

ONE

Unworking

THE FAILURE OF WRITING

THE SHAME OF THE TEXT

What is this madness that must be excluded (tragically) in order to constitute our culture, the modern West? It is nothing else, Foucault replies at once, than “the absence of oeuvre.”

—Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*

This book is about secrets and failures, so it is unsurprising that it resisted its own writing. As Eve Sedgwick has pointed out, we are deeply susceptible to the shame of others, and it is shame—at the depths of humiliation and subordination—that I take up here; shame, the various kinds of failure occasioning it and occasioned by it, and the ability to find in that failure a strange, secretive, and curiously resistant pleasure. To speak or write about what is shameful, many authors agree, is to risk doubly shaming oneself, adding the subject matter to the shameful imposition that characterizes all speech, acknowledging one’s own complicity in the act of embarrassing oneself.¹ We cannot even be sure of speaking truly: “To risk making truth,” writes Virginia Burrus, “is . . . also to risk perjury.”² Our words are too many and never quite right, and we are not even sure whether what we are telling is truth-making or embarrassed elision. It is as if, deeply uncertain that we are interesting, quite sure that we talk too much, we nonetheless had to say. “The writer,” says Maurice Blanchot, “finds himself in this more and more comical condition—of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it.”³ What necessity compels such repeated failure?

I begin with the suspicion that humiliation and failure are entangled. The necessity that seeks each one is driven by will, and knowledge, and the will to know.

The necessity that they recur is driven by the impossibility of that will's perfect satisfaction. In the first chapter following, I explore the question of obedience, making use of the lives of some exemplary ascetics as well as Michel Foucault's work on pastoral power. Perfect obedience not only demands an extraordinarily strong will, but also presents an unsurpassable paradox—from which much of its interest derives. That in the will and the flesh which eludes even the most determined obedience will elude knowing as well. The second chapter, on auricular confession, makes use of some of the same Foucauldean theory, but also of work from Georges Bataille's theories of speech and sacrifice, to explore the strange infolding by which the construction and undermining of the speaking subject occasion each other. The effort to know the depths of the confessing subject turns those depths inside out, leaving us to suspect that they were in fact flexible surfaces—and that something remains, unsaid, however thoroughly we try to unfold them. The will to know and our ability to say what we know run into a mystery, a secret. The secret, we begin to see, will not allow us to hold on to a sense of self with a clear inside and out. Just as we necessarily fail to obey perfectly, so too we are unable to confess everything.

The third chapter changes senses, turning from sound to sight. We hear ourselves speak; we do not see ourselves seeing—but as part of our urge to know, we may well want to. We especially want to know what is “inside,” but this will elude us just as a stable interiority does. The gaze on skin is not enough to know the flesh; various probing means attempt to know more by opening up the skin, but here too we may document a range of failures—not least in the desire to turn the gaze back and understand the seeing self. Again, we run up against an unknowable, against what remains beyond knowing; we run up against a remainder that seems to evade even the most thoroughgoing knowledge.

Obedience, confession, and exhibition cover a considerable range of humiliating pleasures, but by no means all. Chapter 4 therefore considers a range of roles by which we may deliberately abandon autonomous dignity as the measure of being human, in favor of roles ranging from fool to furniture. The secrets of the will, the self, the flesh, and rational humanity all entice us, as secrets will. But they are able to do so in some measure because they also elude us. Each of these practices and performances tells us that there is a mystery, a resistant remainder to remind us of our failure.

In what follows, I have not distinguished between shame and humiliation. The distinction is sometimes made, but I have not found in the particular cases I explore that it holds up strongly (this is not to imply that it might not hold up elsewhere, especially where no pleasure is involved). In this respect I am inclined to agree with Martha Nussbaum, whose philosophical work on shame has been widely influential: “[H]umiliation is the public face of shame. . . . [I]n most cases to inflict shame is to humiliate.”⁴ I want to know, however, what happens when the one humiliated has fully sought out shame.

A HISTORY OF FAILURES

The tendency of a person to allow himself to be degraded, robbed, deceived, and exploited might be the diffidence of a God among men.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Though they were little spoken for a long time, by now I hardly take up these themes of pleasure and shame on my own. There are whole movements already. Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* alerted us all to a range of playful possibilities, and I draw extensively on it here.⁵ Earlier, David Halperin and Valerie Traub introduced the anthology *Gay Shame* with an essay called "Beyond Gay Pride." Gay shame, they declare, is for those who "feel out of place in gay pride's official ceremonies: people with the 'wrong' bodies, sadomasochists, sex workers, drag queens, butch dykes, people of color, boy-lovers, bisexuals, immigrants, the poor, the disabled," whose marginality or overt sexuality "can be a cause of shame."⁶ The gay shame movement, as Jennifer Moon writes in the same volume, "provides a radical queer alternative to consumerist pride parades and as such helps constitute a queer counterpublic. . . . A specifically queer counterpublic would, following Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, reject a politics of assimilation and instead foster an independent, sexually rebellious ethos of antinormativity."⁷ This entails not shame about being proud, and not exactly pride in being ashamed, but a sort of defiant joy in shame and the shameful, in failing to be proud in the proper ways, about the right things.

