of women, when the alphabetization-made-flesh gave way to technological media, and when philosophy gave way to the psychophysical or psychoanalytic decomposition of language, Poetry also disintegrated” (177-78). Poetry, here, means “Classical poetry” (28), a version of the literary domain that could take meaning for granted, unity and totality for its banner. This is the “kingdom of sense” (209). What Kittler terms the “alphabetization-made-flesh” is a consequence of the rise of at-home literacy instruction in nineteenth-century Germany that moved language directly from mother to child, a phenomenon

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4 An artist like László Moholy-Nagy can see in this metamorphosis the potential for refinement, art having the capacity to train and perfect the human faculties he calls “functional apparatuses”: in his manifesto, “Production—Reproduction,” appearing in De Stijl 5 (1922), he writes: “man will be perfect in his own time if the functional apparatuses of which he is composed—his cells as well as the most sophisticated organs—are conscious and trained to the limit of their capacity” (reproduced in Passuth 289).
he documents by looking at the booming publication of reading primers designed for this use. In Kittler’s rendering of the discourse network of 1800 (i.e., the nineteenth century), language appears, not as a system of representation developed over time, but a raw material of nature: as the poet is birthed from the mother’s body, so language is born there as well. This misunderstanding, Kittler argues, gave writers to believe that language offered a stable system of meaning-production: “in 1800 the system of equivalents Woman = Nature = Mother allowed acculturation to begin from an absolute origin. A culture established on this basis speaks differently about language, writes differently about writing. Briefly put, it has Poetry” (28).

Therefore, for Kittler, the transcendental signifier finds its emblem in the “Mother’s Mouth” (a terrifying vector to be sure, to which I will return). The turning point occurs when language loses its aura of organic authenticity and originates, instead, in the process technological reproduction. Kittler locates one of the key origin points of this new relationship to language in Nietzsche’s early work, “On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense” (1873).

While not published during Nietzsche’s lifetime, the essay offers an important statement of his philosophy of language. Nietzsche argues that the root of all language is metaphor, which he designates a lie: if all words are metaphors for immediate experience, truth is only a way of designating those lies that have been codified into law. An individual lies in accordance with a social imperative to avoid conflict, the battle of the one against the many, in order to maintain the “herd” and thus differentiate the honest members of the community from “the liar, whom nobody trusts and whom everybody excludes” (258). This liar, in another guise, will blossom into Bataille’s poet. The supreme power of the human intellect in Nietzsche’s argument, equivalent to a lion’s tooth or a bear’s claw, appears as the dissimulation required in order to convince oneself of the lie: “Only through forgetfulness can man ever come to believe that he is
in possession of a truth...If he is not content with truth in the form of tautology, i.e., with empty shells, he will for ever be trading truths for illusions. What is a word? The portrayal of nerve stimulus in sounds” (255). In Nietzsche’s conception, the process by which the intellect encodes the nerve stimulus into an “image” is the first level of metaphor, the first untruth; the second remove occurs when that image is translated into a “sound,” then into speech, then into writing, the copy of speech (256). We might continue this line of flight along the signal path, through a chain of reactions in which the representation becomes more and more distant from its source in primary sensory experience. A certain quantity of loss is unavoidable in this transit, in this encoding and relaying of experience; as the chains increase, the number of channels increases, and thus the noise present in these channels increases; consequently, the violent reduction of meaningful information is likewise assured, until meaning arrives only in flinches, those other bits of information simply lost on the way.

Over time, this process of loss begins to acquire a veneer of authenticity (a frock coat) at which point it becomes collectively codified, territorialized as a restricted domain, and bounded like a county by a wall of brass. The result is the creation of a limited sphere of relation within which something like “truth” might exist. Nietzsche defines this version of truth as “a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, decorated and which, after lengthy use, seem firm, canonical and binding to a people: truths are illusions that are no longer remembered as being illusions” (257). Inscribed in this way, with a profound interruption at its source, an original sin of metaphor, language emerges in Nietzsche’s theory as a system of representation that can never be completed, a circle that can never be made whole, but that always manifests an irreconcilable gap, the interruption on which it is founded, a
disaster that evidences the impossibility of totality.\(^5\) This gap leaves an opening into the frontier, the wilds that lie beyond-sense, a hole through which practical utility flees like the noblesse bolting the city in flight from plague, and through which a viewer peeking through the stereo viewfinder might catch a glimpse of the other world. I will return to this image in the third iteration of this preface. The presence of the inscrutable hounded Nietzsche like a throng of chthonic furies, loosed from their home in the dread pit: “What I fear,” he notes in an early fragment, “is not the horrible shape behind my chair but its voice: not the words, but the frighteningly inarticulate and inhuman tone of that shape. If only it would speak as people speak!” (qtd. in Kittler 183).

For Kittler, the “Mother’s Mouth” suggests the myth of stability; however, the emergence of noise—the anomalous, inscrutable information—reaches its zenith in the ghostly apparition that appears over Nietzsche’s shoulder, a moment that marks the turn of the nineteenth century. Kittler describes the scene:

> In the deathly still room, only the pen makes a sound. Neither sound nor phonetic method supports a writing that occurs without preliminary speech and so without a soul. If something precedes its materiality, it is only the materiality of sound itself…The inhuman tone behind Nietzsche’s back is not the speech at the beginning of articulation; it is not speech at all. All discourse is powerless against it because all discourses add to it and fall prey to it. Within the realm of all sounds and words, all organisms, white noise appears, the incessant and ineradicable background of information. For the very channels through which information must pass emit noise. (183)

\(^5\) The reference is to Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980): “I call disaster that which does not have the ultimate for a limit: it bears the ultimate away in the disaster” (28).
This noise, finally, is the only sovereign. When it ascends from the crypt where 1800 had tried to keep it buried, it arrives, not in the spotless, bright-white garb of heaven, not washed clean in the blood of the lamb—no, it enters like a wild beast into the sheepfold, breaching the cordon, like the lady Madeline of Usher, in a blood-smeared slip, bearing a Death Sentence.  

Let us recall the scene. The power of Madeline’s presence at the end of “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) is tuned to the horrible metallic noise of her undead stirring: “No sooner had these syllables passed my lips,” the narrator explains, “than—as if a shield of brass had indeed, at the moment, fallen heavily upon a floor of silver—I became aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation. Completely unnerved, I leaped to my feet” (334). The bare sound interjects itself into the very chamber at the heart of the discourse network of 1800 (Usher’s room being decked in the trappings of a nineteenth-century poet), fatally interrupting the story of the “Mad Trist” of Sir Launcelot Canning, which at that moment the narrator is reading in order to calm his host’s nerves. But they will not be calmed. “As I placed my hand upon his shoulder,” the narrator reports, “there came a strong shudder over his whole person…and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur” (334).

When the lady Madeline finally penetrates the border of her brother’s well-curated room, she brings disintegration with her. She emerges as from a terrifying double of the Mother’s Mouth:

> As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell—the huge antique pannels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws…without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher.

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6 Note: when this phrase appears henceforth, in addition to the notion of capital punishment, the violence of which Walter Benjamin describes as the origin of law, a spectacle in which, as Benjamin asserts, “the law reaffirms itself” (Selected Writings I: 242), I also mean to suggest the Chaucerian pair “sentence” and “solaas,” in the sense of meaning/significance and pure pleasure, respectively—that is, the criteria by which a storyteller might earn supper: see “General Prologue” to The Canterbury Tales (1475), Ln. 798.
There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (335, emphasis in the original)

With her interruption, both stories stop. In their place: the fall. The house crumbles into the tarn, whose waters eat it whole. This is a disaster. Usher anticipates his death; he’s dead before it ever even happens. It is not Madeline’s grotesque frame, but her terrifying sound that plagues her brother through those last days and threatens to stop his throat: “Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet…I dared not speak!” (334). Madeline’s own last words offer nothing but a moaning sound. This noise means death, a profound interruption, and the destruction of the kingdom of sense. Thus we understand the source of the poet’s crisis: it is not the loss of the voice one fears, but the loss of the noiseless channel.

“In 1900,” writes Kittler, “in direct descent from Nietzsche, ‘word art’ became synonymous with literature” (185). At this point medium usurps message, and poetry becomes what it had always been, words. Kittler includes a famous anecdote about Mallarmé (the story originates with Paul Valéry), which I will reproduce here. As a poet, Degas preferred painting. He found great difficulty in expressing his ideas, despite the fact that he was overflowing with them. He told his friend: “Yours is a hellish craft. I can’t manage to say what I want, and yet I’m full of ideas”; and Mallarmé, herald of the new age, replied, “My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words” (qtd. 184). This is the crucial moment, which the clamor of mass experience and the emergence of art-as-ballistics accentuates: after the law of meaning-
production gives way to the impossibility of contemplation, the presence of noise in the signal path becomes manifest, as the illusion of immaculate relation, the noiseless channel, dissolves. What’s left for literature is to not to reduce this noise, but to deliver it.

For Bataille, literature is always the liar separate from the herd; nevertheless, its transgressive energy gestures towards the possibility of communication, or truth as such, a version of sovereignty that might annihilate the boundary: “At least we can,” Bataille writes, “in the deep darkness (in the darkness of the intelligible), arrange appearances in such a way that they cease to close the wall” (AS III: 255). In this dangerous and privileged instant, when language miraculates a semblance of order out of heterological disorder, when a moment of recognizability flashes up out of the unintelligible, which, in Benjamin, we might call simply history—the nightmare of history, even—only to be closed again somewhere else along the line, the levee breaks: the membrane separating the restrictive domain from the general zone of limitless becoming gives way: the wall that bounds the county disintegrates into fragments, in a grand becoming-molecular, a grand mal. As the body gives way to its double, and the one law gives way to proliferation, literature stakes its claim.

In the trial that follows, which is only a trial insofar I say it is, I locate the impulse behind the creative act in a clearly marked example of such loss, a case of antiproduction, or the consumption of wealth outside productive activity. I describe the work as a false novel, as it rejects traditional narrative progression and only luxuriates in squandering its plot, only piles up death sentences; it is a series of cracked or broken transmissions, with no clear addressee. Still, it is useful here to speak of it as a kind of memoir, a vector into literature’s excessive guilt. The disastrous event that jumpstarts the narrative impulse is a double of Nietzsche’s giving way to pure noise, as Kittler describes his descent into unintelligibility, and it leads the figure of Ropes
into a paneled room deep inside a house, a limited zone in which something like literary communication might redound along a copper-lined corridor (Ropes’s room recalls the Ushers’ house, yes, but I also have in mind Krapp’s den and Gregor Samsa’s bedroom, which seems to occupy the very eardrum on the Samsa apartment). The manuscript is rooted in an actual historical scandal—a little bit of history from 1930 (the rough age of all these documents), in which a few dozen corrupt government officials were paid for work they did not produce, but the utility of which they nevertheless enjoyed, unduly. I use Ropes as an image of the figure subject to the storm of modernity and an emblem of the discourse network of 1900.  

The scandal is not notable in itself, especially in the annals of venality compiled by Chicago, Ill. (as in illness), but this particular eruption of fraud led to real consequences; for Ropes, for example, a figure I cover in a coat of rejectamenta, the true mantle of Bataille’s poet, it meant indictment, disbarment, dread, and ultimately an early death. Furthermore, the allocation from which these funds were siphoned had been set aside for a sanitary works project: the large-scale construction and general improvement of Chicago’s city sewers. This scandal blitzed through the papers—at least flitted through them—and the ravenous press, according to their gift, bestowed upon it the agreeable name, “Canal Whoopee,” or the delight-in-waste, a phrase in which I hear an echo blow: beyond utility.

Antiproduction is, therefore, central to the conceit of this work: as the original sin, the sundering at the origin point of Ropes, was a crime of antiproduction, so the productive activity they wasted was likewise aimed at the sewer (a canal being an accident in the land designed to produce the free and easy elimination of waste). So that, in the great whoopee with which the canal empties at last into the deep blue sea, that king medium of endless fluctuation, I find a

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7 His career spanned roughly the period from the First World War until his death in November 1931. I approach him, therefore, as a representative of his time, a dread door into modernity.
beginning—on a night like the night, in Joyce, when Anna Livia “signs her final tear. Zee End. But that’s a world of ways away. Till track laws time” (Wake 28.28-30). I’ve always liked that description. All writing, in the end, is a kind of wake. Mixed with all manner of superfluous material, in the canal that moves beneath the streets where traffic flows in an unending stream, and on whose banks the vast City rises, I find a holdfast from which to transmit. I write into that gap in the wall, into the hole that the mars and also marks it, that stops the discourse and out of which the discourse erupts, the disaster that reorganizes the [w]hole on a higher order of complexity.

In Ropes, this oscillation is most visible in the relationship between the moment of transgression and the subsequent indictment that sends the hero into a writing panic and, ultimately, apoplexy. It is a violence noted on the level of language (or song) as well as in the bloodstream; and it is likewise manifest in the lush violence and hot rage with which Ropes, prior to his reversal of fortune (his becoming-accursed), pursued death sentences as an officer of the law, like so many notches on his belt—that most extreme form of law-affirming violence from which he draws his sobriquet. I will return to a discussion of the work’s historical context at the end of this introduction, but first, in these preliminary iterations, I want develop a notion of interruption—an emblem of antiproduction, or noise, the movement that encompasses both the stoppage of death and the opening into a new epoch of deathlessness—as the basis for a theory of Poetry.

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8 As Bataille puts it in his brief essay, “The Solar Anus”: “Animal life comes entirely from the movement of the seas and, inside bodies, life continues to come from salt water…The sea continuously jerks off” (Visions 8).
First Iteration: Dialectics of the Law

In Bataille’s conception, literary communication, which takes poetry as its banner, is deadly serious, the discourse most-high; however, what is essential in poetic language is not meaning-production, but rather the stringency with which the poet is devoted to the creative act, a commitment which is necessarily dangerous and deleterious. The poet’s cruelty is, in effect, a double of religious devotion (e.g., the mortification of the flesh), which, in its extremity, dislodges the activity from the limited field of material utility, or profit, in affirmation of its exceptional status. In its excessiveness, poetry gestures towards the possibility of sovereignty—the end of servility, in other words: the death of the king and the disintegration of the kingdom of sense. The mystic’s posture, an extreme variety of supplication, while it exalts the divine as an impossible possibility, nonetheless highlights the mystic, too, as extraordinary. It is for this reason, for example, that a figure like Margery Kempe—the late-medieval English Christian mystic, whose penetrating visions produced outrageous public displays, disruptive spectacles of loud wailing and hysterical sobbing—was regularly cast out of traveling parties, imprisoned by the clergy, and threatened with sexual assault and possibly death.\(^9\) The immoderateness of Kempe’s religious ecstasies, magnified by her status as a laywoman, marked her as a potential fraud (or, more problematic, a true believer) and a thus form of earthly taboo—the danger of the taboo being, as Freud states, its capacity to infect: that is, to lead us into temptation (801). The expulsion of excessive energy always aims at the protection of the public health, the maintenance of a \textit{cordon sanitaire}, and, like the violence of legal authority, the affirmation of the law.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) See \textit{The Book of Margery Kempe}, 62.  
\(^{10}\) For another interesting example of this desire to quarantine the excessive, recall Creon’s decision to alter Antigone’s method of execution at the last moment in Sophocles’ \textit{Antigone}, a play that dramatizes the dialectic of the law. Antigone’s crime, beyond insubordination, is the transgression of the law of prohibition; that is, she exceeds the limits of the feminine, the private sphere of activity the polis prescribes for all women in Thebes, in a radical becoming-masculine Creon is simply unable to assimilate
For Bataille, such abjection identifies Kempe with the literary. In his theory, poetry is necessarily transgressive. It emerges as a variety of expression defined by luxurious and heedless squandering, and it likewise takes pathological enjoyment in possibilities that are unjustified. Poetry is of the realm of means only, in other words; it operates as a counterfeit variety of meaning-production. Poetry has always been a fraud, a master of dissimulation. We should recall that Plato banished poets from his Republic due to the imitative nature of their art. As a representative form of language, poetry threatens to interrupt the system of meaning with a reproduction of truth, a “superficial likeness,” which it enjoys producing in sadistic fashion. This classic confidence trick Plato describes as “the natural magic of poetry” (367). The danger of this magic is similarly its capacity to flood the world with false copies and bad taste; and, in so doing, to highlight the failure inherent in the drive towards unity. However, banishment, by demonstrating the porousness of the limit that surrounds the restricted area, likewise opens a route into Art’s other country: a Deleuzian smooth space where one casts off the mechanism of practical desire to revel in a state of becoming deliriously saturated, a place where the doors are always unlatched. In its banishment, poetry, too, becomes extraordinary.

Bataille elaborates this theory throughout his work. Its early expression appears in an important essay, “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933), where he writes that “The term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, into his failed theory of rule, thereby accelerating his peripeteia. Rather than proceed with his original plan to stone her publicly, a ritualized execution which would include public as active participants in the law-affirming violence, he decides to entomb her alive outside the limits of the city and there starve her to death, a strategy designed to keep the pollution of her blood-guilt, which would demand blood in return and thus inaugurate a cycle of violence, out of the public intercourse: “to keep the entire city free of defilement”: see Sophocles, Antigone: Ins. 870-78.
creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of sacrifice” (*Visions* 120). As an image of sacrifice—literally, in his terms, “the production of sacred things”—poetry transcends the restrictive domain of the law (119). As an accursed share, poetry is an example of the excess energy that must be wasted, “must be spent,” Bataille writes, “willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (*AS I*: 21). It is precisely this heedlessness—its rejection of the limit as limit—that grants literature its symbolic power, a result of the violence implicit in the law. It appears as a profligate form that rejects prohibition and conservation in favor of transgression and proliferation; through this *becoming-sacred*, it thus affirms the disorder general beyond the limit, the unlimited kingdom of nonsense within which the limited space of meaning-production is merely circumscribed.

For Bataille, there are no deviants, only endless deviation. In rejecting hierarchical structures for the smashed-ness of the *informe*, his thinking thus merges with the Deleuzian notion of horizontality. For Deleuze and Guattari, the radical transit given in the movement of their concept of *becoming-animal* (and all similar becomings in their lexicon) marks a new phase in the larger dialectical process they call *deteritorialization*. The movement of becoming-animal is a version of deteritorialization in that it describes a rhizomatic (or molecular) proliferation, a nomadic model of distribution; in Deleuzian terms, the creative act has no other end than to *unleash* this action. Deleuze and Guattari explain this concept in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980):

> Becoming-animal is only one becoming among others. A kind of order or apparent progression can be established for the segments of becoming in which we find ourselves; becoming-woman, becoming-child; becoming-animal […] becomings-molecular of all kinds, becomings-particles. Fibers lead us from one to the other, transform one into the other as they pass through doors and across

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thresholds. Singing or composing, painting, writing have no other aim: to unleash these becomings. (272)

This multiplicity is directly opposed to the idea of totality, and as such it rejects the concept of a limited moral zone in which something like Kant’s categorical imperative (or “truth,” for that matter) might operate. For Deleuze, a theory should never move towards totalisation: rather, true theory, he says, “is an instrument for multiplication and it also multiplies itself” (Foucault 208).

The line of flight through this chain of thresholds and doors is the creative pathway along which the multiplicity moves; and, in this way, their description matches Marcel Duchamp’s description of the creative act, a discussion I will return to in the final section of this paper.

“Constituting a territory is nearly the birth of art,” Deleuze says in a television interview (even now, he’s saying it again on YouTube): there is no territory without a way out, a “vector of leaving…No deterritorialization without a vector for reterritorialization elsewhere” (Abecedary). In other words, there is no law without the possibility of transgression. Paul Virilio echoes this statement in *The Original Accident* (2005): “To invent the sailing ship or steamer is to invent the shipwreck” (10). Or, we might put this idea another way: “Where there is a reconciliation,” as Stephen Dedalus says in “Scylla and Charybdis,” “there must first have been a sundering” (*Uly*. 193: 9.334-35). In the oscillation between Stephen’s meditation on Shakespeare and the interruption of his interior monologue, Joyce’s style demonstrates the dialectical movement of interruption into multiplicity, his late style a constant swirl between the legible and illegible. The limit, the cordon is an emblem of the law in that it produces the desire to breach it: “The striated itself may in turn disappear in a ‘catastrophe’,,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “opening the way for a new smooth space, and another striated space” (*ATP* 493). The movement is ongoing.

Language is always rubbing against the lie on which it is based. As an excessive form of
communication, literature is necessarily interruptive: it moves beyond the domain of meaning-production, what Wittgenstein describes in *Zettel* (1967) as “the language-game of giving information” (160). However, the violence of interruption, in a paradoxical turn, produces and defines the possibility of discourse and of relation at large; it is the major event with the potential to unleash a new-found land.

In Bataille’s heterology, the abject appears everywhere as the movement becoming-sacred. He presents this theory most provocatively in “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)” (1930), a rejoinder to André Breton’s *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), in which the impresario of Surrealism had castigated Bataille for a cloacal obsession—at one point near the end of the manifesto going so far as to designate him an “excrement-philosopher” (Breton 185). In a telling parallel to Bataille’s later critique of Genet, Breton criticizes his former comrade as a mere poseur who remains servile to the idea of transgression as such, which Breton is quick to oppose to Sade’s glittery independence, or, as he puts it, “the impeccable integrity of Sade’s life and thought, and the heroic need that was his to create an order of things which was not as it were dependent upon everything that had come before him” (186). In Bataille’s response, he states that “The behavior of Sade’s admirers resembles that of primitive subjects in relation to their king, whom they adore and loathe…In the most favorable cases, the author of *Justine* is treated as any given foreign body…The life and works of D. A. F. de Sade would thus have no other use value than the common use value of excrement” (*Visions* 92). In this way, Bataille returns serve on claims of servility, relegating Breton and his ilk to the position of mere subordinates who exalt Sade’s transgression only in order to “facilitate his excretion (his peremptory expulsion)” (92). This is the kind of servility that indicates to Bataille that the Surrealists will never become altogether real, that their program
will never become essential. Bataille says, in effect, that Sade appears to his admirers like the criminal whose punishment only reaffirms the authority of the law.

However, in Bataille’s conception, Sade, the hero of transgression, plays the role of a great criminal, whose sovereignty carries a “brilliant and suffocating value” (93). Sade “received a share of the sovereign magnificence” as a birthright, Bataille continues in *The Accursed Share*, but he “nonetheless pushed rebellion to its extreme consequence… This grand seigneur told himself with good reason that we should have command of ourselves and free access to the world” (III: 252). He writes that “the cruel monstrosities of Sade have only one meaning: their excessiveness brings out this principle [that sovereignty is the negation of law]” (254). This description of Sade’s value corresponds to Adorno’s description of the artwork in *Aesthetic Theory*: “All artworks, even the affirmative, are a priori polemical. The idea of a conservative artwork is inherently absurd. By emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is” (177).