Counterpublics engage in what Foucault calls "counter-conduct"—a term characterizing the behavior of those who resist modern governmentality, and so modify the strategies of discipline and normalization imposed upon them.⁸ Lynn Huffer argues for eros as such a contestation, one that fights the reduction of life to scientifically quantifiable bios. Biopower works by imposing norms; eros resists them, emerging "as a new name for an unreasonable, corporeal ethics of living in the biopolitical present," an unsystematic, nonnormative, and occasionally surprising ethics.⁹ Can the pleasures of failure be erotic and ethical, too—ethical, and resistant, startling, and surprising? Can they be these things, and still fail? Can we be humiliated by these failures, and still take delight? My affirmative answer to these questions unfolds over the following chapters.

It is particularly difficult to lose neither shame nor joy in the other, not to be so proud of embracing shame that the shame vanishes, nor so humiliated in rejecting pride that we lose all joy. Shame celebrates the exclusion and marginality that pride fights, and we already suspect that there is something perversely sexy about it. But it cannot be unequivocally celebratory: that's pride again. It is too easy to recenter stubborn, edgy shame, and, in celebrating without hesitation, turn it into its own sense of pride—losing in the process the defiance and excess, the perversity and pain that brought the joy in the first place. "Shame" movements easily and

understandably become demands for a wider circle of pride. Considerable stubbornness is required to keep failing; to, as Halberstam has it, make “peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal.”¹⁰ For all the defiant effort that it takes, pride is a little bit easier. But failure, it turns out, is interesting. And shame attends only where we are interested.¹¹

Even before the recent interest in shame, there were traditions that valued it, and valued its attendant pleasures of subordination, confession, exhibition, and deliberate disempowerment. The Greek Cynics (like the much more accepted philosopher Socrates) saw themselves as living out truth—in their case, by a devotion to that truth above and against all convention, and an insistence upon following only it. Their way of life struck most, however, as decidedly discordant with reason. Cynics were ascetic,¹² but more famously, they were also eccentric: the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope was said to live in a tub, wear only a cloak, and embrace bronze statues in the winter. In warmer months, he was even less well behaved, having no hesitation about urinating or masturbating in public.¹³ He is also said to have gone through the streets carrying a lantern in bright daylight, with the claim that he was seeking an honest man, and ordinary illumination had not sufficed to show him any. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche adapts this story, writing of a madman who carries a lantern in the morning, seeking the god we have killed. Like the Cynics, the madman is the object of jeers; for Nietzsche, he is wiser than those who laugh.¹⁴

Others seek to shame the Cynics, but in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius calls the Cynics “shameless”: they are not only willing, but apparently eager, to endure rejection and laughter.¹⁵ In this, they offer an odd precursor to later quests for humiliation: the Cynics delight in the humiliating responses they generate, but there is no indication that they seek thereby to humble themselves, as later Christian monks will. Nor is there an indication that they indeed experience shame. Their cynicism is directed toward those foolish enough to disdain their behavior.

Still, they remain of interest to those intrigued by both social norms and bodily disciplines. Michel Foucault describes a Cynic who “has suffered, has endured, has deprived himself so that truth could, in some way, take body in his own life, in his own existence, take body in his body.” Citing this passage, Mark Jordan points out that Foucault is paraphrasing the Christian Gregory of Nyssa, who in turn “is describing a Christian Cynic (and who relies on the incarnational tropes of Christianity).”¹⁶ The Truth, for the Cynic or the Christian or the Christian Cynic, is divine and fleshy, not factual; the will is subordinated to it by refusing the demands of willful flesh so that the divine (will and all) can take that flesh as its own. Flesh is only disowned so that it can be re-owned, and better. For ancient Cynics, the standard of truth is reason. But in Christianity, that standard may come to include not only humility, but actively sought humiliation, on the model of a crucified god.¹⁷