Thus, the violence implicit in this act of becoming opens a door through which the possibility of totalization retreats with impossible swiftness. Like the fatted calf, the prized heifer reserved so that through the gratuitous spectacle of its ritual slaughter it might slip between the ultra-thin membrane separating the living and the dead and therefore affirm bare life, a deterritorialization that translates a meat animal into a sacred object, poetry is an image of pure loss. It is in this sense that Jean-Luc Nancy writes, in *The Birth to Presence* (1993), “It is certainly neither false nor excessive to say that all production of sense—of a sense making sense in this sense—is a deathwork” (3). And we return to the relationship between literate and guilt. Whereas the end of productive activity is material utility (and ultimately pleasure), an end that in effect justifies the energy exerted, for Bataille, poetry’s desire is specifically unjustified—that is,
Evil: “Literary communication—which is such in so far as it is poetic—is this sovereign process which allows communication to exist, like a solidified instant, or a series of instants, detached both from the work and from the reading of the work” (LE 160).

The poet in this process, who uses words “only for his own loss,” emerges as a “reprobate, who is profoundly separated from society as dejecta are from apparent life” (Visions 120). This appearance remains on the level of the possible and can never in fact become real, since the sovereign is only mythic figure, a cipher: “Sovereignty is NOTHING, and I have tried to say how clumsy (but inevitable) it was to make a thing of it. I refer now to the opening of art, which always lies but without deceiving those whom it seduces” (AS III: 256). The lie here is that which in Nietzsche functions as “truth” among the herd: the possibility of success, of totalization, a hallmark of the state of innocence. We might approach this differently. “The Emperor as such,” Kafka writes in “The Great Wall of China” (1931), an account of the dialectic of the law, “is mighty throughout all the hierarchies of the world: admitted. But the existent Emperor, a man like us, lies much like us on a couch which is of generous proportions, perhaps, and yet very possibly may be quite narrow and short” (243). The Emperor as such moves with impossible fluidity and swiftness, but the Emperor himself languishes in his particular domain.

The power of empire is merely symbolic, impossible, but for the seduced, the poet, the process can bring real, deleterious consequences. Bataille sketches a portrait of this loser-artist: “for the rare human beings who have this element at their disposal, poetic expenditure ceases to be symbolic in its consequences; thus, to a certain extent, the function of representation engages the very life of the one who assumes it. It condemns him to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery, to despair, to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows that provide nothing but vertigo or rage” (Visions 120, emphasis added). This description of the inconsistent shade to
which the poet’s chair is turned is yet another echo of Nietzsche’s ghost, the unintelligible. And yet, like the Emperor, poetry as such (and, in turn, the poet), possesses a basic, enthralling charisma. The poet is thus an example of what Benjamin describes the “great criminal” in his “Critique of Violence” (1921), whose excessive criminality arouses “the secret admiration of the public” (SW I: 239). This seductive quality results not from the criminal act as such, but again from the stringency of his devotion to criminality, “not from his deed but only from the violence to which it bears witness” (239).

Benjamin’s critique offers perhaps the most useful description of the violence inherent in the law and the supreme violence that marks its annihilation. For Benjamin, violent action can only be understood within a zone of moral relation. He begins the discussion by describing the dialectic of the law as an oscillation between the law-making violence that establishes a limit and the law-enforcing violence that maintains it. These two forms of violence fuse in the ultimate manifestation of legal authority: capital punishment. He explains that if “violence crowned by fate, is the origin of law, then it may be readily supposed that where the highest violence, that over life and death, occurs in the legal system, the origins of law jut manifestly and fearsomely into existence” (242). In other words, the death penalty becomes the essential form in the movement between transgression, punishment, and the law. Benjamin notes that in primitive legal systems a punishment of death was not reserved for the most heinous crimes but was imposed even in petty instances where the severity of its violence was clearly excessive to modern eyes. In these instances, “Its purpose is not to punish the infringement of law but to establish new law. For in the exercise of violence over life and death, more than in any other legal act, the law reaffirms itself” (242). Thus, the death sentence emerges as a deterritorializing operation within the dialectic of the law; it is in this most extreme manifestation of the violence
on which it is founded that the law affirms its multiplicity. It is a double of the poetic discourse that makes communication possible. In the achievement of a death sentence, in other words, the law confesses its guilt and thereby stakes its claim.

In the trial that follows, I collapse the figure of Benjamin’s great criminal into that of Bataille’s poet. The voice which speaks is everywhere that of the unredeemed, the reprobate, the pest. However, the figure of Ropes is also an officer of the law, a Kafkaesque official, whose name and reputation, prior to his metamorphoses into an antihero at the beginning of the manuscript, are based on his ability to transform defendants into a chorus of the condemned, and to sentence hordes of them to the gallows. His character manifests the pernicious violence of state power, what Benjamin calls “mythic violence”: “the destruction of which thus becomes obligatory” (249). It is with just such an obligation in mind, one given to destroy, that I have undertaken this project. As both a criminal and an officer who arouses the admiration of the public with the lust he displays for the achievement of death sentences, the character of Ropes encompasses both law-making and law-affirming violence. He is an image of state power suspended at the end of its rope. In drawing this portrait, I mean to offer both a critique of the law’s violent force and an occult spell, however ineffectual, designed to disrupt its terrible power.

Moving beyond the malignancy of mythic violence, Benjamin closes his critique with a discussion of the real third party in this relationship: divine violence, or violence as such; this hyperviolence necessarily includes a kind of pure, or free-playing, non-violence. Therefore, divine violence introduces a true state of emergency, not a false sovereignty but a summit that, in its excessiveness, promises to reorganize history. His discussion has always been heading towards a reckoning with a state of radical exception in which the law itself is deposed, where
the nexus of just means and just ends is rendered insignificant. It is precisely such sublime heights Bataille imagines for poetry as a form of impossible communication. This is the reason he asserts that sovereignty is nothing and that literature always lies. Unlike mythic violence, which Benjamin claims is a “mere manifestation of the gods” that nevertheless operates as a version of legal violence, divine violence brings with it total annihilation: “If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them” (249). While mythic violence “demands sacrifice,” divine violence “accepts it” (250). This kind of emperor is a crawling king snake, beyond all servility.

This is more than sovereignty. For Bataille, poetry and all other excremental forms must be wasted in affirmation of their excess or guilt; however, in the annihilated zone left in the wake of divine violence there would be no need for an admission of guilt, as there would be no need for communication—that is, for literature. Benjamin is describing a state of emergency as a state of suspension. He continues: “in annihilating it also expiates, and a profound connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable. For blood is the symbol of mere life” (250). The essay closes with a description of the result: “On the breaking of this cycle maintained by mythic forms of law, on the suspension of law with all the forces on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore the abolition of state power, a new historical epoch is founded” (252). In the excessiveness of this moment of rupture, divine violence enacts something like a return to a state of innocence, in which the innocent are cleansed of the guilt of bare life (experience) and the guilty are likewise absolved, “not of guilt,” Benjamin writes, “but of law” (250).

For a description of this state of innocence, we should turn to William Blake, whose work always seems to outpace history. A disaster on the scale Benjamin describes would mean for the
poet a flight-out-of-time, a reduction akin to the emergency evacuation that occurs at the end of Blake’s *The Book of Thel* (1789), where the naive figure of Thel bolts back to the realm of innocence the moment she confronts, at the dread threshold of the real, the possibility of sovereign experience, an outright rejection of the growth into multiplicity.

In the poem, Thel, a daughter of Mne Seraphim, a Blakean variety of angelic maidenhood, is troubled by the knowledge of her own mortality and so sets out on a search for meaning—for *truth*, a hero’s journey. She moves through a series of conversations with lower forms: a Lilly, a Cloud, a Clod of Clay, and a Worm, each content with their ephemerality, their position in the chain of infinite becomings—or, in other words, each secure in the transitory nature of its servile existence. Early on, Thel is sighing, wallowing, going on about death in all her youthful bloom:

> O life of this our spring! why fades the lotus of the water?

> Why fade these children of the spring? born but to smile & fall.

> Ah! Thel is like a watry bow. and like a parting cloud.

> Like a reflection in a glass. like shadows in the water…

> Ah! gentle may I lay me down, and gentle rest my head,

> And gentle sleep the sleep of death. (Plate 3: 6-13)

In the first half of the poem these laments are answered: by the Lilly-of-the-Valley and the Cloud, with expressions of their divine faith and descriptions of the movement into “tenfold life” and “raptures holy,” as the Cloud says (Plate 5: 53). The situation becomes more interesting in her third encounter.

The Worm is a pathetic figure, helpless as an infant, perched on a dewy bed of limit-earth, the bounding line between the idealized pastoral of Blake’s lower paradise and the gritty
underworld of the pit—an emblem of Blake’s Generation and passage to the reality of experience. Blake’s Worm is a speaker who never speaks, an inarticulate white space: having no voice, the Worm’s song, which is not a song but only weeping, is nevertheless translated and relayed by a Clod of Clay, making for a complicated channel. Thel interrogates this inscrutable figure:

‘Art thou a Worm? image of weakness, art thou but a Worm?
I see thee like an infant wrapped in the Lillys leaf:
Ah weep not little voice, thou can’st not speak, but thou
can’st weep;
Is this a Worm? I see thee lay helpless & naked: weeping,
And none to answer, none to cherish thee with mothers
   smiles.’

The Clod of Clay heard the Worms voice, & raisd her
   pitying head ;
She bowd over the weeping infant, and her life exhal’d
   In milky fondness; then on Thel she fix’d her humble eyes. (Plate 6: 75-82)
The moment is strange; the Worm who cannot speak but only weep is nevertheless heard and translated by the Clod, as if the excremental quality of poetry itself might soak into, that is, *penetrate* the earth. This is the kind of communication possible in the prelapsarian phantasmagoria of the realm of innocence: weeping is translated seamlessly into poetry. The Worm’s song happens in the suspension of a stanza; it’s white noise, yet the Clod recognizes this blanked-out speech through a process of pure absorption. The Clod fixes her eyes on Thel, but it
is the Worm’s story she relates, so that (like Samuel Beckett writing the Unnamable writing Mahood writing his own Worm) the noise would be necessarily amplified by degrees of remove. It’s a telephone game. We should remember that, having not been moved as yet, we are still in the vales of Har, a synthetic pastoral landscape that never becomes altogether real; it’s another counterfeit, a picture of impossible purity that nevertheless affirms the laws of prohibition. This is not paradise; it’s a blank space, an annihilated space, in other words, a kind of manicured suburb; but beneath it crackles a low-lying district of eternal delight, the threat of destructive energy, a flood of corruption, catastrophic infection, disintegration, and waste—a canal whoopee if ever there was! These sleepy valleys are nothing if not susceptible. I mean quaint. I mean predisposed. In Har, Thel dissipates rather than dies; she languishes, sleeps the sleep of death yet continues to hear the voice outside; she passes away, yet she complains.

Now, Blake tears the bandages off. The Clod takes our Thel on a little trip to the underworld. The earth’s porter pulls back its dirty lip, and Thel glimpses the future: she sees the world of Blake’s Generation, where the fibers of growth extend deep down in the earth like a mass of branches, where death and sorrow reign, where heedless expenditure is the only method of payment still accepted. It’s one of Blake’s Miltonic carnival rides. She wanders through these deeps awhile, listening to “Dolours & lamentations,” whose grief far surpasses her own (Plate 8: 109). In this listening posture, she stops: “She stood in silence, listning to the voices of the ground, / Till to her own grave plot she came, & there she sat down, / And heard this voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit” (Plate 8: 110-112). The voice that meets her far exceeds

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12 See Joyelle McSweeney on the concept of the necropastoral, the ghostly double of the traditional pastoral: “I give the name ‘necropastoral’ to the manifestation of the infectiousness, anxiety, and contagion occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classical pastoral. For all the pastoral’s shoring up of separations, and despite the cordon sanitaire it purports to erect between unhealthy urban strife and wholesome rural peace, we must remember that the premier celebrity resident of Arcadia is Death” (Necropastoral 3)
her capacity to recognize and interpret it; she’s well beyond the possibility of contemplation. The inscrutable noise creeps again on stage. There will be no seamless translation here; this grave voice speaks the unfathomable language of Experience:

"Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?

Or the glistning Eye to the poison of a smile?

Why are Eyelids stord with arrows ready drawn,

Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie?

Or an Eye of gifts & graces, show'ring fruits and coined gold?

Why a Tongue impress'd with honey from every wind?

Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?

Why a Nostril wide inhaling terror, trembling, and affright?

Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy?

Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?" (Plate 8: 113-122)

The chant rolls, as if it has no limit, an infinite line of inquiry. It might go on, but Thel cannot. In the wake of this strange remix of her earlier conversations, this nightmarish playback of her vision, Thel loses what’s left of her nerve. Having moved through a chain of banal exchanges before landing here at the foot of her own grave, the same thing happens to her that happens to Scrooge in a similar spot: she panics. The voice unleashes an impenetrable wall of questions, oppressive in their very replication, and Thel wilts. When confronted by the sublime experience that comes roaring out of the pit, she flees back to her sleepy paradise with an impenetrable shriek, a flight out-of-here. Presented with the prospect of real Experience, her double life, that is, her self as a multiplicity, she becomes effectively unhoused and returns to the wooly confines of the restricted domain.
Thel’s failure to transition to the realm of Experience results from the shock of her encounter with the real, her terror in the face of that maw, but it is also a specific choice she makes: to disappear, a voluntary negation. Indeed, her name likely derives from the Greek *thelos*, meaning “will.” Thel chooses not to enter the realm of experience and destructive sexuality, assuring her permanent innocence; she chooses not to get her hands dirty in the pit and retreats the vales of Har, which is another kind of void, a presence that is pure absence: a rejection of becoming. As Northrop Frye explains the concept of growth in Blake: “imaginatively it is a descent to a lower world. But as, according to Blake, nothing achieves reality without going through physical existence, the descent must be made” (232). Innocence is not an ideal pastoral state; it is a fraud, a place, like Milton’s Heaven, where nothing interesting happens. Innocence is the restrictive zone, and the energy implicit in the violence of that restriction impels life into the reality of experience.

Blake, we know, was the great poet of energy and excess, but also failure, which is why he opens his major work, the sphinxlike *Jerusalem*, with this fantastic and pitiful call to the public: “Therefore Dear Reader, forgive what you do not approve & love me for this energetic exertion of my talent” (Plate 3). Blake’s reader inevitably rejects this appeal. As Blake’s plea calls for a kind of pure or total recognition—beyond understanding or in spite of the text’s inscrutability—so his deletions merely reinforce the futility of such a goal. Literary communication, in other words, is always headed for the pit, through which language must pass.

When the Yahweh of Genesis unleashes his violence on the Tower of Babel in order to, as he says, maintain the possibility of the impossible, that quarantine of the divine zone, he does not annihilate the discourse—he invents it. He does the people a loving-kindness. Thus, the utopian city-state prior to the disaster of disintegration was not a paradise of total
communication; it was a land of silence, like the terrifying silence of a night of mice. If information is equal on both sides of a signal path, a grand canal, there is nothing to carry across; like a sewer system placed on the perfect level, nothing is communicated. And still the plague moves. Contrary to the perfection of literary communication, the real annihilation purported by divine violence (interruption as such) would mean, for writing, only a Death Sentence: the invention of a noiseless channel, or signal Death. It’s a myth that, like classical Poetry for Kittler, or like historical materialism for Benjamin, imagines an impossible stability somewhere at the source. Instead, poetry happens in the presence of noise, an incessant interruption. It is everywhere a negotiation with failure, or the production of sacred things.

This is the trouble, the crux of the matter, Samuel Beckett describes in his famous diagnosis of the task of the artist in the middle of the twentieth century. In the Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit (1949), a conversation Beckett always seems to be losing (at one point the text tells us he walks away weeping), he argues that there is nothing to express, no means with which to express, no desire to express, all coupled with the obligation to express (103). The obligation is once again the important point. Like Nietzsche’s great health that must be acquired “because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up!” (Gay Science 246), the poet must descend into the pit because that’s where home is. Beckett takes up the point again in a later interview, explaining: “The confusion is not my invention. We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being aware of the confusion. The confusion is all around us and the only thing to do now is let it in” (Driver 22). This confusion is not meant to be reduced, as Blanchot argues in The Infinite Conversation (1969), but conveyed, since “to speak (to write) is to cease thinking solely with a view to unity, and to make the relations of words an essentially dissymmetrical field governed by discontinuity” (77, emphasis in the original). Literature must
admit its guilt because to write is to confess. In this fallen state, this dangerous position, one might retreat to lonely Krapp’s den in the indeterminate future, to luxuriate in mediality itself and the very sound of the word spool (Krapp 12), or to flip on the switch and find solaas in the words of Bob Dylan, who sang, yes, the Beckett-esque line “there’s no suck-cess like failure” on “Love Minus Zero / No Limit,” a title that feels at home in these pages—but, better than that, the chorus of “Nothing Was Delivered,” a salve for the coming salvo, from the junkheap of tape fragments, that lot of basement noise:

Nothing is better, nothing is best

Take heed of this, get plenty rest.
Second Iteration: An Infinite Field of Joy: Literature & Noise

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee…

—William Blake, “Introduction,” Songs of Innocence

1. Mouse Folk

I begin with the story of a pest. In 1925, a Detroit resident named J. L. Clark discovered in his home a mouse that could sing like a bird. Its song would get louder as Clark approached the creature, which made this pest easy prey. Clark captured the mouse, caged it, and brought it out to entertain his friends from time to time in the pure pleasure of aesthetic enjoyment. A musician was called in to hear the unusual singing, but found it lacking, more mouse-noise than song. Disappointed in the impurity of its tone, which, she said, was “mixed with overtones,” making it impossible to isolate particular notes and generally unpleasant to a trained ear, she left, forgetting the mouse (Dice 188).

That spring, Clark presented his curiosity to researchers at the University of Michigan, who confirmed its musical chops, but noted that “No particular theme could be recognized; consequently, the song was somewhat monotonous” (188). Most often, when the mouse was going to sing, he stood up on his hind legs, clutched his cage wall, “with his nose poked through one of the course meshes of the screen,” so that the mouth, that most grotesque opening, might be said to break this fourth wall (188). It is a terrifying replica of the Mother’s Mouth. As Bataille puts it, in a short dictionary entry for Documents: “The mouth is the beginning or, if one prefers, the prow of animals; in the most characteristic cases, it is the most living part, in other

13 See Mikhail Bakhtin on the grotesque body: “[the grotesque body] is the body in the act of becoming,” he explains: “the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss” (Rabelais and His World 317).
words, the most terrifying for neighboring animals” (Visions 59). The mouse who would sing must first get that terrifying orifice through the cage. Researchers brought in a dozen females and started a breeding program, with the thought of producing a whole chorus. However, the offspring proved unremarkable: the first generation could sing but little, their song described as a “chitter…a faint rapid trill” that was neither “so musical” as the father’s song, nor “so loud” (Dice 189). The father, it seems, was the exception among this particular society (though the phenomenon has been well documented elsewhere). The sound of the father’s song was pronounced by analysts as “very bird-like in quality,” and it could be heard at times, they reported, at a distance as great as 25 feet, but these occasions were rare; most of the time the mouse sang with what could be described as merely a faint whistle (187).

Some time before these events, in March of 1924, Franz Kafka lay dying of tuberculosis. The trouble concentrated in his larynx. Languishing with this wasting disease, unable to make any money, he felt himself become a “parasite” on his friends and family, who were supplementing his monthly income (Murray 370). Having escaped the confines of Prague, that is, having done what Georg Bendemann in “The Judgment” (1912) could not do, and what Gregor Samsa could not do, he was living by the start of 1924 in Weimar Berlin with his lover, Dora Diamant. These were the burning days. Kafka felt himself hounded by furies, which he called “ghosts.” Dora reports: “He was as though possessed by this idea; it was a kind of sullen obstinacy. He wanted to burn everything that he had written in order to free his soul from these ‘ghosts’. I respected his wish, and when he lay ill, I burnt things of his before his eyes” (qtd. in Murray 372).

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Kafka had arrived in Berlin the previous fall, but on March 17th in response to his rapidly deteriorating health and on the advice of his Uncle Siegfried (the country doctor), he left a patient for Prague. Max Brod, in Berlin that week to attend the opening night performance of Leoš Janáček's *Jenůfa* (1896-1902) at the State Opera, accompanied him on the return trip. Having finally escaped Prague’s claws, Kafka viewed this return to his parents’ house as a catastrophic failure: “Now that Franz was living with his father and mother again, he felt it, in spite of all the tender care that surrounded him, as the shipwreck for all his plans of being independent, as a defeat” (Brod 203). On his third day back, his voice began its dramatic decline, eventually being reduced to a whisper. It was during this period in Prague that Kafka wrote his final story, “Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse Folk” (1924). While he was busy burning his other manuscripts, he set out preparing this last one, and with some haste, as he needed money to cover medical bills. On April 9th, he wrote Brod from the Wiener Wald Sanatorium in Austria: “Dear Max, It is expensive, might very well be frightfully expensive; ‘Josephine’ must help out a little, there’s no other way” (*Letters* 411).

2. Rats

In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot describes the interruption specifically in terms of its generative function within all discourse, asserting that the goal implicit in any act of writing or speaking, in any language act, is not to reduce interruption, but rather to convey it. In this

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15 During his final months, his voice became too painful and slight to use, so he communicated by writing fragments on small slips of paper and handing them to his nurses or whatever acquaintences might have been at hand. Many of these fragments have survived and have influenced passages in *Ropes*. He subjects are reduced to necessities, the arrangement of the flowers in his room, with which he became obsessed, and his pain, especially the pain in his larynx, an irritation that was constant, and the burning which limited his ability to partake of any fluid, a true source of suffering in his final months. Some representative examples of these notes: “Everything, even the beer, burned me”; “I’d especially like to take care of the peonies because they are so fragile”; “A bird was in the room”; “How trying I am to all of you; it’s crazy” (*Letters* 416-418).
way, his approach mirrors Beckett’s account of the task of the artist in the face the “mess”: that one must write the mess and must find a form to accommodate it. For Blanchot, the conversation is always accommodating in this way. As a system of relation it is never a process by which two speakers meet on common ground, in affirmation of their commonality, or their affiliation as members of the herd (to again summon Nietzsche’s ghost); rather, the conversation, through its process of exchange, and the interruption inherent in that activity, serves to underscore both the irresoluble difference between the two poles of a communication system — that is, the foreignness of the other in each—and the unknowable gap present in language. In Claude Shannon’s model of this basic communication system, the interruption appears under the banner of noise, information outside the message that is nonetheless always present (see Fig. 1.1).

Blanchot begins with a simple description of a conversation:

when two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn: one says something, then stops, the other something else (or the same thing), then stops…The power of speaking interrupts itself, and this interruption plays a role that appears to be minor—precisely the role of a subordinated alternation. This role, nonetheless, is so enigmatic that it can be interpreted as bearing the very enigma of language. (75)

__16__ Cf. Claude Shannon’s description of a basic model of communication in “A Mathematical Theory of Communication” (1948). Blanchot’s conversation parallels Shannon’s model. This paper marks the beginning of the field of information theory, in which noise, an interruptive agent, features as a pest. Contrary to Blanchot’s argument, for Shannon the main object was to determine the level at which the presence of noise in a channel made communication impossible and to develop efficient methods of encoding messages in order to reduce noise/interruption in order to maintain the legitimacy of the signal path (e.g., by building redundancy into the system). In Shannon’s mathematical theory, the ideal channel is always noiseless, immaculate, uninterrupted, and untroubled by pests, and his chief concern is figuring out how to get a message from one pole of the system to the other with the least possible interference; therefore, Shannon’s model is strictly aligned with the first pole of the dialectic Blanchot describes. Shannon explains: “The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point” (31).
In a basic sense, interruption (as the gap between words and the pauses in speech) provides the rhythmic structure as the basis for conversation and the space that marks difference; interruption is thus as much a building block of discourse as language itself. At the birth of language, one might say, was the pause. Blanchot continues to describe the dialectic inherent in conversation’s exchange by pointing first to an interruption that, like the gap that separates individual words, allows a conversation to begin; it is an interruption that initiates a communication system in which there are two distinct speakers, relating to each other through the “respiration of discourse”:

In the first case, the arrest-interval is comparable to the ordinary pause that permits the conversations “each in turn.” Here, discontinuity is essential since it promises exchange—essential, but relative. What it aims at, be it later or never, and yet at the same time starting from today, is the affirmation of a unitary truth where coherent discourse will no longer cease and, no longer ceasing, will merge with its other, silent side. From this perspective, rupture still plays into the functioning of common speech, even if it fragments it, thwarts it, or impedes it. Not only does rupture give meaning, but it also brings common sense forth as a horizon. It is the respiration of discourse…Interruption for the sake of understanding. (76)

This variety of interruption establishes the rhythm of discourse, or the architecture of the exchange; it builds the space in which an exchange of information can occur, prescribing the positions for each of the participants (read: players). But it also produces “meaning” by interrupting the violence of a pure signal, the image of a conversation as a one-way street. Without the interruption, there would only be a ceaseless, monotonous tone, like an emergency
test signal, or the *un-themed* singing of Clark’s mouse. This unending stream of information Blanchot locates in the terrible “violence of the *dictare,*” the rambling of a megalomaniacal figure like Hitler, whose terrible monologues blot out the respiration of discourse (75). However, in making this connection, Blanchot is essentially describing Shannon’s ideal system: a noiseless channel along which a message might be easily trafficked, a signal path untroubled by the presence of *foreign objects,* or antiproduction. Blanchot, therefore, describes a kind of immaculate production, which offers an interesting parallel to the impossible stream of writing noted at the beginning of Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853). Indeed, Bartleby is a patron saint of interruption, and I will interrupt this discussion to tell his story.

![Shannon's schematic diagram of a communication system](image)

**Figure 1.1:** Shannon’s schematic diagram of a communication system (2)

Even before his inscrutable refrain—*I would prefer not to*—sets off a chain of interruptions that completely reorganize the system in the law office (producing, in the process, an entirely new version of the discourse, a new law of the office, as it were, which causes even Nippers to assimilate the phrase into his manner of speech), Bartleby is an icon of interruption (24). This is not to deny the impact of that enigmatic phrase, but to highlight the original
description as a kind of divine Xerox. “As if long famishing for something to copy,” the Lawyer explains, “he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light” (11). He produces an unending stream, a signal that runs both day and night, an infinite dictare. This stream offers “no pause,” time neither for contemplation nor even for reception in flinches. Bartleby is a pure vessel of writing: a scrivening machine. It is not only Bartleby’s industry that we should recognize, the stringency of which would seem to identify him as a sovereign figure in Bataille’s terminology, but also the fact that he is reproducing legalese, a special case of illegible language of special interest to the present study.

Both literary and legal languages share a common inscrutability, but they arrive at it for opposite reasons. The language of the law is completely unaesthetic. Legal language is basically operational and designed to perform a very specific function. One does not deny that judges often try to render their decisions in elegant prose, but the designation legalese highlights the more confusing aspects of this linguistic variety. This unique operation indeed underscores a dangerous quality inherent in all language (i.e., multiplicity), for interpretation threatens legal authority, a threat that pokes and prods at every nook and cranny of the law’s borders like a million ravenous little mouths. If the language in which a law is written opens a loophole, an unlatched door, then it leaves itself open to attack: as a result, the authority of the law, like the myth of classical Poetry, disintegrates. In this way, Bartleby manifests the dread inherent in legal language, as the ambiguity of his I would prefer not to, in its function as an incomplete or interrupted statement without clearly identifiable ends, presents no immediate response for authority. The law is always open to this attack because language is excessive, because the “mechanical frock coats” of dictionary definitions are still not enough to reduce the noise that
language channels emit (ironically, this multiplicity is the reason there are lawyers in the first place, so that Bartleby’s interruption is an affirmation of the miscommunication on which the Lawyer’s office is founded). Conversely, literary language is aesthetic as such. As a language art, in other words, literature might be usefully understood as a variety of artistic practice dedicated to exploring the exceptional quality of language, its endless possibility, or otherness. Literary language resists unity, therefore, because its multiplicity is given. For evidence of this fact, one only need to look to metaphor, a basic building block of poetic language, which literally means “to carry over,” especially in the sense of one word to another, or, in the sense of metapherein, “to use language in a strange way.”

Moreover, it is precisely the strangeness with which Bartleby uses language that bothers the Lawyer. “I should have been quite delighted with his application,” the narrator explains, “had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (11). Here is a man with the impersonality of a machine, a pure cog; his industry, therefore, strikes his boss as odd, even pathological (of course, as the narrator explains in the story’s coda, by this point, Bartleby has already been ousted from his position in the Dead Letter Office, or, in other words, interrupted from his position as host to all those interrupted letters). In the face of this image of pure production, the Lawyer, who profits directly from such enterprise, is disturbed; in short, Bartleby’s excessiveness prefigures him as the sole exception among the other scriveners, a group described at the beginning of the story as “a singular set of men” (4). Bartleby is, thus, an exception among the exceptional; in a radical usurpation of the Lawyer’s position, he becomes an image of the sovereign, and had he simply continued in this vein of pure production, he would have become similarly accursed. He violates the fundamental etiquette of Wall-Street: the gentlemanly agreement that affirms the servility of the worker, the same unwritten law of the
herd that prevents the Lawyer from going through with the indecency of firing him straightaway and forces him into a variety of procedures in order to avoid that confrontation. Bartleby’s transgression, in effect, annihilates the conversation, the respiration of the office. In this way, the becoming-animal of Bartleby’s radical *agrammaticality*, described by Deleuze in his essay on what he calls Bartleby’s “formula,” is at work from the very beginning of the story.\(^\text{17}\)

In the architecture of the conversation produced by interruption, Blanchot identifies a potential danger, in a sense, the danger of a herd mentality: an interruption that forms part of a larger development towards unity within the conversation. Beyond the mere pause, the interruption also includes the possibility of reckoning the other: “But there is another kind of interruption, more enigmatic and more grave. It introduces the wait that measures the distance between two interlocutors—no longer a reducible, but an irreducible distance” (77). The effect is “more grave” precisely because it moves towards unity, an erasure of difference and thus of interaction, which would mean a complete reduction of the discourse. Such movement is problematic for Blanchot because it betrays the irreconcilable distortion (a trace of the disaster), the lie on which language is based: “there is in the field of relations,” Blanchot writes, “a distortion preventing any direct communication and any relation of unity; or again, there is a fundamental anomaly that it falls to speech not to reduce but to convey” (77). Here again is the confrontation with noise, but unlike Shannon, Blanchot approaches this third party that haunts the signal path as a fundamental ingredient in the discourse. Furthermore, Blanchot characterizes this interruption in terms of its important operation in production of the self; in a parallel to the way Nietzsche’s “liar” is separated from the herd, the interruption organizes the system of relation in which this identification takes place. Blanchot writes that the interruption identifies, “the foreignness between us, and not only the obscure part that escapes our mutual knowledge

and is nothing more than the obscurity of the self’s position—the singularity of the singular self” (77). This strict separation plotted by the movement of interruption, by defining the limit, the membrane between the one and the other, activates the ultimate difference that is inherent in communication and the creative act, and thus it is a clear marker of the writing of the disaster, which is always also the disaster that writing initiates or describes. This brings us to something like the central thesis of Blanchot’s late work: the important thing to recognize in the difference that emerges in this space produced by the interruption, in the noise that introduces entropy into the signal is that: “to speak (to write) is to cease thinking solely with a view to unity, and to make the relations of words an essentially dissymmetrical field governed by discontinuity” (77-78).

In his contrast with Shannon’s desire to attenuate the deleterious effect of noise in a communication system, Blanchot’s thinking thus matches up with that of Michel Serres, who approaches noise in The Parasite (1980) as a productive and organizing agent within the discourse; it is a disruptive force, a violence always described as “the third,” which is excluded, that includes both the potential to activate a communication system (or conversation) and also to destroy it. The starting point for his study is the threefold meaning of the word parasite in

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18 Cf. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939): Benjamin provides an interesting contrast in his description of the problem disruption and excess information presents for the formation of consciousness, related to his discussion of modernity’s destruction of the possibility for contemplation discussed previously. For Benjamin, the the noise ambient in the throng of modernity, which is at once seductive and disruptive, is the central condition of the human being in industrial society. The interruption produced by excess information becomes a kind of army on the offensive. Focusing on the relationship between private space and this “shock factor” caused by public stimuli as it figures in the formulation of identity (SW IV: 163). Benjamin, in his reading of Proust, conceives of the modern individual as a figure constantly subject to the attack of exterior stimuli: “it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience. It is by no means inevitable to be dependent on chance in this matter. Man’s inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience” (158).

19 Cf. Gregory Bateson’s essay, “Cybernetic Explanation,” in Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1967): “All that is not information, not redundancy, not form and not restraints—is noise, the only possible source of new patterns” (410, emphasis in the original). See also Niklas Luhmann in Social Systems (1984): “The
French. The first two meanings correspond to the definition of the term in English—namely: an organism that lives off the resources of another organism, a pest, and a person that exploits or depends on the support of other people and gives nothing in return, a mooch. However, the French definition of the word includes the additional meaning of “interference,” or “random” or “white” noise, from the root para, meaning “beside.” It is in this third sense, the meaning that does not fit under the English frock coat, that Serres makes the connection between the antiproduction of interruption and the squandering of expenditure.

He illustrates the concept of the parasite with a story about rats (as I will soon do in Kafka). These rats have their source in a little poem by Jean de La Fontaine called “The City Rat and the Country Rat” (1668), a reworking of one of Aesop’s fables. The story is quite simple: a city rat goes to visit his double in the country who invites him to dine, but the rustic country food is too mousy perhaps and does not meet his refined standards of taste; this meal is monotonous, so the rats head to town. This is the first interruption. (It’s only at this point in the story that La Fontaine picks up the thread; in this way, his poem skips the original disaster.) The two rodents are enjoying their meal on a fine Persian rug, when someone knocks at the door. At this rapping, the street-wise rat, who lives in the hustle of city life, bolts for cover; he is always anticipating such disturbance. The rat from the field follows behind. The city rat assures his friend that they will return to their meal when the disturbance settles, but the country rat has been unhoused by this interruption. “Not a crumb more,” he avows (Ln. 21). The meal has been ruined. The poem closes with the country rat’s description of the silence of the field:

But then I eat so quiet at home,

And nothing dangerous is near;

difference between meaning and world is formed for this process of the continual self-determination of meaning as the difference between order and perturbation, between information and noise. Both are, and both remain, necessary. The unity of the difference is and remains the basis for operation” (83).
Good-bye, my friend, I have no love

For pleasure when it's mixed with fear. (25-28)

The field rat wants his pleasure unmixed with overtones of fear, the threat of others. In this way, the interruption has reorganized the meal, taken the simple pleasure of eating and turned it into the mixed aesthetic experience of the sublime. This night promises more than a meal; it brings the terror of the inscrutable. For the field rat, then, the dangerous presence of the interruption makes the possibility of a meal, of digestion, impossible; he could only eat bit by bit in the face of such fear. He wants unity, where this meal offers a real conversation. Like Thel, he longs for the silence of the synthetic pastoral landscape.

Serres uses this scene to describe the generative power of the interruption: “The city rat feasts with the country rat; the story, however, is not just about two rats. Someone troubles the feast, interrupts the meal, intervenes. Who is this third person? He makes noise; his is, most assuredly, a prosopopoeia of noise. Noise is a person—that is the lesson of Pentecost; it is the third person” (51). Serres places the meal in the home of the tax farmer; it’s his rug, and the rats eat the leftovers from the tax farmer’s dinner. Thus, the rats parasite the farmer’s labor, drawing off the results of work that they did not perform, consumption beyond utility. The field rat eats of the city rat’s share, and both rats live off the farmer. Moreover, the tax farmer is also an image of a parasite, for he parasites the work of the poor farmer in order to live his life of luxury. Finally, there comes a rapping that sends the rats scurrying, interrupting the meal. This is the parasite as the noise that troubles the system, an interruptive violence that includes the potential of inventing a new system. “A wire does not have to be heated very much for noise to increase,” Serres explains (and iterations of this passage pop up throughout the book—its discontinuous style is part of what draws me to the book): “This excitement stops the message from passing. But
sometimes it allows the message to pass, a message that cannot cross an unexcited channel…Heat a little, I hear, I send, I pass; heat a little more, everything collapses. The smallest increase, in one direction or another, can transform the entire communications system from top to bottom” (194). The important point is that noise, interruption, rather than a problem that needs to be reduced, is actually that which produces the system; it is the respiration of the discourse, an agent of non-sense and an emblem of literature. As Serres explains:

The system is cancelled with the parasite one makes noise in feedback. But this signal does not last. You cannot spend your whole life singing, nor can you continually protect your possessions, for you have to acquire, repair, work: without that winter winds come, and one begs for food in vain. Noise stops for a moment—it is a function of time; even the grasshopper stops. A signal that did not stop would thereby stop being a signal. And thus the third man withdraws. The system is immediately put back in order. Rats in the country. At the first noise, the system is cancelled: if the noise stops, everything comes back to were it was. (52)

3. The Sound of Chitter

Josephine the Singer is an icon of failure, a loser artist. Her fate ultimately doubles that of Thel. Josephine appears wrapped in the mantle of Bataille’s poet, one of a slew of such wanton figures in Kafka, a single bright petal in the rose that blossoms across his output. Like the officer in the penal colony, like the hunger artist, like K. in his doomed approach to the Castle, like the miserable pilgrim who languishes hopelessly before the Law, she longs for recognition, access, and communication: “What she wants,” the narrator explains, “is public, unambiguous,
permanent recognition of her art, going far beyond any precedent so far known. But while almost
everything else seems within her reach, this eludes her persistently” (372). She demands no less
than the totalisation of her artwork, the completion of her practice. In this way, “Josephine the
Singer, or the Mouse Folk,” becomes Kafka’s ultimate testament to the problem of
communication in the presence of noise (and this from the author who has given us Gregor
Samsa’s inhuman voice and scrabbling about in his room, the trace of him left all over the walls).

At the beginning of the story, we learn that she is incomparable: the only singer among
the whole crowd. Separated thus by her art, Josephine is the “sole exception” in the mass
experience of mouse folk; she “has a love for music and knows how to transmit it” (360,
emphasis added). This knowledge demands attention. We might recall, in an interesting parallel,
the certainty of another exceptional singer: Geeshie Wiley, the great female delta blues singer
and guitarist, a rarity. Thought to have been born near Oxford, Mississippi in 1906, she
might have been completely lost in the flood of history had she not recorded six sides for Paramount
Records, all in the same session in a little room in Grafton, Wisconsin. In the most celebrated of
those recordings, the enigmatic “Last Kind Words Blues,” she sings this couplet: “The
Mississippi River, you know it’s deep and wide / I can stand right here, see my babe from the
other side.” The singer’s visionary experience carries across the big river just like a metaphor,
just like Kafka’s story advancing across the water before him in his midnight reverie, a great
“flinging open” of the soul.20 At the close of “The Judgment,” young Georg Bendemann is
sentenced by his father to death by drowning for growing from an “innocent child” into a
“devilish human being” (87). Georg does not hesitate. He rushes to the water in the same reverie
with which Kafka wrote his story. He flees the house as if it were crumbling all around him,

20 As someone who grew up on the banks of that same river, I can report that such recognition would
indeed be exceptional, though perhaps not impossible.
seeming to outpace even the narration: “Georg felt himself urged from the room, the crash with which his father fell on the bed behind him was still in his ears as he fled. On the staircase, which he rushed down as if its steps were an inclined plane he ran into his charwoman…but he was already gone” (87). His swiftness moves him beyond the possibility of encounter. He rushes into the street, “across the roadway, driven toward the water. Already he was grasping at the railings as a starving man clutches food” (88). The story seems to be glitching, interrupting itself, almosting it, cutting ahead just when it seems ready to describe the scene. George cannot affirm the sentence fast enough. He swings himself over the rail “like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth” and then hangs there, watching the rush of traffic. There he hangs, surrounded by the noise of the modern city. The busy street is a double of the running water into which he will drop; the traffic noise will cover the noise of his fall in the same way that the water will wash over his body. The judgment is not his father’s but his own: a voluntary negation. The story ends with his own last kind words: “Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same” (88). Kafka gives us the last line, which we might assume signaled the interruption of his writing reverie: “At this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge” (88). The disaster of Georg’s suicide amounts to little more than a drop, this solitary disaster being consumed in the inarticulate rush of the city. It is not Georg’s fate that we are left with, but the noise that haunts the channel; in the end, the story of his booming business, his engagement, and his metamorphosis into healthy maturity is interrupted by the unending stream of traffic.

Josephine the Singer, meanwhile, is unmatched: “she is the only one; when she dies, music—who knows for how long—will vanish from our lives” (360). Her death would mean a catastrophic loss: the interruption of this singular transmission would make aesthetic experience disappear entirely from folk life. Her death is likewise the death of Art, a total reduction.
However, the relation between transmission and reception is never so clean and easy. As the only one who is not part of the equilibrium of the crowd, Josephine is clearly treated as a foreign object, but it is more than that. She might know how to transmit, but the mouse folk don’t meet her in their capacity to receive and interpret this information. Uncertainty is embedded in this story from the start (beginning with its title, which is a source of my own). Early on, the narrator explains: “I have often thought about what this music of hers really means. For we are quite unmusical; how is it that we understand Josephine’s singing or, since Josephine denies that, at least think we can understand it” (360). In her renunciation of the possibility of reception, at least in a complete sense, Josephine affirms the loss implicit in the creative act; her denial asserts, in other words, the omnipresence of noise. What she produces is not singing, but piping (pfeifen): a singing that is not-singing. The narrator asks: “Is it in fact singing at all? Although we are unmusical we have a tradition of singing…we have an inkling of what singing is, and Josephine’s art does not really correspond to it. So is it singing at all? Is it not perhaps just a piping?” (361). The word pfeifen literally means “to blow a whistle,” or “to play a flute,” or “to referee,” or “to howl.” “But its most common German usage,” John Hargraves reports, “‘to whistle at’, means ‘don’t give a damn’ about something. So Josefine’s artistry is at least partly humorous, even ridiculous” (172). Her rejection, therefore, operates as a radical interruption of the possible that carries with it the experience of certitude; at the same time, her singing, in its communicative gesture, affirms the possibility of starting out on the road to reception. Her incomprehensible piping, which she is seemingly always at the ready to produce, exemplifies Blanchot’s interruption of the incessant that is also an incessant interruption. In the end, however, her interruption is washed out, blanked out by the wall of the crowd.
The crowd flows with so many mice that it behaves like a single organism, like an unending stream moving over the bridge. Awash in contact, unable to perceive anything beyond a sea of fragments, the mouse folk exist in a state of *hypersuspension*, a sensitivity well beyond the possibility of contemplation, the pause that is pure static: “So it seems to us, but this impression although, as I said, inevitable is yet fleeting and transient. We too are sunk in the feeling of the mass, which, warmly pressed body to body, listens with indrawn breath” (364).

The apparition of these faces in the crowd, which lace together like the a sea of shining scales, present a uniform surface, a universe of scales, a million eyes like so many cuttlefish. The crowd vibrates in its mass, being a crowd as such. It is out of this flux that Josephine the Singer erupts. When she blows her lonesome whistle, it is a double of Thel’s final shriek, as inscrutable as the noise from one of Luigi Russolo’s *intonarumori*. She emerges, in a remarkable instant, in an atmosphere of dangerous possibility:

> to gather around her this mass of our people who are almost always on the run and scurrying hither and thither for reasons that are often not very clear, Josephine mostly needs to do nothing else than take up her stand, head thrown back, mouth

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**21** In his 1913 futurist manifesto, “The Art of Noises,” Russolo argues that the unbridled sound in modernity made the restrictive domain of “music” obsolete; in its place he argues for a new art form entirely, which he calls *noise-sound*: “In older times life was completely silent. In the nineteenth century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born. Today, Noise is triumphant and reigns supreme over the sensibility of men” (reproduced in Rainey 133). His reasoning anticipates Benjamin’s later description of the impossibility of contemplation in modernity and is worth quoting at length for the relevance to this study of its description of traditional music as a particular domain: “This evolution toward ‘noise-sound’ was not possible before now. The ear of an eighteenth-century man could never have supported the dissonant intensity of certain chords produced by our orchestras (with three times as many performers as those of his day). Our ear instead takes pleasure in it, since it has already been trained by modern life, so teeming in different noises. Not, however, that it is fully satisfied: instead it demands an ever greater range of acoustical emotions. Musical sound, on the other hand, is too limited in its qualitative variety of timbres. The most complicated orchestras are reduced to four or five classes of instruments, differing in timbre: instruments played with the bow, plucked instruments, brass winds, wood winds, and percussion instruments. So that modern music founders within this tiny circle as it vainly attempts to create new kinds of timbre. *We must break out of this restricted circle of pure sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds*” (134, emphasis in the original).
half-open, eyes turned upwards, in the position that indicates her intention to sing…The news that she is going to sing flies around at once and soon whole processions are on the way there. Now, sometimes, all the same, obstacles intervene, Josephine likes best to sing just when things are most upset many worries and dangers force us then to take devious ways, with the best will in the world we cannot assemble ourselves as quickly as Josephine wants, and on occasion she stands there in ceremonial state for quite a time without a sufficient audience—then indeed she turns furious, then she stamps her feet, swearing in most unmaidenly fashion; she actually bites. (364)

Here is a portrait of the artist as becoming-animal. In her wildness, she draws the crowd out from every piece, her dangerous posture, like the gratuitous violence of the great criminal, being part of her seductive power. Her stance is especially important. With her head thrown back, her mouth open, her grotesque body becomes a figurative cannon ready to unleash the missile of her whistling art.