In another failure of reason, Christian Cynicism is taken up by the holy fool, one who appears absurd by common standards. Holy folly originates in monastic asceticism, with its rejection of the trappings of pride and worldly success.¹⁸ These fools deliberately court public contempt, sometimes by encouraging misperceptions of themselves as criminal¹⁹ or insane, though in some cases the latter perception is arguably accurate. (“If the sacred walks along the borderline between the social and madness, what can you do?” asks Catherine Clément. “If one of its functions is to cross over, how can you stop it?”)²⁰ All push the monastic quest for humility into a quest for humiliation, for which the appearances of criminality and madness are excellent sources.²¹ So too is scandal—the cynical saint Symeon tied a dead dog to his belt, overturned vendors’ carts, feigned seizures, harassed churchgoers, and associated with outcasts, actors, and prostitutes. Onlookers were horrified, despite the fact that he evidently retained his chastity—though chastity might strike few of us as his primary issue.²²

“Cynicism,” Jordan goes on to say, “presents a series of breaking points at which philosophy must confront its own inconsistencies. It is a carnival but also a race to the limit.”²³ Holy fools subvert not only convention, but submission: their carnivalesque “freedom” from all social constraint pushes the limits of obedience to a considerably more difficult imperative. Cynicism is resistant to the norms that constrain others, but it is under the strict constraint of obedience to the more abstract demands of an ethical truth—with its edge of the unknowable. The holy fool obeys not even a moral imperative, but the impossible demand of holiness.²⁴ This demand for something more, for greater difficulty, is common to those who seek the pleasures of failure, who may find it impossible to fail by ordinary standards.

That stricter obedience characterizes the lives of many other Christian saints and martyrs, too; here again, humiliation is often deliberately sought, and eagerly written afterward. This gives hagiography a prurient appeal that has been noticed, and condemned, for a long time. As David Frankfurter points out, hagiographic narratives often appeal not just to eros, but specifically to a perverse eroticism, a “sado-erotic voyeurism.” The positioning of pornographic violence in hagiographic context “allows the enjoyment of erotic display at the same time as the disavowal of that enjoyment. . . . It also allows masochistic identification with victims’ eroticized brutalization and dissolution.”²⁵ The increasing scholarly interest in these bodies does not meet with Frankfurter’s approval. Citing Tertullian, he asks, “Why should it be lawful to see what it is shameful to do?” Frankfurter extends “the question to martyrology itself, in which bodies—often erotically charged bodies—are imaginatively put through sexual display and graphic torture for a frankly prurient gaze.”²⁶ Precisely here, however, our interest lies: in what is shameful, and in what is at best in uneasy relation to what is lawful. Rather than disavowing either the eros or the perversion, rather than turning our intellects properly away, perhaps we too can learn from these triumphant failures—instead

of repudiating the pleasure and sublimating it into a rage against the martyrs themselves, as Frankfurter argues was the primary effect of such texts.²⁷

More avowedly sadomasochistic eroticism has seized on humiliation as well, from the texts of its titular figures onward. Several of the libertines in the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* rhapsodize on its delights. The banker Durcet, in a precise reversal of Tertullian, declares, "Nothing more logical than to adore degradation and to reap delight from scorn. He who ardently loves the things which dishonor, finds pleasure in being dishonored and must necessarily stiffen when told that he is." Joining in, the Président de Curval reminds the group of the tale of "the brave Marquis de S***," who ejaculates joyfully when he finds himself "at last; covered with opprobrium and infamy . . .!"²⁸

Like many after and, undoubtedly, before them, Sade's characters wonder about the cause of the "undisputed facts" of shameful pleasures. Curval explains that the soul is changed "once a man has degraded himself, debased himself through excesses;" then "from the state in which one is when one has ceased to blush, to that other state wherein one adores everything that causes others to blush, there is no more, nor less, than a single step." The ways of such shameless people cannot be mended, since they will only enjoy any punishments inflicted, an "enigma above all else" that we must suspect pleased Sade greatly.²⁹ That this is the sadistic perspective is already evident, however; the masochist or submissive who has ceased to blush will find humiliation at best uninteresting, and this will be uninteresting to the sadist in turn. What these characters' delight suggests is that the sadist who retains interest in shame must work to avoid its characteristic contagion, delighting in it without feeling ashamed in turn.