Josephine longs for the recognition that can only happen in the public sphere, a kind of glory (*kleos*) in which the singing becomes the song itself—*kleos* being a Greek term that encompasses both the medium and the message that carries legendary fame. “She reaches for the highest garland,” the narrator tells us, “because it is the highest; if she had any say in the matter she would have it still higher” (373). Her ambition, like Antigone’s, whose revolutionary movement from the private to the public sphere effectively unhouses Creon from his sovereign seat, is to be remembered like a god. Such recklessness is doomed from the start. In this image of the creative act, there can be only failure, only continuous loss, in which Josephine the Singer supplices herself again and again against the impenetrable wall of the crowd. She doesn’t know
that she’s in a hopeless position, so she petitions the crowd, endlessly, exhaustively, and they reject her: “The people listen to her arguments and pay no attention” (372). At the cusp of her final performance, she loses her voice, or it loses her:

She would be glad to oblige, but she cannot. They comfort and caress her with flatteries, they almost carry her to the selected spot where she is supposed to sing. At last, bursting inexplicably into tears, she gives way, but when she stands up to sing, obviously at the end of her resources, weary, her arms not widespread as usual but hanging lifelessly down, so that one gets the impression that they are perhaps a little too short—just as she is about to strike up, there, she cannot do it after all, an unwilling shake of the head tells us so and she breaks down before our eyes. (375)

Cajoled into the act, like a mere field rat, she refuses. Eventually, she pulls herself together and manages to sing, an act that in fact bolsters her, making her “less tired than before”; however, she finally departs in her “tripping gait”: “she moves off, refusing all help from her supporters and measuring with cold eyes the crowd which respectfully makes way for her” (375). What is it that Josephine knows how to transmit? “What you do to me, baby,” Wiley sings in something like a rehearsal of the singer’s last words, “it never gets out of me / I may not see you after I cross the deep blue sea.” It’s something in the blood, this contact, a parasite that transforms the host permanently; this is how a lover affects the beloved.

Such parasitic activity features as a central motif in Joyelle McSweeney’s recent play, Dead Youth, or The Leaks (2014), a tragicomedy of the Anthropocene and farcical remix of The Tempest in which Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks, hijacks a disused container ship in order to transport an ever-multiplying and dangerously witty throng of Dead Youth, victims of every
kind of contemporary violence, to Magnetic Island, that they might be ascended into the heaven of the internet. This plot disintegrates; it flees the scene, more pit than Thel, more ill than well, more hell than Thel. In Act II, the character of Abdi Wali Abdulqadir Muse, the Somali pirate sentenced to 33 years in Federal Prison (before being appropriated by big media, transfigured into the great criminal of a major motion picture featuring movie star Tom Hanks, then becoming the cipher for an infinite series of Internet memes) and the analog double of Assange’s digital piracy in the play, relays a parable of a parasite as an allegory for revolutionary action, the meaning of which is roughly: you (state violence) reap what you sow (revolutionary violence).

Muse begins this pitiable story with a description of Chagas disease, a parasitic infection common in Central and South America, transmitted by Triatominae or “kissing bugs.” This kiss, the bite that communicates the microscopic parasite through feces into the bloodstream thereby infecting the host, can have a devastating effect. Muse describes the process by which the parasite does its damage on the rural poor:

In photomicrographs, this protozoan looks as slender and harmless as a little girl’s hair riband or a streamer from a bike. But in the body of a peasant, toxin runs all through the body, causes celldeath, including in the heart. Now the peasant man can no longer swing his axe. And why must he swing his axe? Because that is his livelihood. He makes axes handles. The axe is swung but poorly. The mother now swings the axe, now the children, now noone. My parable is concluded. (43)

This parasite interrupts the man’s productive activity and thus threatens the well being of his family. The violence becomes a symbol for all who are oppressed. This is a moment of relative clarity in a text fairly overflowing linguistic excess, a hallmark of the poet’s style she calls hyperdiction: a flashy, variegated, exhaustive variety of poetic language. McSweeney’s
hyperdiction is decidedly noisy, over-the-top, and extravagantly decorated. It’s precisely in this exuberance, this verve, that one finds the strength of the writing and its strange power. McSweeney describes the play as a spell written for the protection of the play’s various heroes, and the language seems charged with that occult potential, that extra layer of information crackling around the text. I try to use this example in all my writing. While the language of *Ropes* tends towards a kind of antiquated prosaic style at times, the book is nevertheless written as an occult message to Ropes and as an act of contrition for those victims of the violence he activated.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who appears in *Dead Youth* as the mouthpiece of state power (authority as such), and to whom the parable is addressed, is confused by Muse’s speech: “I don’t follow,” he says (44). Muse then unleashes a more aggressive part two:

Allow me to quote another great author, Mr. Herman Melville: FOLLOW YOUR LEADER. [smacks him] Sir, you are slower than these dead youth. Perhaps your kepi is too tight. I am here to read my rights into the record. I’m here for my MIRANDA rights! That is, I’m here because I love the Brave New World despite the people in it. I like Assange and his mooncalfs, the DEAD YOUTH. So let me begin again. As a human inmate on earth in the year 2013, I have been bitten by many things. That is, I have been subjected to many things, mostly against my will. To the point that will itself seems to be a poison and not the same for every man…

What about a man who wants to eat justice?
And what would such a man shit out into
Justice’s bloodstream?

And this, then, cher aviateur, my dirty chevre,

my cabriolet, is the meaning of my parable. (45)

Muse is already doomed: he appears before the accursed assembly as a man already sealed to the most horrible fate: to be sentenced to prison, landlocked in Terre Haute, IN. His guilt gives him an air of sovereignty, though colored with a kind of tragic inevitability. He appears on stage with a sanctity that translates through the fourth wall, and he speaks with the stringency and righteousness of a true poet. His speech closes with a prayer that lands like a spell on the world of the play:

So many things I have been made to eat. So
many little things have eaten me.
I will learn from that. Let me be unto this
world the bacterium
pinky slender as a girl’s riband
that eats and changes hearts (45)

At this, Exupéry responds, “O pirate! I am slain” (45). He’s playing, of course. It’s a farce. The second act fizzles, with a lot of sulking about and the whole crowd tired. The ship is given over to Muse, but he hasn’t seized anything. He’s just running the ship while the rest of the company naps. He closes Act II with resignation: “Very well then, intermission” (47). The effect of his parable disappears in this anticlimax. His prayer lands on deaf ears. No one in the crowd is listening.

“Last Kind Words Blues” ends with the singer’s apotheosis into history, a rehearsal of her own last words. This is only what happens. Likewise, within a few days of Josephine the
Singer’s last performance, she is gone, vanished into that boundless space best rendered in Kafka’s short tale “The Departure” (1921) as merely “out of here” or away-from-here (449). That’s the only goal in Kafka, the desire to be miraculated into a new state, a desire that always seems frustrated in some fundamental way. This is why “The Metamorphosis” is as much the story of Grete’s debut as it is of Gregor’s becoming-animal, for it is she who finally blooms in true affirmation of the multiplicity at the core of the story. The last words describe her springing to her feet and stretching “her young body,” a direct counterpoint to the way Gregor shrivels into his (139). Gregor signals the failure inherent in communication and Grete the possibility of starting off; as Grete’s metamorphosis marks a new phase of deterritorialization, so in his death Gregor is left with the thought that he must disappear. The only thing that’s left is to vanish, to disappear across the blue sea: the endless sea, a medium in which information is so widely dispersed, that there is only a state of suspension, endless flux. Zee End. This is an image of the noisy channel par excellence, troubled, as it is, by monsters.

In Ropes, the situation of the work—the mise-en-scène in other words—is always a version of Abraham Lincoln’s deathbed scene. A vast crowd presses right up to the many doors, the infinite chain of doors, behind which Ropes sits, like Beckett’s Krapp in his rooms, luxuriating in endless dictation inside a womb made of media. The crowd does not speak; they mill. To receive a signal from across this channel would be to speak to the dead, and such transmission is not so free and easy. We might ask our question about what Josephine knows in another way: after such knowledge, what forgiveness? It is impossible to say just what I mean.

4. Nights of Mice
Kafka had written of mice before Josephine. In 1917, after he was first diagnosed with the tuberculosis that would consume him, he went for an eight-month stay with his sister Ottla in the rural village of Zürau in northern Bohemia. He arrived in early fall and found the farm life agreeable, even welcoming, but by the time the weather turned cold, the trouble moved in. In a letter to Felix Weltsch dated from mid-November, worth quoting at some length, Kafka writes of his nightly terror:22

The first fatal flaw of Zürau: a night of mice, a fearful experience. I myself came through unscathed and my hair is no whiter than yesterday, but it was still gruesome. Here and there previously (I may have to stop writing any minute, you will learn the reason), here and there in the night I had heard a delicate nibbling, once in fact I started out of bed all atremble and had a look around and the noise stopped at once—but this time it was an uproar. What a frightful mute and noisy race this is! Around two A.M. I was wakened by a rustling around my bed, and from then on the rustling did not stop until morning. Up the coal box, down the coal box, across the room they ran, describing circles, nibbling at wood, peeping softly while resting, and all along there was that sense of silence, of the secret labor of an oppressed proletarian race to whom the night belongs. To preserve my sanity, I decided that the noise was concentrated around the stove, which stands at the other end of the room. But it was everywhere, and reached its peak when a whole swarm of them leaped down together somewhere. I was completely helpless, could find nothing in my whole being to cling to. I did not dare get up,

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22 I quote this passage not only for its interest, which I think is self-evident, but also because I have used all its elements: its cadence, its pacing, a certain frantic quality, its terminology, and its evocation of dread throughout the writing of Ropes. This debt the manuscript certainly owes to Kafka’s work at large, but especially his letters and diaries, in which one finds the full breadth of his obsessions given their turn.
light the lamp. All I could manage was a few shouts, with which I tried to intimidatethem...Today everything is spoiled for me here; even the good coarse smell and taste of the farm bread is mousy. (*Letters* 168-69)

At this point, mouse mania takes over his correspondence, a pestilential and constant hum saturating his thought, seeming to penetrate everything in his experience. In every letter of those days, mice appear; eventually, he begins describing the extent to which the mice have affected his sensorium. By November 24th, he writes Brod: “My sense of hearing has become a thousand times sharper and has become more uncertain by the same proportion—if I rub my finger over the sheet, I no longer know for certain whether I am hearing a mouse” (171). In this passage, the perfection of the “functional apparatuses” described by Moholy-Nagy is also a movement into illegibility. The incessant scratching of the mice begins to bleed into all audible stimulation; the sound of Kafka’s finger on the sheet is a double of a pen’s nib writing on a sheet of paper: all of these scratching sounds include the violent potential of cancelling out intelligible noises, of making a veritable mess of his room.

Kafka continues on the same theme in a letter to Brod in December (which I again quote at length):

My reaction toward the mice is one of sheer terror. To analyze its source would be the task of a psychoanalyst, which I am not. Certainly this fear, like an insect phobia, is connected with the unexpected, uninvited, inescapable, more or less silent, persistent, secret aim of these creatures, with the sense that they have riddled the surrounding walls through and through with their tunnels and are lurking within, that the night is theirs, that because of their nocturnal existence and their tininess they are so remote from us and thus outside our power. Their
smallness, especially, adds another dimension to the fear they inspire. For instance, the idea that there should exist an animal who would look exactly like a pig—in itself amusing—but is as small as a rat and could emerge snuffling out of a hole in the floor. That is a horrible idea. (174)

Here, Kafka distills the horror of this infestation; his fear centers on the native intractibility of the mice. These creatures behave like a community of sovereign foes; in their multitude, in the insignificance of their individual smallness, in the apparent equilibrium of their mass, they present an image of a vast host whose persistence threatens to overwhelm the possibility of Kafka’s writing. This danger is twofold. The mouse-noise doubles the sound of writing and redounds with the pure noise implicit in Kafka’s own scratching. But, more than that, their nocturnal presence usurps from Kafka that solitary experience of the night, the sanctuary his creative life, as Roberto Calasso writes in K. (2002): “wasn’t it Kafka to whom the night belonged? Now he discovered that beside him, behind him, above him, the same belief held sway among an ‘oppressed proletarian race’ that worked without respite” (292). Kafka’s nights are now shared with an inscrutable presence: he listens even when he cannot hear the mice, hears their signature even in the silence of his room. “The night,” as he says, “is theirs.” What else do mice produce but an incessant interruption?

We should recall the great night of writing in Kafka’s life, the night beyond all nights when he achieved his breakthrough, writing “The Judgment” in a single all-night session between September 22-23, 1912. In a diary entry on the 23rd, Kafka describes the experience:

I was hardly able to pull my legs out from under the desk, they had got so stiff from sitting. The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. Several times during this night I heaved my own
weight on my back…Only in this way can writing be done, only with such 
coherence, with such complete flinging open of body and soul. (Autobiographical 
Writings, 52-53)

This became the ideal creative scenario for Kafka, in his memory, a kind of automatic writing, an 
uninterrupted outflow, as in a dream. But in Zürau, the mice perforated this fantasy of writing’s 
silent night. It should be no surprise, then, given the distracted state he was in during much of his 
stay, that the writing Kafka produced in Zürau took the form of aphorisms, a collection of 
fragments. Kafka’s fright in the face of this infestation is another double of the terror Kittler 
describes for Nietzsche as the shadow looms behind his desk. What Nietzsche fears is not the 
voice—that is, what the ghost says—but its “inhuman” quality: the disaster that will exceed the 
capacity of a writer to represent it, the interruption that cannot be reduced but only conveyed. 
The first aphorism reads: “The true path is along a rope, not a rope suspended way up in the air, 
but rather only just over the ground. It seems more like a tripwire than a tightrope” (Zürau 3).

5. Threshold

A rope marks a limit. Laid out, snaked along the ground, wiry and distinct, it is a 
bounding line; folded over itself in an endless coil, an impossible knot; pulled taught, the shortest 
distance between two points: a navel-cord, that fantasy of a noiseless channel. This is both the 
image of a signal and the image of its stoppage, a line and a line break, two icons of death.

However, the most important characteristic of rope, as of a line, is its flexibility. This is the crux 
of Marcel Duchamp’s experiment in 3 Standard Stoppages (1913). Dropping a meter of thread 
three times and fixing the resulting shapes on canvas, in wood, and in glass, 3 Standard 
Stoppages investigates both chance (fluctuation) and stoppage. When the falling is interrupted by
a horizontal plane, thread settles into its interruption and is made, in this way, fragmentary: it is no longer standard, meaning a reliable measurement, and it is also no longer a thread, in the sense that it has been removed from its original utility and translated into a work of art. The fact is, by inviting chance into his process, Duchamp is only affirming the impossibility of realizing an artistic idea, at least in a pure sense.

So Duchamp plays with words, always one of his favorite games; it’s an activity that moves across, in horizontal space: “For me words are not merely a means of communication. You know, puns have always been considered a low form of wit, but I find them a source of stimulation both because of their actual sound and because of the unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words. For me, this is an infinite field of joy” (qtd. in Tomkins 245, emphasis added). It’s important to note that in the French, le stoppage, in addition to the English definition of a process being interrupted, includes a second meaning: “invisible weaving”—that is, the inconspicuous restoration of fabrics (e.g., the use of threads, colors, and techniques that most accurately match those of the original in order to hide traces of the mend, which is another kind of fraud). The thread in 3 Standard Stoppages thus operates as a threefold image encompassing: fluctuation (chance), stoppage (interruption), and weaving (or writing). In “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1890), a story which might be understood as a kind of inversion of the creative act in 3 Standard Stoppages, Ambrose Bierce weaves an entire thrilling escape and journey home in the time it takes a rope to pass from slack to taught. When the fall is interrupted here, we know the man has been hanged and that the story is a fiction; we know—or are reminded, in other words—that stoppage is always a death sentence.

At the center of Ropes, interruption appears as the quintessential event: rather than a standard in this case, the moment of death functions in the text as an extraordinary, super-
saturated event, the givenness of which is incomprehensible: a disaster that ripples though the multiplying and ubiquitous crowd of condemned, a milling mass of ever-presence who form an equilibrium like the mass of Mouse Folk in Kafka’s story, an interruption that has its source in the clot that led to Ropes’s apoplexy. This concept I deploy as the noise that, in interrupting the signal, reorganizes it on a higher order of complexity. Each time such an interruption occurs, it resets the work; it kicks off another movement. As such, it offers the sovereign value Bataille attaches to heedless expenditure, an apotheosis into sanctity.

In Ropes, the intersection between literature and death is given. The voice comes from beyond the limit. The entire manuscript, therefore, might be understood, in the sense that Dead Youth is a “badly-wired” version of The Tempest, as faulty retelling of the journey to the underworld in Book XI of the Odyssey, in which our hero has to fight back a crowd of shades as they throng towards the black blood of ritual sacrifice, which pools, in a resting state, in the memory hole Odysseus digs in the beach. Even his dead mother must be kept at bay; she must be held in suspension until Tiresias can first deliver his prophecies. And what news does the seer report? Struggle and delay: shipwreck, interruption, rough seas, the loss of all sailors but one—all this to return home to a house beset with parasitic suitors in order to slay them in a frenzy of gratuitous violence.

After Tiresias concludes, Anticlea comes forward. Like the lady Madeline, she is beyond-death. She tells her son first that she died of heartbreak for the want of him. It’s a heavy message. This is an echo of the voice that speaks out of the grave, causing Thel to take flight. But that voice came armed only with questions: Anticlea comes with answers, and with a certainty well beyond that of either Josephine or Geeshie Wiley. She speaks as one who has outpaced even those dreadful companions from Whitman: the knowledge of death and the thought of death; this
is a message from beyond the grave. Anticlea knows what death is and she knows how to transmit. At the close of her speech, with the blood still ringing her mouth, she says:

O my child, ill-fated beyond all other mortals…

can only what happens…

The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together…

the soul flutters out like a dream and flies away. (216-222)

In this moving passage, generative enough to jumpstart the interruptive collage technique in Pound’s Cantos, the Mother’s Mouth drips with the blood of sacrifice, as she elaborates a profound thesis on the concept of history. Her shadowy form, an infrathin image of the past as it flits by, is everything that is the case. As Benjamin writes: “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again” (SW IV: 390). This is just such a dangerous moment of infrathin contact, during which our hero reaches out to caress his mother and gets only an armful of shade.
Third Iteration: Infrathin Passages

The possible implying / the becoming—the passage from / one to
the other takes place / in the infra-thin.

allegory on “forgetting”

—Marcel Duchamp, first note on the infrathin (Notes 2)

1. A Little Game Between I and Me

“The only thing which could interest me now,” Duchamp writes to his friend and co-
conspirator Henri-Pierre Roché in 1922, “is a potion that would let me play chess divinely” (qtd.
in Tomkins 240, emphasis in the original). By 1918, after the completion of Tu m’ (1918),
Duchamp had stopped painting; and during the next five years, he retreated almost entirely from
his artistic practice, fashioning only a few readymades (e.g., the Rotary Glass Plates in 1920)
and working intermittently on The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (The Large
Glass), which would be left ultimately unfinished (inachevéd) in 1923. The letter to Roché thus
catches Duchamp in transit between two states, two versions of himself, or rather, multiplying
versions, like a blurred photograph.

What would it mean to play chess divinely? Max von Sydow plays a game with Death in
Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal (1957), but that is not quite the same thing. It is, more
accurately, defensive chess,23 or a delay in chess; we might even describe it as aggressive (in the
manner of Diomedes turned berserker, charging the god Apollo three times in Book V of The
Iliad), a means of fighting off the inevitability of Death itself—but not divine, not perfect.

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23 Note that, while regarded as a bold and innovative artist, Duchamp generally played a defensive style of
chess during his own career. According to Tomkins: “He stuck to classic principles he had studied in the
chess literature, and because he was often matched against stronger players, his strategy tended to be
cautious rather than daring” (289). Later, as he played mainly for himself, he was said to loosen up this
defensive playing style.
In 1770, Wolfgang von Kempelen unveiled his famous chess-playing Mechanical Turk—an automaton that proved such a strong opponent and mechanical wonder that some thought it possessed by dark magic, which could complete, it was said, in a demonstration of its advanced skill, the knight’s tour of the board. An impressive illusion, no doubt, but it turned out the magic was mostly in the interior, the chess being played by a human interlocutor secreted away in a false compartment, so that the Turk proved more divine hoax, than divine chess.

Nevertheless, it is a hoax that seems like a tailor-made Duchampian provocation, complete with its own box, a masterpiece in an impersonal and mechanical style that would fit well alongside the rest of his output.

The Mechanical Turk reappears in Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history: this time in service to Benjamin’s critique of historical materialism, which like Kittler’s description of “classical Poetry” in the discourse network of 1800, imagines a stable continuum connecting past and present; that an object or a word remains the same thing in the present that it always was in the past. Benjamin writes:

There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game. A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf—a master at chess—sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand.

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24 The knight’s tour is complicated maneuver in which one attempts to visit every square on the chessboard, using the knight’s L-shaped movement, touching each of the 64 squares only once: if the tour finishes in a position that allows the final move to land on the original square, thus permitting the cycle to continue in a seemingly infinite loop, it is designated a “closed” tour; if the tour is unable to return home and leaves a gap, it is considered “open,” or, one might say, susceptible.
by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus.

The puppet, called “historical materialism”, is to win all the time. (SW IV: 389)

Is this what it means to play divinely, to “win all the time”? Certainly, that would be playing well, but in any game of chess there is always the potential for the counter-play. Chess is not a game one plays alone, at least not “divinely.” To play divinely, one must play beautifully; and, as such, one requires an opponent who can adequately play back, or else the game would quickly become a bore, so that we might be left with divine indifference.

The game is of particular interest for the present study because chess prescribes strict positions for the players on opposite sides of the board; that is, it prescribes a law of oscillation between the violence of the move and the violence of the counter-move. Even in the case of so-called correspondence chess, or chess by mail, a game to which Duchamp was dedicated (he won the First International Chess by Correspondence Olympiad), the position of the players is, as it were, given. Even if the player is elsewhere, his or her position is established; the relationship between the two players and the board remains stable. The board-as-grid thus presents an architecture of exchange; the game, while played on a fixed grid, happens in the drift, the correspondence between players: a system of communication. Thus, Duchamp’s fantasy potion, a tonic mild as Paris air, would necessarily allow him to play chess against—or between—he himself; it would allow him to divide and replicate, to blur like a body in one of Étienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotographs or his own descending nudes. Each reproduction would come to function as a new divinity, and not simply in order to practice, but to play.25 Furthermore, this divine play would require a complex interchange: it could not be a signal sent between two equivalent divine poles, as such a noiseless channel would imply equilibrium; rather, it would

25 The American grand master chess champion, Edward Lasker, described Duchamp as “a marvelous opponent...who would always take risks in order to play a beautiful game, rather than be cautious and brutal to win.” (qtd. in Tomkins 289)
necessarily be a game between two sovereigns, fatal play. We know that Duchamp was interested in the relation of these fixed positions. During the time he was working in secret on his final work, the tableau vivant of *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage . . .*; or, *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas . . .* (1946-66), he would sometimes ask his friends, often during a game of chess, as John Cage recalls: “Why don’t artists require people to look at a painting from a specified distance?” (qtd. in Tomkins 407).

In 1966, Duchamp agreed to participate in a short film for Andy Warhol, which became *Screen Test for Marcel Duchamp*. The film spans roughly 4 minutes; it presents, in medium close-up, a portrait of a thin and slightly skeletal male face, flushed with harsh light. Duchamp addresses the lens face-on, that is, as an opponent, coolly smoking from a rather disappointed cigar. He appears bored by the production, at times, but one gets the sense that he’s actually enjoying himself. This pose, the air of indifference and disinterest, of which he was grand master, it’s a little game played between, or through, Duchamp and the camera, a flexing scenario in which we look through the camera at Duchamp looking at the camera: a delay in film, with each frame checking another Duchamp.

About the filming of the screen test, Duchamp reports: “A cuddly actress came and sat by me, practically lying on top of me, rubbing herself up against me” (qtd. in Tomkins 429). But this actress doesn’t appear in the film—or rather, for a brief moment, something angular, in the shape of a blade headed for the moon, or what might just be a broad-brimmed hat, juts into frame, pointing at Duchamp’s right eye (an intrusion that recalls diagrams of perspective and is also reminiscent of *Tu m’*, in which a crude hand, painted by one “A. Klang,” a hired sign painter, directs the eye into the right side of the image). Duchamp almost recoils; he moves just briefly in response to the intrusion, mirroring its pace, so that the distance between the two
figures is maintained. The space between them holds, as if held between like poles on a magnet. This is an infrathin dance, an infrathin interruption (infra-mince in French, literally: “above”; “thin”). Duchamp’s notes on the concept offer this approximation: “The convention of the arrow / sign produces an infra thin / reaction on the sense of displacement / agreed to” (Notes 9).

One must agree to play a game. Duchamp might whisper something to this woman through his ultrathin mouth, or she to him, but he’s soon facing the camera again, in the manner of our Turk. The rubbing continues; Duchamp grins, smokes; the film rolls, drifts. So that, mediation is always in transit: an infrathin blur. So that, Duchamp’s work is often an encounter or a game with our multiplying selves, a provocation that pressurizes the aesthetic experience, whether in regards to expectation, taste, or in the case of The Large Glass, our reflection and the reflection of the moment at which we encounter in the piece the reproduction of our presence, the instant of our experience; likewise, for Duchamp, explicitly, and in more general terms, the creative act is a negotiation with failure, with noise, an encounter with the impossibility of total success, an impossible possibility. Art is, therefore, as always, an allegory on forgetting: “allégorie sur l’’oubli,” reads the bottom of the first hand-scrawled scrap on the concept of the infrathin (reproduced here as an epigraph).

In his essay on “The Creative Act” (1957), first delivered as a talk at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas, in April of that year, Duchamp, listed as a “mere artist” in the event description, put forth a theory of artistic production as a process of failure, as a kind of infinite negotiation or conversation between the artist’s intention and the reality of the work, and later between the artwork and the audience. In his comments, later reproduced in Salt Seller, he says:
In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of
totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of
efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be
fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane. The result of this struggle is a
difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is
not aware of. Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative
act, the link is missing. This gap which represents the inability of the artist to
express fully his intention; this difference between what he intended to realize and
did realize, is the personal “art coefficient” contained in the work. (Salt Seller
139)

What Duchamp describes as the “art coefficient” is a measure representing the loss inherent in
the act: it is, in effect, a term designating the accursed share implicit in artistic production. The
difference between the conception and the realization results from the interruption of conception
on its path across a “chain of totally subjective reactions,” and the coefficient is present because
the process of representation is subject to interruption. To recall Kittler’s discussion of
Nietzsche’s fear: even the channels (the chain of subjective reactions) through which this act
passes emit noise. The difference marked by the passage between each iteration of the work
along this chain is itself an infrathin quantity, an infinitesimal delay, and yet the consequence is
profound. In this way, Duchamp defines the creative act as a radical becoming: this chain of
reactions recalls the staggered images of moving skeletal figures in chronophotographs, or the
paintings Duchamp developed in the wake of such images, the most famous example being Nude
Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (1912), which caused such excitement at the Armory Show in
1913 that Duchamp arrived in New York (like Georg Bendemann, who is seemingly across the
street in the next scene before he exits his house) somehow already famous, Duchamp achieving this status while on a transatlantic journey. The creative act thus passes through a thousand iterations, and it returns us to Deleuze and Guattari on the self as multiplicity:

the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities. Each multiplicity is defined by a borderline functioning as Anomalous, but there is a string of borderlines, a continuous line of borderlines (fiber) following which the multiplicity changes…It is evident that the Anomalous, the Outsider, has several functions: not only does it border each multiplicity…but it also carries the transformations of becoming or crossings of the multiplicities always farther down the line of flight. *A Thousand Plateaus* 249

“Call it a little game between ‘I’ and ‘me’,” Duchamp quipped to art writer and curator Katherine Kuh in 1961 (qtd. in Tomkins 251). The game to which Duchamp is referring is the process by which an artist invents, or reinvents, the self, as opposed to an idea of self-expression as an engine driving artistic production: repetition with difference. Such replication happens across a stream of infrathin variation; the art coefficient is the banner of becoming, a mark of passage.

If the term infrathin has not yet been described in these pages, it is because Duchamp himself never defines the term. The term *infrathin* is indefinable: that is, it refuses to put on its frock coat. It is a concept in which the failure of realization, the coefficient of loss, is implied. Related to notions of difference, such as the “difference between two contacts” (Note 14), and Shannon’s basic model of a communication system (Fig. 1.1), the channel that connects a sender and receiver, the infrathin remains still more playful and more fluid than either. In place of a working definition, Duchamp developed an archive containing 46 notes, published
posthumously, which may be described as a series of Benjaminian thought-images, collected between the years 1934-45, a horizontal sequence of texts that oscillate between being abstract, evocative, and inscrutable.

A neologism coined by Duchamp—not a readymade but a linguistic invention—the term is used to encompass the ephemeral, the infinitesimal, and the magical passage that opens into the domain of the possible. The sound of Georg Bendemann hitting the water before he even lets go of the railing, or the slight residue of body heat left on the railing as he is swallowed by the flood, or the terrifying silence of Kafka’s nights of mice—that’s a definition of the infrathin. Indeed, Duchamp’s first note on the concept reads: “The possible is / an infra-thin.” Thus it happens that, in the infrathin alleyway, Achilles runs against Zeno and never wins, despite his swiftness. Each infrathin encounter, each halfway, each passage along a signal path, each blur brings us closer to the infrathin, which is fleeting, disposable, temporary—like Achilles. And yet it is also the shade we becomes after we cross the river. Antje von Graevenitz, in her essay, “Duchamp as a Scientist, Artifex, and Semiotic Philosopher” (2011), describes the infrathin like this:

We are discussing here at length the desert-like intermediate zone as interval in the interaction of two states, to which Duchamp gave his full attention and which he called the infra-mince. It is an almost nothingness that exists between two

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26 In this, Duchamp’s work on the infrathin overlaps with the time Benjamin himself spent working on the autobiographical sketches that make up the chronicle of his youth, Berlin Childhood around 1900 (1932-38). I mean to connect the two projects on the basis of this historical overlap and, in this way, to bring them into occult conversation with the figure of Ropes.

27 A representative note from Duchamp’s series: 3. “shadow-caster” / a company of shadow / casters / represented by all / the sources of light / (sun, moon, stars, candles, fire—) incidentally : / different / aspects / of reciprocity—association / fire-light / (black light, / fire-without-smoke = certain / sources of light / the shadow casters / work in the infra-thin” (Notes)
things, the in-between-ness or the infinitesimal tiny distance between two things that can arise between the seeming and being. (216)

As a term describing the difference between what a thing seems to be, or between what it is meant to be and what it is, the infrathin clearly anticipates Duchamp’s “art coefficient,” which is the “gap which represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention; this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize” (Salt Seller 139). As a term for “in-between-ness,” it is the hallmark of the excessive domain: the fissure in the wall that heralds the ultimate destruction. Indifference becomes in difference. In Duchamp’s famed Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2, what is being replicated in the chonophotographic effect of Marey’s images is the infrathin separation between a body and a body moving in Time. “I spend my time very easily,” Duchamp tells Tomkins in an interview, “but wouldn’t know how to tell you what I do…I’m a respirateur—a breather. I enjoy it tremendously” (qtd. 408). The body of the present is not the same of the body of the past; whether the differential is one breath, one second, thirty years, or a geologic blur like a double of the color diamonds that spread along a horizontal plane on the surface of Tu m’, stretching back into the infinite, the situation is infrathin. Three Standard Stoppages functions as an experiment in the infrathin. The delay is infrathin. “His finest work,” Henri-Pierre said of Duchamp, “is his use of time” (qtd. 405).

At 73 years old in 1961, Duchamp is preparing his own posterity in the interview he gives Katherine Kuh, in the same manner that he has always been. This future, like many of his other projects, had been in the works for some time. The versions of himself that he relays in

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28 Ten years earlier, Duchamp helped negotiate the agreement promising the Arensberg collection—a major haul that included thirty-seven pieces by Duchamp (most of his major works) along with nearly 900 works from other artists, including twenty-eight Picassos and nineteen Brancusis, etc.—to the Philadelphia Museum of Art upon the deaths of his longtime clients and collectors, Louise and Walter Arensberg (Louise died on Thanksgiving Day, 1953 and Walter’s death from a heart attack followed two months later) (Tomkins 371). This agreement also guaranteed that Duchamp would have control over the
these encounters come to function like a composite autobiography, a collage portrait, a multiplied image like his *Nude, No. 2*. It’s an ongoing game. He tells her: “I was really trying to invent, instead of merely expressing myself. I was never interested in looking at myself in an esthetic mirror. My intention was always to get away from myself, though I knew perfectly well that I was using myself. Call it a little game between ‘I’ and ‘me’ (251). A game between the “I” and “me” takes place in the *passage* between the two versions of the self, a relationship that is always flexing, that is, *rotating*, between subject and viewer. Autobiography, therefore, is a process of negotiating these separations, of collecting the irretrievable; and it occurs in the infrathin separation between present and past, memory and the real, one word and the next.

2. Givenness

In Duchamp’s *Etant donnés*, what is *given*—to be sure, in the sense of a retired king—is the game up. That is, the creative act, the correspondence between viewer and the art object, is laid bare, not on a pile of twigs but a grid, the black and white checkerboard linoleum floor that sits beneath the *tableau vivant*, unseen by any viewer. It’s a little game, this installation. *Etant donnés* enacts the *infrathin*, in the passage from the second to the third dimension. Given is the truth of the room first, a visible field of operation: the viewer’s address of the outer room, a threshold, a border: three blank walls and, a strangely anachronistic fourth that seems simultaneously ancient and like it might have been plastered with modern Dryvit stucco. The weathered, battered door, is clearly archaic. Duchamp spotted on a little house in Cadaqués, a coastal town in the far northeast region of Spain, where he and his wife Alexina (“Teeny”) spent their summers, bought it off the owner and had it shipped back to his 14th-Street studio in New final installation and arrangement of the works in the museum space, thus ensuring that he could effectively design his future legacy; he continued to work, in secrecy, on a last piece with such control over the exhibition space in mind.
York. While it appears quite solid and clearly a barrier that blocks the viewer from entering the interior of the exhibit, the door’s wear pattern (especially bottom-left corner which is missing a piece of the façade), nevertheless demonstrates that it is not a solid partition but a series of layers, and, if we look closer, an infrathin chain of cell wall in the wood, composed of cellulose and hemicellulose (Fig. 1.2). The rug, the stucco wall, the distance between the three walls and this frontispiece, each functions as a layer of infrathin separation, half-distances that check a viewer upon their approach. In effect, one can never reach the door to access the piece; however, when one realizes that the door is in fact a passage, if only in a visual sense, not an impasse but a see-through, a stereoscopic viewfinder, a peephole that looks out as from a camera, the effect is to be unhoused in the museum, which gives into its reality as a dream house. 29 For an evocation of this experience, I turn again to Benjamin:

The dread of doors that won’t close is something everyone knows from dreams.

Stated more precisely: these are doors that appear closed without being so. It was with heightened senses that I learned of this phenomenon in a dream in which, while I was in the company of a friend, a ghost appeared to me in the window of the ground floor of a house to our right. And as we walked on, the ghost accompanied us from inside all the houses. It passed through all the walls and always remained at the same height with us. I saw this, though I was blind. The

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29 Sit awhile on the bench opposite The Large Glass in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and watch as visitors enter the small, dark chamber to your left. Knowing patrons will engage with the piece without much deliberation, but most people, those who are simply spending a day strolling the museum, become confused. Many will simply look around the corner, see the door in the low light, perhaps stand to appreciate the piece for a beat or two, then exit back into the main room; a few will read the description of the piece on the wall. Unless they know how to approach, unless they see someone else look through the door, or are told to do so, visitors aren’t likely to stick their face against the door, let alone touch one of the museum’s holdings. This is how it happened to me; and, at one point, I explained to a group of teenagers how to access the piece and suddenly found myself feeling uncomfortable. I got up and left.
path we travel through arcades is fundamentally just such a ghost walk, on which doors give way and walls yield. (*Arcades* 409).

![Image of a door](image)

**Figure 1.2:** The dread doors: view of the exterior, *Étant donnés* (Phil. Museum of Art)

One peaks through a membrane separating the room inside the museum and the imaginary landscape, which is itself behind another brick wall, *onto* a necropastoral landscape *into* the period of Duchamp’s rooms, a dream history of the ruins of modernity. The viewer, alone given access to the ports, assumes the most basic and likewise the lowest observational post: the peeping Tom. This Tom sees: Thel’s vision of Experience. A grotesque female torso, stripped bare, hairless, with malformed genitalia, sprawls across the imaginary landscape of a Renaissance portrait (Fig. 1.3). Again, Duchamp has abused Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* (1503-1517).
A viewer inevitably recoils from the image and is fascinated at the same time; stuck in the infrathin transit of the unhoused, one looks in the face of one’s desire to see, devour, replace, or photograph the reclined figure.

Figure 1.3: The lit parlor: view of the interior, *Etant donnés* (Phil. Museum of Art)

With the passage of days and years, *Etant donnés* breeds dust and age, as thousands of viewers push their weight against the wooden door, crouching down or straining their necks to move their eyes over the twin apertures, each new viewer replicating the posture of the mass audience that preceded them, stepping, even, into their footsteps. Duchamp has fixed us there. The infrathin residue the crowd leaves in its wake takes on another character altogether. In the
small chamber, the alcove off the main Duchamp gallery in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in which *Etant donnés* is installed, the ghostly image of a human face now appears, looking back from the threshold, a double of Benjamin’s Angel of History (see Fig. 1.4). 30A composite portrait made in dirt, makeup, lotion, skin oil—namely, *infrathin* media—the history of the masses comes to make the moment of contact, the ephemeral moment of exchange, clear. In the manner of Christ’s bloody countenance being fixed on a rag, or his corpse on a shroud, the reflection of the crowd *en masse* comes forth to kiss each new viewer, who is always its double.

![Figure 1.4: Ghost face: detail of the door, *Etant donnés* (Phil. Museum of Art)](image)

30 In my correspondence with museum staff, I’ve uncovered no evidence that Duchamp anticipated this effect; the ghost portrait is instead the product of curatorial space and the artwork’s design—and an appropriate aesthetic inevitability, given Duchamp’s attraction to the chance event. Recall his reaction to the fracture of *The Large Glass* during its return transport from the International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. Duchamp repaired the glass but the left the cracks, allowing the chance element to remain. Later, during an interview with James Johnson Sweeney for NBC (1956), standing in front of *The Large Glass* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Duchamp said: “Yes, and the more I look at it the more I like it. I like the cracks, the way they fall. You remember how it happened in 1926, in Brooklyn? They put the two panes on top of one another on a truck, flat, not knowing what they were carrying, and bounced for sixty miles into Connecticut, and that’s the result! But the more I look at it the more I like the cracks: they are not like shattered glass. They have a shape. There is a symmetry in the cracking, the two crackings are symmetrically arranged and there is more, almost an intention there, an extra—a curious intention that I am not responsible for, a ready-made intention, in other words, that I respect and love” (*Salt Seller* 127).
and the echo of past encounters: the “I” to its “me,” and the eye to its we.  

In this way, the Duchamp’s door dramatizes the infinite chain of reactions inaugurated by an artist’s conception in the creative act. Here is the face of that inhuman shadow who waits behind Nietzsche’s desk. The production of this composite “portrait” (a biography) on the door of Etant donnés is an infrathin becoming in which the image of the face—the thought-image of the face—is burned, or screened, by light, onto a material that has become photoreceptive, changed as if by means an alchemical process, glazed with an infrathin layer of chthonic emulsion. In this way the infrathin operates as a metaphysical, or supernatural field—that is to say, magnetic.

The fixed situation of the viewer on the grid of Etant donnés (given is the fact that, unseen by anyone, the installation sits atop a black and white checkerboard linoleum floor, a little game) recalls Michael Powell’s British thriller, Peeping Tom (1960), in which a media-obsessed killer (whose own bedroom attaches to a large photographic laboratory, part dark room and viewing theater) attacks and kills with his camera by means of a cinematic close-up. Fit with a dagger in place of a tripod leg and a circular mirrored disk around its lens, the killer’s instrument makes literal the symbolic function of photography. The camera moves in for an extreme close-up, the tripod acting as a brace that stabilizes the face for the shot at the same moment it stabs the victim to death; the mirrored disc, distorted like a funhouse mirror, reflects back the victim’s own image so that the camera captures the portrait of a face wracked with the

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31 “Caresses / infra minces,” Duchamp’s scrawls on a corner of paper (Note 28, Marcel Duchamp, Notes).
32 Director Jean Epstein describes the power of the close-up in an essay on magnification: “The close-up is the soul of cinema. It can be brief because the value of the photogenic is measured in seconds. If it is too long, I don’t find continuous pleasure in it…Therefore, one must admit that the photogenic is like a spark that appears in fits and starts…Mincemeat. Even more beautiful than a laugh is the face preparing for it. I must interrupt. I love the mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap, and moment before landing, the becoming, the hesitation, the taut spring, the prelude, and even more than all these, the piano being tuned before the overture. The photogenic is conjugated in the future and in the imperative. It does not allow for stasis” (9).
horror of seeing the close-up image of her moment of death. In this way, the apparatus elevates the photographic situation to its ideal: the penetration of the body by media, the ecstasy of absolute or divine perspective, as from a potion.

In *Etant donnés*, the stereoscopic peepholes drilled into the door likewise reflect the viewer’s eyes. As the viewer’s eyes fit the two holes, so the holes are also fit in the door and function, as focal or hinge points, to *breed* a face of dirt around them, like the image of Christ in the Shroud of Turin. Moreover, this face, which is revealed over time and essentially through chance, as an inevitable product of accretion, substitutes for the inaccessible head of the Duchamp’s nude torso so longed for by a viewer of the work, who is often straining at the peepholes to try and see the absent face, an act that always seems on the cusp of being made complete. However, this is an impossible retrieval. Zeno’s paradox tells us that we can only ever get halfway there; Stephen Dedalus is always almosting it. And yet this straining, this knocking at the gate, this waiting at the door, this caressing at the threshold, the brush of an eyelash or a cheek upon its raw wood—this is the contact by which one passes through. Thus, the moment when the viewer in *Etant donnés* penetrates the *tableau vivant*—pressing a body into the door and slitting an eye through its gaps to look at the grotesque body, the counterfeit copy of Gustave Courbet’s *The Origin of the World* (1866), the scintillating waterfall, photographic backdrop, or the illuminating gas—is a delay in coition. The beloved stares back from the work, seeps through the door as through a screen, to press body to double. It is not so much a prospect as an embrace, divinely played.
Threshold

On July 9, 1931, the Chicago Daily Tribune reported that Commissioner of the Illinois Supreme Court, Judge Thomas Taylor, had recommended for disbarment nine senior attorneys, including several affiliated with the State’s Attorney’s Office, on an allegation of widespread corruption—namely, an extended period of payroll-padding during a sanitary works project. Such news is not unusual in Chicago at any time, but it was particularly common in those early decades of the twentieth century. The scandal reached as high as former State’s Attorney Maclay Hoyne, who was one of some three-dozen attorneys to be suspended. Among the nine receiving the more serious charge and threat of disbarment was attorney James C. O’Brien, whose courtroom theatrics and reputation for being the most aggressive and successful “hanging prosecutor” in Cook County during the teens earned him two colorful sobriquets: the first, “Red Necktie,” identified his favorite courtroom accessory (“It means a death sentence,” he’d explain when asked about it), the second, “Ropes,” referred both to his habit of sending men to the gallows and the lust with which he pursued those death sentences (Huntington).

A trial lawyer celebrated in all the newspapers of the day, O’Brien was well known in Chicago in the first decades of the twentieth century for prosecuting local criminals in a town ripe with them—gangsters with fantastic names, like Eddie “Ammunition” Wheed and Gene Geary, stick-up men Earl Dear and Lloyd Bopp, and the deluded Carl Wanderer of the famous “ragged stranger” case. The latter’s story is representative. Wanderer, a veteran of the First World War, and his wife, who was eight months pregnant, were returning home from the theater when the couple was accosted in the narrow vestibule of their home by a “tramp” in ragged clothing. Wanderer’s wife was shot several times in the stomach during the ensuing struggle, while Wanderer, who was also armed, managed to shoot the tramp and was later found
pummeling the man’s corpse with the gun. First hailed as a courageous defender of his dead wife, the trial showed that Wanderer was behind it all: he had hired the man to trail the couple and given him a gun (an expensive firearm, which was very similar to Wanderer’s own gun and had been sold to Wanderer’s cousin a few years earlier). Wanderer was executed by hanging in September, 1920. Up against Ropes, all these men were ultimately sentenced to death. His record is documented in newspaper reports from the period. From 1912-1920, “O’Brien handled most of Chicago’s noteworthy murder trials. He sent criminal after criminal to death”—18 in 8 years (Urbana Daily Courier 1). The Vidette-Messenger noted that he “was feared and hated by the underworld as no other prosecutor in Chicago’s history” (8).