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch is likewise invested in humiliation, though his take on it evinces less delight in the paradox. Though *Venus in Furs* contains a range of small humiliations (my own favorite is Wanda's insistence that Severin travel in a third class rail car),³⁰ the greatest come when Wanda enjoys the attentions of another lover in Severin's presence, and encourages this second lover to whip him: "I almost went mad with shame and despair. What was most humiliating was that at first I felt a certain wild, supersensual stimulation under Apollo's whip and the cruel laughter of my Venus, no matter how horrible my position was."³¹ Here the arousal through humiliation is even more humiliating than the initial shame. Perhaps worse still, Severin may be ignored: "I served her at dinner, she ate by herself, but had not a look, not a syllable for me, not even a slap in the face. I actually desire a slap from her hand. Tears fill my eyes, and I feel that she has humiliated me so deeply, that she doesn't even find it worth while to torture or maltreat me any further."³² Failed visibility and visibility as humiliated tangle themselves together: if Severin did not suspect that Wanda enjoyed ignoring him, he would find much less of both pain and pleasure.

Sade and Masoch are less distant from the martyrs' stories than we might suspect. Masoch compares himself to a Samson brought low by the beauty of Delilah.

One of the four libertines of the *120 Days* is a bishop, and in general Sade loves to populate his texts with clergy.³³ No doubt the entanglements of the sacred and profanity are more readily acknowledged from the side of the latter. I think, though, that we do well to recall a point raised by anthropologist Michael Taussig: “[D]esecration is more than the inverse of the sacred or of sacrifice. Something more complicated than inversion is going on.”³⁴ In desecration, as he hints, perhaps we find a sacred reenchantment of a world that has become too mundane.

RUNNING INTO LIMITS

He did not at all want to consent to suffering, but he was detained . . .
by Limit . . .

—*A Valentinian Exposition*

Desires that pull against pain or displeasure are often about testing the limits of our capacities, whether or not those limits are understood as physical (almost always, they will be experienced physically in no small part: even the resistance to speaking is strongly felt in the throat, the jaw, the tightly pressed lips). They are pleasures that try to break from the limitations of words in opening the spaces between them, from the limitations of flesh in embodying sensation, from the limitations of desire belonging to a subject. Burrus asks whether shame might be inherent to finite creatures.³⁵ As finite, we are constantly frustrated and humiliated by limitation as we run up against it—and stubbornly pulled to what we know is not knowable at all. The play of limitation and excess appears throughout humiliating pleasures.

Anne Carson points out the “inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can.”³⁶ Both desire and the desiring self arise in failure, and failure arises at the limit.³⁷ “Words have edges,” Carson points out. “So do you.”³⁸ The edge that forms identity is sharp enough to open desire: “Infants begin to see by noticing the edges of things. How do they know an edge is an edge? By passionately wanting it not to be.” Desire, made at an edge, is made to fail—and is made, we realize, in stubborn opposition to knowledge (we know an edge by desiring a dissolution).³⁹ The very limits that make us may also unmake us, as William Robert points out: “[P]assion binds its subject—one subject to passion—to a limit, but enduring at that limit entails a subjective dis-integration or de-formation, thanks to which this subject is no longer himself or herself and, therefore, no longer fully self-knowing or self-determining.”⁴⁰ Limit, after all, is not just finitude but definition.

Excess is outside (or, rather, it is not within) the limits of knowing; it is a mystery, a secret. I have used both of these terms, rather than one or the other, to allow me to draw upon a wider history: literary and queer theory tend to use the

term secret; theology, though not without exception, mystery. “The excess of the secret is marked by a disproportion for which no progress of knowledge could ever compensate,” Pascal Massie writes of Blanchot. “The secret cannot be measured; for a measure encompasses what it measures, while it is proper to the secret that it exceeds any knowing.”⁴¹

This may sound odd, since there are all sorts of secrets that we can know. Taussig writes of “public secrets,” things everyone knows, but everyone knows very well not to say, in realms ranging from deeply traditional religious rites to contemporary politics. There are what I think of as everyday secrets, bits of information, usually about people, that are shared only among a small group. The demand that they not be shared beyond that group may have penalties ranging from quiet disappointment to, if the information is, say, governmentally classified, imprisonment. There are data that we know must be there, as in a natural science, but that we haven’t yet found. But there is also a sense of secret as mystery.

Mysteries, in the history of mystery religions, are traditionally secrets not to be told to those who are not initiated. In the *Symposium*, Plato deepens the meaning of mystery. After laying out the lesser mysteries of love, Diotima (who is, we must remember, an invention of Socrates) teasingly remarks, “Even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated into these rites of love. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly—that is the final and highest mystery, and I don’t know if you are capable of it.”⁴² Whatever this highest mystery might be, then, it won’t be accessible to reason, at which Socrates is masterful—it is a mystery that taunts him with the humiliating likelihood of failure. “Diotima” leads him, and us, through the ascent from lust for a single beautiful body to *philosophia*, the love of wisdom itself. Yet Socrates is a brilliant ironist. In his Diotimatic drag he surprises us by going beyond the love of wisdom to a higher or better object still, one that in the perfect simplicity of its beauty eludes exact description.⁴³ From that which is guarded from telling by the constraints of rite and rule, the mystery becomes that which is guarded from telling by impossibility itself. Even Socrates’s presentation of it harbors an impossibility: he creates the very speech in which he acknowledges his inability to understand what he is saying. Eros must lead us to failure, and in failure’s intermingling with pleasure and desire mysteries stir.