After 1920, O’Brien ended his career as a prosecutor and entered into private practice (in fact, he started his work on the Black Sox case with the prosecution before switching to the defense midstream, as it were). He carried on with a successful career through the twenties, until, under pressure in late November 1931, just four months after Judge Taylor’s recommendations came down in the Canal Whoopee scandal, before his case even came to court, O’Brien was found dead in his home on Chicago’s west side, in a big house on Adams—death, in this case, one assumes, hastened by the pressure of scandal and the looming indictment. The cause of death was recorded as apoplexy, a striking away. Another series of reports dotted the national media: “STROKE KILLS ROPES O’BRIEN: Famed Red Necktie Wearer Sends 17 Men to Gallows in 8 Years” (The Pittsburgh Press).

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33 Though his conviction rate was remarkably high, a few defendants were able to escape the death penalty. According to the Oshkosh Daily Northwestern (1931), “Among the prosecutions he lost was one against Al Capone, in the days when Capone had not yet become a gang dictator and was still just a promising youngster in the ‘mob’,” evidence that the “great criminal” slips through.
This man was my great-grandfather, and the Ropes of the title is the ghost of his ghost, my only witness.\(^{34}\) But this isn’t the story I heard growing up, nothing of his death, disbarment, or shame.\(^{35}\) It was as if that was not part of the story at all, just an absence. The story I received, though no one, even my grandparents, seemed able to tell it for the number of years, came to me in flits, like the glances I caught of the caricature of Ropes hung on the wall: a line drawing in black ink (or was it a cartoon?), a sea of exaggerated faces, its only color a flaming red tie, posted at the top of my grandfather’s stair, which staircase, rising with a strangely moderate incline that I can still ascend in my mind with long, exaggerated steps, the wide treads covered in a thick, cerulean carpet, lay always in continuous dusk, continuous quiet, as if it were a confessional, where the image still waits, as one piece of the mélange of curious objects that lined the walls in that memory hole, that deep space: a heavy brass dish, a large oil painting of a mass of sticks, the frame fit with a brass lamp, the work nearly obscured by a filter of dust, all fragments. No, the story I heard was that my grandfather, as if I owned him, \textit{Ropes}, a strange kind of a name, worked the Black Sox case in 1921, when the Sox were put on trial for throwing the World Series, as if he himself had thrown the series. And that meant something because it was the big leagues. And Shoeless Joe was a name like Ropes. And I’d heard of the Black Sox before I’d heard of Ropes. And so when I learned, by reading through newspaper coverage of his career, that after three decades of hanging and big Chicago houses with ballrooms in their middles, he came to such a ruinous end, I started thinking about a book, a way of accessing that

\(^{34}\) The reference is to Kafka, in a letter to Milena Jesenská, end of March, 1922: “Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one’s own ghost, which secretly evolves inside the letter one is writing or even in a whole series of letters, where one letter corroborates another and can refer to it as witness. How did people ever get the idea they could communicate by letter!” \textit{(Letters to Milena} 223).  

\(^{35}\) He was disbarred, despite his death. Later, his son worked to have O’Brien reinstated to the Illinois Bar posthumously, the first time such an event occurred in Illinois.
history, an encounter with and a realization of that history. But this will not be that book. In its place, I send a book of dread.

The American sportswriter Walter Wellesley “Red” Smith is credited with one version of a well-known remark about the difficulty of writing; it’s “nothing,” he reportedly told columnist Walter Winchell in 1949, “You just sit down at a typewriter, open a vein and bleed” (Naugatuck Daily News). The wry comment is, of course, meant to belie the arduous process of putting words on the page. I like this sentence for the gratuitous violence of its description; however, leaving aside its wryness, this notion implies that writing is a natural production of the body. Nietzsche makes a similar claim in Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883): “Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood. Write with blood, and you will experience that blood is spirit” (40). Here, Nietzsche is clearly writing out of the discourse network of 1800. What Red’s comment fails to explain is that the vein the poet opens is necessarily troubled by clots. The fragment, in other words, appears here as the form of writing par excellence. For a more telling description of the notion, we might return to Kittler’s description of “classical Poetry.”

As if powered by a vacuum, he traces the act of writing in 1800 up the body’s pulsating network, a via negativa running from the poet’s written hand, up through the pen’s nib, through the long cylinder, from the pen then, in infrathin, magical transit, up into the digital arteries of the hand, continuing through the radial artery, the brachial, the carotid, and on, into the brain’s wet nest, and, finally, from this signal housing to language’s origin point in the body of the one great Mother, Our Lady, who bestows upon the poet-child, not only the blood of her womb, but also the clear Word as Such: “This placing of mothers at the origin of discourse,” Kittler argues, “was the condition of production for Classical poetry, and the Mother was the first Other to be understood by poetical hermeneutics” (28). Kittler’s post-hermeneutic critique of writing posits

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36 I take some pleasure in reporting that Red Smith and I share an alma mater: Our Lady (of the Flowers).
the source of meaning in media itself. In 1800, he argues, classical Poetry was possible because
the spirit made it so, the ends (stable meaning) justified by the means. But this spirit dissipated.
What had been a stable discourse network becomes an unstable one: what had been possible
becomes a continual encounter with the impossible.

When the press asked what his red tie meant, Red Tie Ropes would say, “It means a
Death Sentence.” When they mentioned a potential defendant, he might respond, “Give me a
shot, he’ll get the rope, sure.” While the presence of the “he” who is the subject of this sentence
is always given, and the givenness of the event of his death is likewise super-saturated, in the
words of Ropes, “he” becomes a multiplying, endless chorus of condemned, the terror of which
is that they’ve already penetrated every boundary. In composing this work, I have tried to inhabit
the moment of interruption, of loss, where the voice erupts out of the grave, to approach the
threshold that separates history and the present, seeming and being, that membrane joining
literature and noise, with deathly quiet, that I might pick up some sign, to flow down the creative
pathway into the brain of this history that I might approach the great event, the annihilation of
the limit. Oh you should see with what patience I wait at the door, my face pressed against the
membrane. This has been an unnerving experience. The following is its trace.
CHAPTER 2

EXPLANATION

OYEZ OYEZ OYEZ

BENCH. All persons are admonished to come forth and give attention, but are first of all admonished, in the sense of being urged. In the year of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and thirty. Thirty. That’s history. That’s me, history. This is to be a record of such activity. This is the end. Let me hear your mouth seek.

*He begins in profile—in defilade.*

*Ropes.*

ROPES. My Friends. Co-conspirators of my Thoughts.

I am Red Necktie Ropes O’Brien.

My name is perhaps known to you. I’m sanctified. I’m a singer. The one who speaks up before the Law. The State’s mouth-piece, prow of the State’s ship, the Law’s audibility. I’m a dead man, staved man choked on a ribbon of dread. I’m the overture comes here before justice. I’ll tell a story. My body is, just like justice’s body, more than a pest, more host than pest. My doom’s
hereditary. My wreck’s a ship. My judge still
my god. My sobriquets are multiple. My sobriquets
surround me in a fiery glow. They drown me
incessantly down an irreversible waterway
I drop in. That’s it. That’s is. So that:
I am drowned. I am become drowned
Inundated in every flood: a river at breech
the moment it breaks the wide levee
in me—this seam: the Law’s ill
illegibility. My names attend me like so many
mayflies, a thousand drops on a thousand wings
of solder. I will end my days (I write this on
my deathbed) in a throng, surrounded
by a thousand stands of mourners, suspended
on an endless ocean of woeing; on my
bedclothes, still damp with nightness,
like a mouth still tinged with its last breath,
I write a sentence to shroud only me—as a sea

storm torn the rigging,
so it will tear me now, sinew
from luminous sinew.
Fixed in a dark suit. Fixed
in my natural station, that is, my
amazement, with the garishness that is
my fixation recommending me to you
and to all of us, oh yes, and my shirt striped
like a wet flag, blousy as a lion—roused
as a lion slightly wounded, bright blood
striping down its right side, its downy
underbelly, where stomach muscles cradle,
with such tenderness, a knot of glistening
viscera
viscera with a fiery glow,
viscera in hot rage, all living
flame, then being lifted
in a single drop upon the wind’s courtesy, ripping
along the animal’s noisome flank, what lion,
what with redoubled frenzy, tears at that banded
flock, snatches one foal from the strict field, closes
on a throat full of spine, one fold in the unlimited
field, one organ in the vast host, so I set the crowd
on fire, like a whip. So I set the crowd hysterical,
alight, like a sling of arrows shot straight up the moon’s
mouth. I’m the tooth caught the knot, the scale
in the cunt, the tensor closing off
the sun’s ripe neck. With that red jewel
fit below my mother moon, I sent a whole
crowd to float down in the DEAD SEA. Sent a whole
sea of dead enemies like a herd of iridescent swine
down to the gallows in a single
boundless
spell.

Q: Say, what does the red mean, Ropes?

A: It means a Death Sentence.

Friend. How much more accounting is needed?

What is the Law if not a superabundance of Death Sentence?
Citizens of every country in the world.
I am Ropes O’Brien.
Hello. I come on a vessel filled with gold.
I have undertaken to correct every slip
as it comes from the press, every sheet that slips
out the mills. I have undertaken vengeance;
it’s an endless passage. And I go under.
I have confident faith in vigor the hate makes
this our reprisal. My name spreads through the news,
I mean it elongates like a finger moving through
a loom: an electric wire, it cuts across a witchy sea, a
medium O yes. Taken as a whole, affect
an ocean. O yez, a déformation professionnelle.
Are you not also troubled? Have you never seen a canal
so extend itself that it pierce the way in that drifty sea,
solutions multiply so intensely? Is it not precisely canal
business to be so drift, the mud dredged up, piled up
in greasy springs along the banks until the muck itself come
blot out every trace of the sun’s carie, the soft place in
the sun’s cut neck, the canal being given to communicate
with the sea, the streaming stream?
Forgive me.

Even now I feel myself doing something I’m about to regret.
The sentence is arrived or do they say: TIME IS GROWING SHORT. Before I die. I’m a dead man. I dread every moment, then I apotheosize. Then that starts dreading again. The charge would be ridiculous if not for the pain it brings to my love garden; like a copse of flowers, it coats me in mealy loam. Like a jewel, it sticks in my wet side, sets free a rivulet of synovial fluid, a river of plain ichor. I am sick then indicted, summonsed by the ray of the star, called to appear, radiant and lucid, in my attachment to a project of clean works, fleetingly improvised. To appear! What greater things than these be set in store? What fulsome beat holds fast the whole I conquered, the county I bounded with a wall of brass, the domain I claim as an act of worship?

I say that I have been relieved, only, allayed at home; that I’ve been running my fingers over the filigrees cut in the mantelpiece; that as a mantle, I’ve taken up a stone of obduracy; that I’m the only neck with any skin in the game; that I’m the only boy whose father’s not a butcher; that I’m the only body whose parasites play host; that I’ve been interrupted in situ in the place I wash, instead of at work, the place I eliminate deviation; that I’ve been sentenced in medias, arrested in a dark room, immersed in the reproduction of memoranda: this endless, luxurious, smooth-tongued dictation, so that allocution and reception have become almost indistinguishable activities. I tell myself, they might have sentenced me in dictée, to drill an indifferent loop into the very eardrum of the house, where the only witness is my ghost, safe behind locked doors, a knock on any one enough to redound in the City’s limitless crypt.

But now day as well breaks.
Fire licks the belt of the horizon. Then I start to seethe a little. Then I start to breed a team of corpses. I have my own script. I hail you, old City!

With that hammer I forged from a valley of sconces, I shatter and leak out the dome of many-colored glasses, released from safety home and wife to fill the civilized world with sentences. My subjective days are over. I live under a dream’s pause, where each nighttime flies away, the hogs scream with pain, they knit my brainstem with their insidiously piggy rooting. I have thought it fit to have printed a manifest of scars, a notice to the public that I plant a flower in. A billet doux all wrong to cover like a char this incessant chatter.
At the time of their sentencing, most were unable to appreciate the various aspects of the Canal Whoopee, so-called, and the whoopee period, so called, and the lucrative financial reward; nevertheless, each contributed to the whole in their own way and so must be counted, must be kept, as the word is, in a rooms. My supreme concern remains those who cross, those intransigent little hairs that dangle, as a watch does, in my daydreams, that is, my wake.
This is to be the story of Lazarus, but the priest isn’t going to rise.

Give me a shot, he’ll get the rope, sure.
BY MACLAY HOYNE

During my recent illness, I read with some interest and more amusement the greetings and salutations of the Mayor to our citizens concerning the administration of the police. According to the Mayor, crime has been reduced through the efforts of the Chief of Police, a painted splendid little lamb, official notwithstanding that the Mayor has solicited his resignation. Meanwhile, through the press and this office, we learn there is a carnival of burglaries, a riot of holes throughout the city, the blowing of safes with the most modern instruments and the use of acetylene gas. A siege in the sweet cloister of home. Policemen are murdered and thieves have been robbed of their booty by the very officers who arrested them and the court. Call it: Outrage. One policeman has been detected conning at the theft of revolvers and other firearms, and possibly some of the stolen weapons been used in slaying his brother officers. Over all these crimes the Mayor throws the pretended cloak of activities from the hanger himself. The truth is that force never administered more inefficiently, more wastefully; that the majority of officers corrupt; that the detective bureau is honeycombed with graft and with grafters; that the administration feeds off this vile villainy; that the city betrayed both by its Chief and that Chief as such, despite the Lord’s hypocritical pretensions to righteousness and poverty, debauched and demoralized beyond the limit of which no other has ever debauched and demoralized. The chief has pretended to take an interest in young boys and for their aid permitted the operation of slot machines. He has exploited youth, religion, his family, his wife, his clubs, his fraternal lodges, and the business organizations that supported him. Neither city life nor I. Property is safe. Honor
and honesty and white honey have become city jokes in the hall of ropes. What could be fairer?
Indolence, ignorance, stupidity, and neglect of duty or worse, the Mayor, henchmen and friends
the field these things: blackmail as a political weapon to build up his machine, craps games and
handbooks in consideration of tribute, houses of prostitution for bricks of consideration or like
payment. Call it. the promotion of officers to rank consideration or like payment, the
extermination of captains the death of lieutenants at the request of thieves or vice lords. Call it: A
parade of the State, a manifestation of State power. An accident in the land. Call it. One of the
pungent evidences of the alleged graft systems was discovered by Mr. Hoyne to be a small green
Moroccan bound notebook in the possession of Lieut. White. The book is made up under three
headings: Can Be Raided, Chief’s Places, Not to Be Raided. To BE Raided. Not to be Raided. To
be Raided
Not to Raid.
Not to be.
Can be Raided
Hanged.
Can be Burned.
Brothel I
Left Alone.
To be Raided.
To be Raided.
Caught.
Caught.
Caught
King’s men
To be Built.
To be Vacant.
A built world
Chief’s places
Graft places. 3 on Adams.
Big House
A Tunnel
Gone to mold
Cafè. To be Raided
All told
To be Aided
To be left alone.
To be Hanged
Hanged
Ropes
Ropes
Ropes
Ropes
Ropes
Retreats.

This book contains a list of all houses of ill fame.
My Dear Ones:

I begin with a feeling that I was ill, or not-ill—dread, which slipped into the blot before me as a foam into which, open into which I might insert some important claim, such as wedlock. So that, from the first, I forged in the whole country a feeling that all had the air of historical enterprise, or, one might say, aggregates.

Total land, total media circus.

That’s how it zeroed in on Ropes.

I awoke in a basin of stings, having lost all bearing. Had not eaten. Not a moved limb in a thousand years. I couldn’t say whether it was day or not-day. No voice. No circumstance beyond that red face beaming in the knot. I felt an ache pulsing in my rind.

The faucet bit me ho-hi in the thigh like a swan. Bright strings of pain shot through me. My legs: toes buzzed, my right knee a dam, left foot a receiver vibrating under the mat. My children scratched fleas in every corner of the house, dropped their eggs in every inch of the house they meant to know.
In the home I lived, there were rooms
where one would expect corridors, sometimes two
sometimes one made of two, two of one.
I was in a network of caves.
I could not urinate.
I could not expectorate.
I could not expel any fluid. They swarmed then in a cloud of thorns.
I saw a legion of hosts rise against me, drawing me into dense heat—July, a large radio dial with
a stopper at its heart, a shipwreck round the house, a ghost army with real feelings. I could only
be quiet, a remnant of faith. Had the feeling that if I continued or if I fell to pieces, the canal
business would be for a large part accomplished, the lock marked in the earth.
Beyond this I saw nothing.

Trouble.

I sank so low then as to be beyond measure. I got down on my side. I looked on the silverskin
stuck between the near rock and the far and skipped my big buckle across it, through the loin of
all this data, as if, in such reconnaissance, one could slip between the sea and its muscle,
it might come loose.
We wanted to dredge the canal. We wanted to cement our position between a torture chamber and a throne room. We wanted to build a tube in the earth. Do the work, carry the signal. All of that. Money too. Sure. The health of the City depends upon such easy transmission, the same as a slaughterhouse. This town was a beef place before it was yours. Give me a cow, I’ll cut its heart out, sure. I’ll ride the rest of the way home between the oars on its back. Up-End it. Use its bony blades to cut a wake in the wastewater.

Before even word arrived, I felt the regression awake in me.

I was falling out of gauge before I was even.

I was a fisherman in the middle of an indistinguishable oxen.

I was alone, apoplectic, full of pork. I’m sure it was not a gag.

A strange force compelled me to interrupt all locutions.

I wrote a mass of letters to my dozen children that they might bury in their graves.

Even my seal the earth made complete.

Larceny. What sacrilege! Imagine if when the voice came from the mouth, the spine as well erupted. Do you forget my friends how clean I swept this City of its bottomless crime, its bodiless hesitation, how quick I made gaps?

I think I must now be completely truthful.
I AM A MEMORY COME ALIVE

Not guilty, only willfully out of time, I am simply
Of a line, another sumptuous citizen—one of zero
Magnetized to a certain point
You remember me, the one who speaks
Before the rail, whose approach preys on
The City’s bare knees, smugly
Search me!
I have to attend only
To my misery. I have told the Law my reverie
I have said before, the moral force I obtained here is destroyed
I have told them, friends, my directors, I have had great pleasure
In getting you convicted
My systemic disasters
This is fatal. I’m on the record
I’m on the plumb level
I stand like a lurid dream in the Law room
The guilt party, the vagabond face-painted
To look like a toy boat. My glottis kisses
Every lectern, a delirium listing to every
Unkind fancy, whose every other
Word slits another gill open in the stale air.
I am a thorn
Bored into those cheaters
They want revenge,
I want to put them in cold boxes.
I am the thorn broken off the woods, crying a tie
Round the sun’s neck, her dainty latchet.
I’m interrupted
A river of bad drains, without other information.
My labors infinitely doubled.
My circulation hisses
Back. My circulation is redoubled:
Addd nauseaum.

I am exhausted with fatigue and sickness.

Broke down lame under a spell.
How is it I love you, among a million others?
I have gathered the horses of the county—No:

The horses of vengeance. I named them all
The same name, Death.

An executioner’s indulgence, the State’s best-
Dead man. I’m the one who broke the bank
At Mt. Hood. Where John Bell Hood found
The wound breathing in his leg, I scored
The condemned throat-
Wise like the implacable river
Went down to play at breathing
Their corpses hissed froth
These men suffer with incredible devotion
They go still and dumb and starving as suppliants
Their knees scab like a pie plate
From it
Call it: Parasitic activity
The hood
I kept supple, his hands filled. I keep him filled, and the bucket
To keep clean, I kept clean. I’m the overture
Before comes something, the blessed
Virgin, sent from another one, the world
Prologue stood abreast the gate

In the space in the gated rib and knuckle

Said the word trouble. Welcomed us

As the conqueror

Who brings death itself a sentence.

Immaculate worm.

Perhaps you have seen me

Through traffic, or my arm hailing

From under a reverent magazine editor

Or my supine hand ushering some upright

Piano to the State, like one sowing grain

In the valley, underhanded

A few seeds in the fertile foot-deep

Soil—i.e., Illinois:

Still black as all night,

Soil dark as the sun is

Bright.

Don’t set yourselves against me. Rather,

Cling.

My friends. My pure ones. Unite to me

Every bit that flashes up, transform even

The non-material into material waste.
DEAR BOYS

The sun is setting upon our backs. The first courses have been repulsed. Here, advancing, comes the innumerable enemy I lovingly bequeath to you. Observe you this runnel of blood mixed in the gutter-water; it hails them, a passenger. They’re nothing compared to the bouquets of death threats I’ve collected from dead families, live ones, the bent heads of whole armies’ violence. How to engulf me. Fixed with slurred mouth. Know very well that I have confidence in you and our profession. I’ll begin with that. I am exhausted with fatigue and. Noise-sick.

It was not yet June, and the children languished

in the wet heat. It was not June.

Fortune had not yet clotted my door.

REGRET?

No one else

now, or ever

will be, so deep

in arrears

awareness of

the failure

the failure

the failures
these records,
stored as they are.

My only friends, citizens of every country in the world, forgive what you do not approve.

In these sentences.

It’s melancholy this

epoch that keeps

the jail key

stock-age the yard

this vessel full of sick rom which I make this offering to the public.

Yet I am imprisoned here.
NIGHT DREAMS

For my crimes, not so long absorbed for the long cortège
of justice chases my holdfast from the rooms
like a siren at the beginning of an offensive dream.

I start taking sodium bromide. I sleep actively
live for the minute each night when the City’s sleep
boils at its opaque core.

When the City’s dream heeds my body. Leaves it “dug out.”
Then I might erupt, ooze into the gutter, a warm oil streaked
with moon. Oh swoooouunnd
It’s a nocturne. What’s it keep?
Ahold.
The Law is not anything if it is not generous.

That’s it.
That’s it.
That’s it.
I tear open the gauze.
Each day, with every step, I abrade
  the City
every surface, partitions of
powder glass, and return
home, with terrible swiftness,
like a wild boar in an in-
fancy ward, to shred
every lit interior until dusk
thickens in the rooms: blackout.
Nightness. Darkness swallows
all. They carry me
across a bed of rain
laid with last night’s
bedsheets draped across
a crowd’s equal backs
Shades rise to see

Outside, the air buzzes with crowd.
We wanted to dredge the canal, sure; the canal, for its part, wanted dredging.

What is a canal if not a soft place in the heart made for dredging? A film soft enough to be carved into hole, inundated with any substance until the walls cake with residue, the passage clog with genetic material? I not only did my duty in carrying out this, what, this project of clean works, I wasted my own surfeit.

I shocked even myself!

Imagine a charge out of such trench, with no chance of success, in resistance’s face festered in the fixed phase, continuous disintegration, continuous spoof.

Porous as my unfit mouth.

When speaking’s no longer a way to interrupt my bruxism.

Teeth to tatters, infection crowning each luminous root, gums fluttering in wooly ribbons.

I still ate.

I still accumulated.

Even my cake heart started digging!
SON OF MAN:

What I there was before Ropes, to whom shall I confess? In my night dreams, my neck is prized by a group of convicts I sentenced to death. I am a prosperous people, a prosperous house. At the table’s head in a local stall, I’m fixed with a face I can’t contain, an eroticism reserved only for the saints themselves, an assembly of antlers packed tighter than the guards about me, a golden spear radiating out of my coccyx.

The condemned care only for a few raw tools: axe-heads and slaughtering knives, which are always being sharpened and polished but never furnished, never employed, for there is no meat. There are no animals other than pets, and leaves rustle like pigs beyond the framed houses. The citizens, each on their deathbed rest. Each a dying part. The corn stores themselves are rotted under a woven, pitted bed. I dig that hole to remember misery.

All effort focuses on sharpening the tools and observing their glint in the firelight, and enemies come storm down the mountain to trade their own milled tools, nuzzled like infants whenever I get a look-see, for the fresh-cut tools of the condemned, which shine like buckets of oil.

They speak from their hands, these rough men; and when they speak, in murmurs I can’t decipher, the wheel seeps out their mouths, a crude phrase. I’ve a notion with a great bright stain tearing it in two, a remnant of filth. I sew the party amongst other groups. Still it seems my popularity can only grow. There’s no malice among them, no desire to see the thing come to an
end. The whispers of my rapid ascension frizz the table, and even the fibers of the wood seem to curl up in hysterics under such seizure.

After a few days at table, these whispers begin to smell like eating, then something very good to eat; and the table itself seems something good to eat, and the splinters curl up in agonizing delicacy. I’m ravenous.
I’M A MEDIA COME INSIDE

Is this a fluid a pressure? Can a suture be a fluid? Can a career like mine so decay?
As soon as a force exceeds its limit, angel clots the chamber, blood shifts
the lowly: power falls to earth.

I’m not going down there again.
I’m not going down again to assert my spine, but to spring
wholehog like a fathead talking
out the side of heaven’s mouth.

They love me in heaven.
Love me.
Even despite their hot rage.
Love me.
Grace me with flowers
Kisses

When the boy arrived I was burying my bad heart.
As a sentence, the body too will crumble like a reliquary
or a spectacle of self-election. Perfect.
For the reenactment and for the transcript
I have undertaken an endless passage.
When I get to the birches, I will be in the Lord’s hollow,

Hallowed cavity of the Lord

who favors the suppliant.

I’ll have a hanging jury sure, eating like moth
dust from my hands. From my scapulae.

Should I have to splay myself out
before the public on that pike,
a criminal I shall so bedeck
my legs with joints, I’ll be doubled
all over in the easy heat, super
-saturated like a wet loom, fragrant
as a naked saint.
DEAR MACLAY:

The Law tells us we must not attribute any good to ourselves but attribute everything to good sentences, that no one should be required to do something a poet would refuse. In time, this lawlessness fills all channels; that is to say, that which is outside is indeed that from which the law generates; that from which the canal turns away is in fact the membrane shutters the country from the plague dead. A thing outside the ship, which does not appear as a ship but a whale is nothing. The image of back, greased in light, back of shining gossamer. The Law is image of want on which it is founded. If it affects us or affects growth that is only so that laws petition it to be so. I deck the room. I live in a womb jeweled as a golden calf, and as such, the situation in which my regression might be thwarted never comes to pass. The canal blocks it.

In the beginning was desire thus split: two poles, an immaculate conception and a chain of subjective falls, or doubles on the blade. On the one end, the desire for immolation, the fire desire, a completely new force. At the far end, a wound carved out of the wounding act, a husk of the hollowing.

A crime is such an exception.

When the sentence came down to me then, it was a call to feed as much as listen, as parasites come upon saturated timber. All the while, they disappear, like all other signals, in a giant fry.
When you put on a bright new sobriquet, you’re suddenly rabid as you want to be.

I carry a flag; the sea eats the sea, entirely.
DEAR BOYS:

In the lean time, even the fins were gutted, even the fields folded over with a grid of little welts. The driver wanted to be strangled at the moment I became a father. I thought back to the bulging. Each time such an encounter was accompanied by thorns, a cyst sack, its piercing like a ruined budget, the excitement of animals dying outside, their eyes drawn open wide, mouths sucking in a bucket of flood a panic, a bright movement to the limit, a series of gnats attracted to pulsating fruit.
Dear Boys

Every face paraded before the long bar of the courts, the bother of arms, every hand slid down the cold bronze luster of the balustrade; every child raised among dahlias has a place in the books. Under night’s cover. I have sent a million children a million fathers home without fathers. I have seen them crying in dark woods. One must remember the feeling of surfaces if not skin, of biting a bone. That’s how one fills memoranda. Every neck needs a tally, every sentence a brand; every limb a rubber band before it’s really cutting time.
IN THE MIDDLE OF A SPELL that’s where home is, against the oak of every thing.

The foam urged its way out of these mouths, spongy, crusting the beast’s mouth.

The judge’s voice called forth with thrilling vibrancy, with a death cry of a motor.

The people gathered in the pit there vibrated as well, with peristalsis, if not joy.

My stomach bands flexed at the seam; the gallivanting horse lunged in the jailhouse.

The whole episode was a call to arms. I was going to open all out on them like a lit rose.

A bullet hole.

Imagine them all like that, toe up on the boil head, digging for it, lancing at it like that, in the siege place where the runaways in the walls shake the canal, singing under the bright jewel of a moon, that starry consumption, and the dead’s wives tear out their hair in frizzy couplets.
DEAR MOTHER:

Before my eyes, all muscle goops.
In the debris field, a thousand enemies restrain themselves from hanging me.

In static, as with a glass eye, I see myself spit out in pieces upon the battlefield of the Lord, stove by a white wake.

Power topples the eggy land. A limit brain scrambles a network of useful fluids the heads shot out.

To be sure, with each day, I earn every patent.
PIKE COUNTY OF MY DREAMS

A telephone shatters
the attics of my body, the sound of a fight broke out
in a train.
I can’t write anymore. I’ve come against the limit. I am asleep while writing. I am dead sick. I wake up afterwards but it’s no use. I seek out them who would refuse me. I have to burn my fingers, my wrists. If only my kneecaps weren’t subject to miracles. If my scalp wasn’t as raw as firmament. If this fatal light was still unbeknownst in us.

That I might not measure each moment.

I loved beyond measure.

In every detail.
To have to bear and be the cause of such suffering.

I knew that though innocent, I had been made to suffer.

Evening as usual: worked, read, dictated, listened without result.

I was afraid to spoil.
To be put to death by Rome instead of unbelievable blandness.
DEAR MOTHER

August. The fields are bursting. Grass flutters in the wind in the backfield. Time passes. The crowd starves. You wade through it, waisthigh, wishing it. Sun burnishing the land. We please ourselves with the specter of the City’s absolution. Disorder is a dream drained from the host. Sin is disorder, a system of wash. The drain, incessant device, an escape which through chronicles of disorder alone seemed to offer me. The allure like that of a neck to an axe. An overwhelming desire towards thinning, as a solution to salt with something gone awry.
DEAR HOYNE

A man comes to the house, whether I’m ill or not, at inscrutable intervals. I don't deny that this would require a certain mobility between ties, between tongues, if not nerves. It is not just a grammar of shift, but cadence, the kind, the pace, and the quality. Seductive on the base of its deformity, it is the memory of a derangement that cannot arrange itself as a whole that loosens our hold on the world like a bad tooth.

Each instance passes the same. He approaches with his fist in a jar and raps on the door in an innocent spasm. Shaking like a cut lamb, the ward answers the door flanked by three little kids. The first carries a pox in his right hand, a wishbone otherwise, his mohair coat burned in places along the right placket. He’s the leader. The second carries a young goat, throat-cut naturally and bleeding everywhere in the vestibule. The flowers have relaxed into giving up. The polished floor is so slick that every object is a threat to slide. The third carries a bread cup and a single-chain thurible, whose leaking fills every sickening crevice of atmosphere with bloodguilt.

Together, we walk to the door, my team and I, discussing our plans for the greatest future, the restoration of place, reputation, recovery of funds, how to give me, and the whole time, before the inevitable dissolve into logorrhea, the crumbling house, that whenever it is thought fixes on a form, however imperfect it may be, it hangs on, the content of the inner layers, all dissolved, which could be seen and felt but which could be rarely if ever seized. To express in words the sensation, the coloring which lives within a dormant stage, lest I lose the entire thing.
DEAREST MOTHER:

At dawn, as if spread before me like an enormous bronze island, I saw the multiplication of my miseries approaching. A giant serpent, in sun shape. The serpent’s legions tramping up the long walk, their feet kicking up dusty venom. A sense bloomed in flesh that hung from portions of my upper arms and ribs, those reserves whose fundamental assignation is the same joint. A wet hub, whose axle has been hacked away until it moves not, and it reveals nothing: in its wide cut hole, not even envy.

In my hard gum, something’s burning. I sought for a fate I might call the main curse. Something bloody. Rare.

Afternoon. I sat for a long time with the animals as they slept, spreading their bellies to cool on the rock.

I blurred my eyes against incendiary displays in the flowers.

I covered the deck in flowers, the lawn in flowers, my body in the pollen of graves.

I adorned my children with a million star lilies.

I lined thirty puffy peony heads around each grave they made.

I had to monitor the flowers like temples to keep them wet, freed of the old contagion of sin and death. I had to keep petting the graves free of devices.
As Death, I drew a half circle in the earth with my big toe; in the lack I made a rat’s nest, bird-built by my brain’s skull. I surrounded the center in a halo of wails, a wheel of various ways home. Then I stood my heel on it, pushed it into a vessel. I let the blood run out until the earth alone felt some anxiety for what had been absorbed.
To exhibit the dead body to the sea of dead, a medium. The sea both alive and dead. Medium-dead.
FIRST SONG OF THE CONDEMNED

BEING A CHORUS

CARL WANDERER, of the RAGGED STRANGER CASE

*Raised from the Dead, still bearing his latchet.*

CARL I:

Come along, little Omie, to the river and

beg.

I tell you an old story, about John Lewis’s Lies,

how I’s strapped to that awful bloody rock, O me! Oh

my how I begged that feeble Judge, begrudge me not

judge a long, broad-bladed knife w/ which to bury my hand

in mine own side. My father was a butcher! Why, I’m

the butcher’s boy! Old Pal a mine, I sang like a canary in a

cold mind. I trumped the ragged tramp in the vestibule one, sure;

now I’m trump in the haylock, a wise old spade caught

in the stocks with 2 rocks: 1 for the bird & 1 for me. O my Rrruuutthh-

less proclivity for bringing *grande belle death* home again

to death’s own door. O home again that house had a ball

room in its belly far stranger yet inside—Ommie, horribly drownd,

grown big like a bird fit its stomach full of bath. Don’t act at

last like I don’t own the general attention. My father cut

his own boot-soles with the meat of a good fat hand, and I

his boy! With my bell-like mouth and my childlike sense
of abandonment, we’d go down to the mill dam, my Ruth
and I, the ragged. We’d speak a voice so mean, sound like
a shot come out of hollow spring. Do you think it strange,
I wonder, as I wander that spot between the door and I, that
to my house I brought the noose? That I poisoned
the whole roost twice, like a second shooter. God’s decree
that, having not ate my fill four days, I shot the ragman full
3 in the gut, and the bullet in the hall not like a child built,
but a vast cleaver, sliver of iron slung through the door
dug into the ash-hole where the boy’s body used to be;
and she, O! —used to that house awhile, that is to say,
undeluded to its charms, even used to that hall
of love, and she shot, too, like a cold winter
melon, left there to bleed out in rain, rain.
Now I, childless, ruthless, rudderless, famously
condemned, I say, like a dry beggar to a bone, I say
to fate: be kind, join us someday. Some rain. I’ll
leave here in my youthful bloom, only all alone.
All my life left empty. I’m gone. Bye now, bye. Why
I’m a pilgrim; my name is John
Johanna, I say. My name I’ll never
deny, that old pal of mine. I’ll see you
in that sweet bye and bye
TO THE PRESS:

It was July then but years ago. I awoke in my aunt’s room.

Dry floorboard. Fetid wells of guilt. Room cracked under.

Abed. My heelskin scraped away, palms, my dreams were terrible.

Black Axes. A fox lake. Shivers slept over my body always

Veiling itself, working all bonds until they tender, young and hog-hearted. July. Window blew open a lake. Light razoring wall.

I tied a bullhead to the fence to let rot there on its wire. Ash.

Its splint: the mercy one coils in, shame one lies across. Ash.

I jigged for frogs with the mud up my legs. If the sun is a fish, then I’m a gunner. I want to walk with a gunner’s authority:

or a priest. If I get the chance, that’s mercy for me.

I am a fine dark horse.

August-fine, cracking the fields. I stood on the night’s lip: my heels pushed into the sand wet little eyes. I took one little up as a flower from the soft wet path. It bloomed then.
It bit me. The wound flooded,
my whole body is sediment.

To become shame aware, guilty
one works to dislodge it both

from the heart’s wall, the membrane
that kisses the crowd, its custom. One

doesn’t deny a certain foreign mobility,
muscle between tongues, but never

carries one tooth into the next.
Dear Maclay. *Time.* Time fills all holds. When I’m not eating, I’m carving away. When I’m not licking at the hem of the Law, I’m moving among rooms like an infection jumping from one tooth to the next. That’s how crowd works—in the seam, like biting. Wake to some storm, trees destroyed. Ribbons beside every gateway, verminous sky. Rather than attached by ligaments, this is how a body holds itself together.

by Ropes!
My citizens. I am the knot in the grid.
Untie me. Confront me. Bring something
glitchy:

A passage
cannot arrange itself as sanitary
canal water: a glass
through which every-colored eye
projects.
The sentence, the moment when it is absorbed, takes on a liturgical suggestion.

The highest ground makes the best fit, the softest wool the gravest.
Brouillet

Information declares

Paying of grossly excess, allowing

fraud in absent services

Punishment comes

Down in Canal Whoopee
DEAR MOTHER: When I bring a crime home you’ll know it. In the eagle’s gullet, a message waits for me: a royal decree.

Ringed all round the house a crosstree cradles my organs; the gray-eyed birds wait for their chance to make pity on me, to tear fortune a home, to spread out lengths of my legacy on frost. A tree of infamy sprouts a hard germ in my nape. A villain, decked in black silt, crawled over the sheep-fold wall, full moth of bright teeth, the lights that face the way, ringing a single animal.

O holy source animal, whose neck ruptures even before silt hits the wall. My hand already stopping my throat, the valve in the box that shunts forward into a crumbling interior. Even my heartstrings were tuned so fine the blood could not move in me and so flattened like a baby in a love-basket. Even the black clot I muled away thinned its way back into terrible lymph.
SECOND SONG OF THE CONDEMNED

A CHORUS

GENE GEARY II

Swinging

on the corner the street the flat spot the street they perched a hole they let a shelter house dirty
over the spring they let a passerby think it a privy I found it shook into a romance the center
recalled center recalled a fat old carp    faraway old carp I remember
the day a blade cut from the water a disc held from the water so long in front of the sun I thought
it my Annie fair or the cut moon moved it on over well
against my eye my sty eye my memory flattened the cut moon deludes me by dripping eye bath
on the pets dead in the yard I’ll bring it along the dog like a horn of plenty bring them a noise
eats up from the bottom you remember
the place he dug when I rubbed you I ask whose face is this my answer’s met by a demand for
money I can’t reason with money I dream up all told seven cures for my jar but find it’s native I
think about the Adamses’ spring for days but it doesn’t matter I am condemned I am without the
wherewithal where it doesn’t matter I draw a bird on the wing with a scrub pencil over the
moulding I draw a settee with a dead eye on the wall like the same eye I used to squat in the
backyard over the memory hole I die in the morning
forever for the fact of killing my dead wife dead wife dead with a painted face she looked just
like Uncle Sam her painted face decaying under the lazy lights springing on the tiger like a safety
pin
DEAR BOYS

Fourteen years is a long time to be abroad. I was a doctor before I started cutting. There’s a lot to cover, so let’s jump straight in. Ropes is a name I read on a boat, sitting in the slack water for some kid. One fisher, who cries all the time, carries the letter. This sucker makes every room a thoracic cavity. They carry the cutters. The glasscutter and the horticultural cutter and the horizon. You wouldn’t think I had a body, but I do have a lung. I felt it deflate. I left the money in my lair.
In the flexing megacolon, contemporary life comes to a point: a calf springs out of the cursed ground. One eats a share, but the suppliant gut-atrophies like a king. One escapes insofar as one demands it, but the king describes the possibility of immense eating—immensity.
I want to be a legend, too—but for disaster.
DEAR MACLAY

That’s one of the problems with the press team. They don’t come in until it’s too late and I’m past saving. I’m too shot up to fail. I’m too poor to be a nursemaid. Too clotty to be a network. So, what’s left? I can stand by a bed dead-still like a villain. I can creep up to a door with tremendous ease. Oh, you should see the patience with which I descend the earth, how with unimaginable curtsy I kneel at the threshold. If I finish this account, I’ll end with what can be written convalescing in a house of inoculation. A dead house, catching every surprise in advance like ground meat into a casing, a blackened skein intercut with sickness and health. When the machine starts to signal I’m going to bleed from something, that’s a reminder I need God. Once I awoke, a blue angel servicing my wounds, plugging each hole closed with lies: I knew what the creeps were doing. They were prepping me as a larvae host.
Before there was a child, there were angels, flowers and angels, sores
a furnace to my ear,
a thorn in my cheek,
a ferrule the eye
the sty licked clean,
a seed in the lap
of my accomplice, the place
I will not go for glory.
And the Law. A sieve of bad
circumcisions. The same few
sets trapped in an ever-unwinding net,
cancelling out, keeping going,
Only the night I felt in me, lush
as an epidemic conjured of pure
wash.
Pure outrage.
Color of dried blood. The body as much saturated with blood as with dryness, until it fails
to hold and stops looking like itself. I wanted
up on that pike, to be inscribed with its sensational pain,
some fury that same portion in physical.
To become a tree, a walking erection.

I have undertaken vengeance, yes. Kept parlors

Full of dead men murderers

Yes. Finally, proof. Each day’s limit.

Everyday I’m dead.

A Ropes is a limit, death welds the spring

of a noiseless channel. Elections have

weights. Transmission rings round

the new year. The signal in time a line

carries across the water, the door erupts

like any joyous, foamy birth.

I was never ostracized as all that;

I was merely expunged, a patient

Sent back along snake’s head, pushed

out with the wastewater like a babe.
To raze a child like a building, put on trial like a suckling pig.

To glorify this panic like a slug.
DEAR MOTHER

When there was confinement on the property
When there were hogs and source animals, stores
of this surplus, but never only one in isolation
I paint its portrait only mixed
like company, pools of it.
Flanked side by side, laced
Bit by bit in our halls our rooms
Stagnant dock areas, along waters.
Carpets so saturated so as to be unfit
for further use. You might have walked across the river, a stream
on their bloat. Motion sick
What message was in that sliding?
A fungus that ties the beam, woodsoft beam fades away, from wood into fluid the structure of a song—even the question rots in my hands.
DEAR M.

I cannot stand people in my charge, for their proximity.

I love them for laughter. I love them like a pilot

Loves doves. Good for sneering. They love me for constancy.

I feed them a fresh bouquet, every dawn.

Today in furs. Tawny hides.

I kiss their faces and taste pale.

I ate steak. Every meal.

Every winter white leg glowing

inner sores, every household

torments this day. Deny it.

A remnant of torment.

An unspeakable palace.

Every ward, an army on

Every corner a horse image

I can’t see it.

A fractious horse.

That can’t be it.

His mouth bleeding from his gnawing the post.

His flank drips electric light

His ribcage gives birth this century.
Still, I don’t remember this much.

Then a message came to the house.

Ill omens: the weapons, gone. My daughters, 
horrified; the house flexing languidly 
Inflamed peripheries. I fled. The cup runneth 
over the door, my belt. I heard a voice 
say 
I alone seem able of hearing the truth about myself. 
I’m sure. 
I’m sure. 
I’m sure. 
I’m sure.
DEAR MACLAY

Every morning brings a new day. I devote all waking energy to not setting forth, so that in these records failure lists to one side, along the molten river.

Even night is not night enough.
November 1

Not ill. Only desperate.

How do you know you’re not helpless? Is it a secret texture, a zone covered over with incandescent skins like a body rots the woods out a bead of silica stored in a pyx?

Might it glow as when flesh begins to husk out in holy degradation on feast days, all raised and loosened from the bone, light and airy?

Where was I when they sentenced me?

The exaltation of the law to print annihilation. Has that gone.

Before me, the horror of family life.

Like a clog, all children are intolerable.

Even the lowest observer of human atrocities should have arrived at this conclusion before me.
In the presence of crowd, Christ is born and dies at once. It's possible to conceive of scandal in this way: a blur. To break the covenant I have installed. No power to deny it, an interruption that erupts like a femur through a thigh. Still, the future presents a kind of ideal pressure. If all the streets of the City concentrated at its pinprick, this book, a variety of entombment. Before this was an slaughterhouse, it was swampland. Until they let slack the rope. Until the men slipped for cosmopolitan nights out in the fashionable district, hoping the pully hawly wouldn’t only be digging a second latrine. I don’t describe this. I hardly think it. I haven’t a speaking voice, only a hushed valve, sometimes sound of a motor. What is our ship, a manger? No, a whirling stage whose philosophy is a hogshead. I stood up there in front of the prow of retribution, speech weeping my red throat, inaugurating death-time in my tissue, Found me feeling something like I imagine a meat hook feels as it waits for the moment it will penetrate a carcass of clean beef. All tissue. There was a time I used to think about getting back. You weren't born. Standing there in front of that measure like a condemned saint. Only she Floods. Oh Glory! Most sensational of all media. The best eye of them all. How happy I am. And I.
When I glitch,
Even the meat
Knows me then
By warm amplifying lineaments
Knows their even their own
Swoll parts at play
Even their own see me
Then vile and enormous
Enemy, a hemisphere.
A pale host.
In the heart of every city, I fit

an entire atmosphere of fluid,

an erotic cone, even, into which all

messages withdraw; all notions burn

up in the bandaged temple of a spell.

A space for a crowd to fill in.

Imagine the resonance of the whole host, humming

with a mix of electric fancy, something fuzzy.

When I speak of rows of houses being shut up, I don’t mean by courts. Last month was July. You made amends instead of money. I don’t mean by degrees. You coaxed a confession out of me in the manner of a boil.

The malignancy of most closings is related to the openness of beginning.

Something added to the mass that causes it to expand, to strain,
to glitter to the point that it begins to cut itself. The image of amputation becomes even more erotic now—too much, more.
(For M.)

The image of the golden spear.

The heaving of the saints.

The wound

The wound

The wound out of the wounding

that doesn’t heal.

That doesn’t suppose the end.

The whole category martyred,

oozing sacrificial glue

whispers surprising curses

in my ear. Great axe in

a hole in the ear

two holes to nuzzle.

Each way an axe.

One seems to depart

without leaving, a leave-taking

never quite apart; another wants to dig.

The wound that breaks

apart something real

below this history.

The house that closes in

like a doomed ship
on the jellied sea.
That’s what’s coming for me.
A smearing campaign.
That’s what’s coming.

That’s what.
In my displacement fantasy, I'm evacuated to the head of a pin.

Then I set out dismembering the river

of shame I'm inoculating against.
DEAR MOTHER

In this house there are nothing but horses, visitors who talk to me looking in a well, a maggot in every thick port. Into the antibiotic of the Lord, I lunged forth, networking. Radiating hate moved out of me at the threat. In the ballroom where it still reeks of sweat.

I want to rut.

Each blade bears the gland’s Signature,

Blood ripples the air.

I was a lion.

I had to draw heat out of a wet land, pick nits off my skull with a tire

I put my house where the starvation camp had been, sanded

The brick walk.

Compression sand.

It gets into every crevice just like I do.
November 17

Dead awake, I scour the century, every hall a detonation.

This is not a corridor but a tunnel in a crowd. I come to dominate

the weapon room like bloodguilt. I can say that

I have done so with pleasure, but I have come to finish.
THIRD SONG OF THE CONDEMNED, A CHORUS

EDDIE AMMUNITION WHEED

I was born a mule, a mule wet with the light off. My mother took the toothing for granted. The rafters creaked and whinnied under the shame of it. My muleness swelled into a belly. Labor entered the rooms with a lard bucket. The lard in the bucket younged me and younged my coating. My mother adopted the bullwhip for granted. My pink belly distended. I swelled into a hog.

It was hot in the rooms near the boiling fat. I sat in my mother’s room and licked the face off a match. I sat on a raft and soaked my feet fat in the bucket. My limbs gummed and shriveled into two villains. They belled and whistled and hummed at my sides. I sickened, and one marbled and grayed, falling away dreadfully as a robin.

I was born a whale. I crept out at night through my blowhole. I sifted through film and lilies with the baleen. I listened in a reverie to the water hissing, the night complicit in my hugeness.

I put a garden in the night. Lush as an epidemic blooming was my uterus, the lush complicit in my act of hugeness. My mother had me stuffed. My mother with a sign up for sale. My mother with porkfat plugged up my breathing. My breathing with porkfat deliberate as a drum. My skin ribboned. The ribbons dissolved. The ribbons for luck.
TO THE TRIBUTES

What more is there to say. I’ll have no death equal to this private disruption. All trends red in the red red rosewound of debt. My dream family is a small diamond at my throat, justice, a cake I keep in my locket. The family is a horse, well-fed, every inch a muscle rippling alive under a tawny hide: where a fire’s waiting under a cloth to intercede.

Like a hub, the house extends five fingers parallel to drains, the lawn a close full of corpse wood, the light a double of my disuse. These corridors covered with a drive and between them a cedar. From fixed sin to genteel misgiving, the depths probe a sonic eye, evensong sticking like a brick at every slot, a bloody rope-end dripping from every doorjamb, the song not even twice the sky.

My daughters like to tell me about the time the dog bled all over the cistern that eclipses a corner of the lawn; the neighbor’s child ends in the papers. The dog loses one leg in a pyre; the bone loses any sense of its silhouette. This is the day of pain that gets in the way of real reverie. The police come to blot out its shadow.

The faces of the crowd stop looking like themselves.

What does the day do?
TOTAL MOUTH

this City,

where the anchorage is clearly marked,

a swelling offers public output, input to the body.

Open the door, the whole flood flows

a fagot of lit prayers upon you

with sharp points, buckled at two pricks

instead of knees, a cape of sores, a gown

caked with influences, a shingle

up the center like a growl, a grater

ready to divest me of my robes

My house wears a glass

like a tooth enamel it only degrades

Entropy, my hollow friends

Empty the lead out, brothers

Caveat emptor, bros., lest the streets

jam with this radical traffic. I walk between

a crowd, with growing expertise, gloating

about what?

The thing about the past and a person

standing in the dark is that both are great

vehicles for cutting.
I concentrate.

I inaugurate my efforts each moment

anew, so that the interior might be smoothed,

glassed. I’m ready to stick.

Every concentrated minute moves through me going

away like a swift army, touched by Athena,

A regiment, cutting a swath through handsome

country, a bald avenue.
DEAR MOTHER

There is no room for adventure in my life, unless you call sliding down the exposed bank on a stomach such a dream. The bulge in my throat arrives each day, grows each day a new bird in the mailbox. These are complicated allegiances. I covered over fright with a lip. I collapsed, full-length in pock. I stared at stars threatening the City, I tore each nerve fiber from my eyeback until I saw sludge. The dog was there in the mud, his head burst into splatter. Bright rays of anxiety marshaled themselves from each office. I was a terror on myself. I could sleep only at zero. I could lean into a pinhole flexing on the wall of my trauma heart.
DEAR MOTHER

Scar flesh. That is, the body retains what I choose to forget. It pools in places; in others flesh drops away, or perhaps I scrape it away for rotting. The silhouette takes on the darling knob of a bone, all the while the darling cut of a bone. At home, I set up the fame room. Here an actor, here a starlet with a gun in her womb. Here a tramp shuffling off into the ionosphere with a face bashed into mash. Here a striped shirt like butcher’s cloth. Even the veiny little wrists of children get stuck in the tussles and come back denuded and charmed, their faces blushed, their teeth, still sharp from a lack of food, devouring themselves under their nightly gnashing. They spend the rest of the day at the screen door, glaring at me in anger and disgust. I scrape it away with the hard knife. My elbows are blistering. My legs, tubes of water, my lips a juicy wild plum. I see through their milk teeth now, just like I see through this silkworm.
DEAR MACLAY

In the damp land, disregard grew in clusters of gorse, damp tufts of purple heather, odorous and handsome. When I die a medical doctor, let my son mistake my body for a built world, a bullet field for a roaring teen dream. I was entranced. Did I say it? I was entranced, I say again, by the sound of somewhere distinctly else. Among the listeners, a girl, as fair as a Christ, with practiced hands started cutting on the collar of the weak people, the whoopee people. Where is the road on which I can cough apart this dread dream? In my image store, a show choir stirs on the head of a pin, I stand at front in my blue dress receiving every harm that makes cruel the worm bite, a blushed child eating shiny crow. I’ve dedicated my lives to the lives of my children. I dream not of the dog, nor the restoration of my practice. The dog dreams of flesh. A word that circles my mouth like a motherbird, cleaning parasites from my skin. Or a leech in peristaltic joy. On the wall of the canal I poured an onslaught from a scaling hose in crisscross instead of gasoline. I set against the bank with a sawtooth and my ocean liner mouth. I carved my name in it, the name of my fathers before me as a holdfast, headlines. This flight the softness of a hull made of wasps. The children’s names I sank in mud.

Capacity! The word itself unfolds with the brassy gleam of fantasy.
DEAR BOYS

When I die, sing me my memory.

Put on my great coat, entropy.

Bury my body in the blue sea.

Let out my boundless crime.
FOURTH SONG OF THE CONDEMNED

A CHORUS

LLOYD BOPP I

*Swimming in it.*

Three days

without a cure-all.

Three days

molar impacted.

On the second I called for a fist of lambshank.

We split it open, a bird flew out.

On the third I called for a sequence of lovers.

My wife came in and snatched at the bird with a curious lamp.

She was so gentle. I watched her.

She brought them babies down to yon cellar.

Brought them fifty steps and three, till they were all dead

and drunk as me. Lead on I said. Make it shake I said.

Let’s go under.

We stretched open the mouthtrap of the Earth with a crank

curious, until the jaws sang like metal. The gums burgeoned

aboveboard bloody aboveboard, and we looked on them

as on an emerald robe, a moss curtain. We tucked ourselves

warm under the Earth’s lid. where it was dirty.

You raised your arm. I kicked you in the ribs.
You said hello. I kicked you in the ribs.

Now you walk in a way that your arm’s betraying you.


You appear hours late. And he doesn’t flatter, with fast hands, grown fatter. Say I’m not gonna say my right name.

*Oh parrrttner.*

Say my name is Sam. Old iron face, thick as a plastic hymn and his browdown mother and her vision pretty as glass. But she won’t quit talking and you think it the sun. Say my name is John Johanna.

Say I never knew a grievance till I moved to Arkansas.

I never knew the difference until my burying day in this, what is this. A hog capital. A cold place.

Say this is the hole, the centipede.

Be calmed. Be birthed as a multiple.

Big as a furnace. I could use a furnace.

Say I got so thin on mercury and weak tea I could hide behind the steam. If you see it whistle, I’ll cut you off a paw.

I’m heading back a shovel spade to lie in Arkansas.

Yes. Yes.
I didn’t believe him the reverend I wanted to bleed him the second the orderlies did what I wanted to gift him I grieve him like a picket up the bank did go did I it was on the brow I struck him through he grew big in the face like a furnace melted in the free and easy season a rose grew up snaked up rose up like smoke from out of his fertile brain I wanted to be him the death’s head having been long away I curtsied with my limbs fair dangling in the desperate air having been fast asleep they struggled to right me before the trap door I listened they balanced I didn’t wait she played the fiddle I purred like a villain they balanced I didn’t wait she played the whole bower into a kitten
WANDERER III

Well, I copped it. Sure, I did it. I had two guns, one for me and one for the killer.

I got all dressed up. I went down to the bluff to watch the bells filter into the river like bits of slag.

I laid out back in a hammock after she was gone and made like to read in the garish sun.

But I faked it.

The sky appeared.

The morning gathered into a raghop boar fish.

I couldn’t shake the slimy as a sole.
DEAR CITIZENS OF EVERY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

I am Ropes O’Brien. I come to you on a vessel filled with gold. I come to you in courtly dress holding aloft an arrow decked twenty-six notches, one for every man I sentenced to death. Surely, the wind-birds told my story. Are you not staked also in the floor of this slaughterhouse with two pegs and two awls? Am I not shut up in my rooms with no chance of reinstatement?

I see beyond this asylum only a narrow strip of a land. I have come with my red diamond and my professional deportment, my various accouterments. There is no reason to cry out now. This is the day the Lord has made for our comeuppance.

I remain your humble servant.

Ropes
DEAR HOYNE

I didn’t receive your letter until this afternoon, and now I’m stopping to eat. Fair enough? To say I'm involved is to say *play fatal*. This is a group for whom slaughter and sloganeering proceeds in a continuum with the world of mass panic, through pools of urban refuse. Garbage. I’ll tear the slings out too. The flaw of refuse, or chatter, like that of film, is that it cannot make this crowd the whole focus. It always wants to cover other things.

I regret that the gateway was interrupted in the course of its issuing forth my own advancing column; and if fluid be the last course of my mental acuity, then I shall call upon that gateway to once again behead me, to leave a hole there from the sun like one left from a lit cigar.

Though my body is pressed into a wound in the trail, filled with gnats, though my height be not equivalent to the terror that approaches, the weight of the blow fixes on the temple I dream, the spread eagle of my brain’s team. This is my seam: the sneak-through what bleeds over; always leaking.

ROB
DEAR HOYNE

I’ve never been able to talk to you as though you were a political scandal. My family absorbs me too much.

Leave me be. Be gentle with my proxy.
DEAR HOYNE

I think of my thirst as a room with a locked door, and behind the locked door are the good things. The river rises. The river bifurcates the City like an elaborate spine, the intestines hanging from it, cradled warm and safe by the stomach muscles, the water, an elastic cage, consecrated and cheered by a host.

When I think of my spine, the river rises. The river rises full into view. When I hear the sentence, I arrange the marks along the teensy ribs of a sunfish. I swell up that I might yet slip away.
DEAR BROS.: There were periods during which I desired to be wounded, to sicken to the point of death, to live in exile inside the loom. Do not forget this profusion of spells, how like a corpse the night is when I speak to it, the rope tied round the moon’s horn, the stars gaping like a greased mob.

I say to the crowd, I’ll give you up the lash. Give you up mine!

I hear the voice of someone I dislike lodged in my throat. Each day reads like a new year.

Old pal,

old pal. You left me alone

every day I’m last.

No one left to meet me.

No one left to greet me.

It’s an empty wall.

A plurality of weak pests.
DEAR HOYNE

The first time I felt the clot shuttling forth I was moved, overcome by signal, butterflied like a dead bird fixed like heartbreak on a cooling board, the nails run home.

I couldn’t wait. On the first day, I dressed for disuse—No, the desert: all beige, beige all over and my hair slicked back from sleeping on it. I held myself in places with a piece of pot metal. I put wet towels over the cracks of our discovery so we could live like live bugs and not have to think about sequence or black garb. Through a ghost town, I walked menacingly, singing “the slow process,” as to a crime not yet approached.
DEAR HOYNE

When the world’s fair came, I could think only of rivets. All the time I thought about riveting. I couldn’t wait to see the tight face of rivets on all the girls’ pin-up curls or hear the death screams of wounded animals. I thought I might never make the frame room or the hot dog room or the cathedral of erotic doom. But the City itself began to be visited at this point, both by harbingers of the coming experience and by the black cloud, each of them faces looking to undo me like a tide undoes surfaces, or glamour lubricate an image, as, for example, a blue filter punctuates a verdant latrine.

When the greedy feeling was with me, I circled the fair like hot air, raining down my erotic wash from the rooftops in gooey omens. I lived for these historical exceptions. Even now, expositions are the only keepers of understanding for me. They go into every home, just as I do when the parlors are lit.
DEAR HOYNE

There are mayflies here. In the rooms. Many mayflies, teeming in an intricate floret around my eyehole. Each wing a ligature, a bond between a false sick field and this field of memory.
DEAR MOTHER

Here we are then, having arrived. I won’t settle. I’ll play a role in the mothering of my nation. I’ll be the fix maker. Here a child tore from the caves of his mother and fell into love with an intertexture, a network, which by light touch its disease communicated. The mother called a child, a signal: a child stuck a razor into the bush like a horn in the black sand and made a pit. “Ward off, mom.” He bayed. “I’m excommunicated. Heretofore I’s a weapon. I’ll flicker in the night, even as I suffer in the brig. I resettle every dawn. I want to hold a hot rivet in the crook of my house, feel it burn right through the fatback before slinking around the last rosette of my king snake. I want to do everything dirty again inside a few localized brain areas. With two heads on the wrong neck, and each neck subject to a sentence. The sun cooks every hole. As if it were the right spot to die under a mound, as if it were meaning in it. As if it were the right way to move under the curved cave of the mouth, the capsule. The nook in the cathedral where the eyes of the host bleed bleed bleed. Where a spine shoots out every neck. Give us the horn, then the knee in the viscera. The cape, a horn in the bollocks. She rubbed a cape of blisters against the rock, mesmerizing it. Rubbing it raw. From above, the sound it makes is jangle. A bull arose up blue-gold, a bar illumined along a shoulder-blade. Blades buckle with the wet. The sound is bells. Across the smooth of the rind all skin now boiled globes of blue pus. Here a child, then a function. Here a small bell rings in fulsome flourish reporting birth.
DEAR BOSS

All the world sure loves small children but not as much as I love prosthetics, since they, unlike so many frilly tributaries, never cease challenging their master. There was a time when I used to think of dripping lye into my eye, but mostly I want to do away with my left side, the hoof between hell and heaven, a signal bell one can take to the grave, especially below the knee.
DEAR HOYNE

I want to cut off my left foot where the action is. Where the hole is. When the blooms on the honeysuckle line blow out, like siege engines among the kids, that’s when I’ll say enough.
TRIBUTES

I’ve not been in the street but in the top office, preparing violent episode. The time came, as was its wont. I lit out of the house into direct air. I dashed into my head. I carried on as if I were a boy, a first body. The crowd circled, sent out a third ring to caress me, a massive one. Each time I met the public it was like walking into a cloud of gnats. I lived then like a picket, a pickaxe lodged in the bright, split-open toe of the public host. How I got out alive, I cannot tell, but here I am.

The Ropes
DEAR WARD

You ask about these things. Why we can’t touch each other instead of furnaces. What book of the Bible I like best. Why everyone has blood in their mouths and pieces of the seam. Why the kids are crushing figs with small rocks instead of amphorae.

This is the season; this is the see-through and you’re still my ward. Are we not thinking now of a holy day, the feast when I’ll touch your arm under a hush-hush, move like a horn of plenty under the knit surface, next to the swell veins, which part for me like high-end hair?

I should be fitting you out.

I belong to a luminous germination.
DEAR HOYNE

I’m thinking about my cartilage shredding itself, slitting itself within my joints, about having my body sliced into infinitely-thin planes like horses, so that each one may be stored, meat traced in detail, until each section, gummy as slice of cured meat, betrays me and the blades shatter my noxious interior. I did this once to a hoof without much agony, or abandoning yourself.
DEAR MOTHER

Allow me to explain needles. You’re only seeing the bleed-through, not the cinema. I was thinking “wicker” when it became “whooping cough.” I love my whoopee more than all other forms of luxury. When I close my eyes, it’s fabric. It’s fish. A fist beating a slicer. I was let down by a lady we all love. She’s crabby most of the time but looks like she could beat me into a new mule. I hated her even before I started with the make-believe. Even before I started making birds exclusively out of her hair I gagged on.
DEAR SEA

I like your vertebrae like that. I want to lick them. I want to suck all of the big stuff out of them. I would chew that even as the sun defamed me.
DEAR WARD

All burns.
DEAR WARD BOSS

I sleep. A few twitching motions begin to appear. Blood fills the breast of the Lord-hole, with the bloom of a child already birthing forth, the chaos of an oral cavity. I dream of the dog, I can’t believe it. Not a woman. Not the bird in her throat, but the dog in the wound. I got a dog act. My specialty is brain injuries. Soft as it is. As I look back, everything I did seems curiously sensual. First, I left the church in a muscle, then I thumbed my way to the sitting horse.
DEAR SEA

I covet you all over my flak jacket.
DEAR WARD

Then I had the shingles. They cut up a river from the small heart of my back where I can’t reach. I thought it was my pelvic wall unmeshing but I checked and the wall was still tight as a purse. Instead it was the shingles coming out to play a little. I bite down on a chair leg and the leg gives a little under my milk teeth. This is how come I know about static.
DEAR HOYNE

I will have the pleasure to take revenge on me. I dream dog. Not nerve lace. Not bird throat. Dog Dog in the wound. I got a dog act now. My specialty is endgame. It’s a sin we don’t have a few rooms left for crushing.
DEAR GUARD

She has been with me, crawling across the floor these few hours, the whole time. From the corners of his mouth, thin rivulets of steel massed themselves inside a salon. Albert, I called to him, the young. I'm not going to talk about that anymore. As my assistant, please visit the bank. Bring a grinder.

The Young.
DEAR HOYNE

I don’t like it here, except when they treat me like vermin. Then I eat and eat and wake up dead on a blanket in the woods.
DEAR DOG

I want to leave and go home, and I want home to be a warm burrow in tar. And I’m going to sweat from my genital zone. I’m going to sweat from my violence hole. I’m going to sweat from my grievous tank. I’m going to sweat from the stump where the rubber cap is dried into uselessness. I’ve had a major event. But I’ve got to keep blooming away. Don’t let a slack face get in the way of this honorable party.
DEAR MOTHER

I’m beginning to hate the ward like the army. I can’t sleep for all the gnats in my gash place. I made a detail of my body forcing my other body to feed. Instead of sleep I think of taking two or say three vertebrae and making a stock.

Benefit the season.

ROPES
DEAR DOG

The police are doing nothing now. In the mirror appears the glaze of their scout faces, all of them ironed on. The LORD is in my sex act. Beat that.

The Lord
DEAR MOTHER

The backfield bleats
The sea proceeds
The hillsides ripple with breathing
I feel my own coat wet and gray.
I talked to a man who holds some rank in the town
His children grown, I attribute no way his conduct to my own destiny.
I am hungry and omnipotent I cannot see
it looks like we will be here forever

ROPES
DEAR HOYNE

It is you who should squeal—not I.
DEAR DOG

Don’t touch me.
Don’t touch me.
Don’t touch me.

I’ll be good.
It's fair. The day is.
It rains. Tell me
It far

Tell me!

Tell me!
Tie me!
Tie me!
Necktie me!
Test me!
Kiss me!
Sell me!
Keep me!
Kiss me!
Fix me!
Lick me!
Like me!
Leave me!
Drive me!
Five me!

See me! Stake me!

Teach me! Take me! Give me!

Make me! Blow me! Hold me!
Sue me Show me Throw me O
me! Do me!
Woo me! Who me! Shoot me!
Save me!
Grave me!
Love me! Lull me! Lend me!
Mend me! Miss me!
Bill me! Mill me!
Film me!
Find me!
Bind me!
Time me!
Buy me! Eye me!
Ply me!
Pay me!
Slay me!
Wake me!
Make me! Write me! Fight me! Cite me! Wipe me!
Want me!
Forty!
Fuck me!
Touch me!
Tease me!
Suck me! Stick me! Pick me!
Lick me! Nick me! Tape me!

Tap me! Dick me!
Duck me! Tuck me!

Tease me! Beat me!

Birth me! Ease me!

Please me! Meet me!
Greet me!

Kill me!

Dare me! Spare me!
Meat me!
Marry me! ?
Bury me!

(beneath a ?)

Fail me! Feed me! Eat me! Need me!
Toast me! Ghost me! Host me! Hit me!
Hang me! O Hang me! I’ll be dead
And gone! Hang me!

Hail me! Sit me! Bail me! Bit me!
Ring me! Sing me! Bring me! String me! Roll me!

Rope me! Catch me!

Hatch me!

Watch me! Wax me!
Wine me! Time me!
Let me!
Bet me! ? Mind me!
Blind me! Buy me!
Might be! Tie me!
Cry me!
Help me! Kelp me!
Welp me! Belt me!
Felt me! Melt me! Pelt me!
Pet me!
Set me!
Tempt me!
Turn me! Fan me!
Burn me! Ban me!
Spurn me!
Spell me!
Yell me! Phone me! Loan me!
Home me!
Hymn me!
Hum me! Him me
Humbly! Humbly! Pray.

Jolt me!
Jilt me!

204
Pup me! Pulp me! Pull me!

Shock me!
Sock me!
Sick me
Kick me!
Cock me! Clock me! Lock me!
Stop me! Cop me!
Keep me! Carp me!
Kill me!

Kill me!
Kill me!
Kiss me!
Kiss me!
Kiss me…!
Kiss me—

Call me!

Call me?

Call me

ROPES
ROPES
ROPES
ROPES

205
DEAR SEA

I want to die on top of you.


Graevenitz, Antje von. “Duchamp as a Scientist, Artifex, and Semiotic Philosopher: His Notes


Photograph [exterior doors], Étant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau, 2° le gaz d’éclairage . . .


Photograph [interior tableau], Étant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau, 2° le gaz d’éclairage . . .