Even speaking becomes excessive—out of the bounds of the subject who speaks. Bataille writes, “Not that one must or could speak . . . , but it speaks . . .”⁴⁴ The authority of speaking is self-expiating; it is never mine, as Socrates’s use of a surrogate already shows. The “it speaks” likewise characterizes what Blanchot calls “the neuter,” which precedes speech yet murmurs within all speaking. Massie writes of the neuter as something like a mirror image of the secret; we might understand the latter as pure interiority, and the former, harboring nothing, as pure exteriority. He adds, “The neuter, as secret of the secret (‘which is no secret’) is beyond meaning, pointing both to the limitlessness of language and to the limit

that gives rise to meaning.”⁴⁵ The “it says,” unsaid by anyone, surrounds the unsayable, unknowable secret. This means that the kernel of the possibility of saying, the neutral murmur said by no one, is itself not sayable. There is no secret if secrecy means inside with no outside; there is no meaning without what exceeds it.

The difficulty of saying is pronounced in failure and humiliation. We cannot easily claim what shames us—nor, in many cases, the closely overlapping set of what we find exciting. Such expression encounters the difficulty of pornography, which is also an effort to reveal excitement, to portray arousal in hopes that it will prove as contagious as shame. The language of obscenity is as difficult, as resistant, as that of confession. Bataille writes in *L'Abbé C*, “It takes energy for [the priest] Chianine to raise his skirt but even more to speak of it properly.”⁴⁶ Reader, writer, and fictive subject all resist even as they push on. Language betrays us: it will not do what we want it to do, and yet it tells, in its stutters and gaps, the secrets that we spoke in order to keep.

The reluctant shame to admit or to reveal is a pornographic commonplace, in tension with the pride in displaying the desirable body. Related to this reluctance is inadvertence, the claim that what is revealed would have been resisted had those represented known about it. It is not unusual for works of pornographic fiction to include avowals of their reality, as if to reassure the reader that this too is something we were not quite supposed to hear, something overheard or reluctantly told, with a blush still in it—or manifesting an astonishing shamelessness, rather than simply a vivid imagination. Likewise, the viewer is assured that an impressive percentage of online and other visual pornography is amateur and thus, presumably, a little shocking, a little embarrassing, in its display of those not jaded or hardened by the profession—those who cannot simply leave a sense of the personal behind and act altogether professionally, so that their arousal and expression must somehow be “real.” Of nearly equal popularity are claims of successful voyeurism, implying that those displayed would be shocked and embarrassed by the use thus made of their images. Each attests to the desire to catch something revealed rather than something created to make money from revelation—innocents who know no better than to show themselves, or the even more innocent with no idea that they are on display. It is true that a great deal of what is available is at least amateurish, but equally so that the claim of inadvertence is often, to put it gently, exaggerated. It is perhaps even less likely to be true, on grounds of imagistic composition as well as legal liability, that all of the caught-by-surprise voyeurism really does show its subjects unawares. What the popularity of these genres suggests is that we want to feel as if there is something still a little naughty here, a little bit forbidden; something someone ought not to have been doing, some gap in the deliberate display of the self. The resistance is in and to the revelation; what is revealed is its failure. When that failure is successfully sought by those revealed, however, something stranger still must be at work.

Halberstam begins *The Queer Art of Failure* “by addressing the dark heart of the negativity that failure conjures.” She turns to “the happy and productive failures explored in animation,” but then back again “to darker territories of failure associated with futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming,” which “allow for the fact that failure is also unbeing, and that these modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge.”⁴⁷ One reason we cannot say secrets is that we cannot, in any of our customary senses, know them; in secrecy we must be in a very different relation to knowledge. Among the most important of the excessive desires at play is just this desire to know; among the most important of our failures is that of knowing. We are not always humiliated by ignorance (one hopes), but we may seek the failure of knowledge through a quest for humiliation.

WHOSE FAILURE?

T'es qui toi, t'es qui moi?
 T'es pas qui, t'es pas quoi! T'es qui toi, t'es qui moi?
 Mais toi, t'es qui? T'es quoi?

—Rachid Taha, “Tekitoui”

Mirroring this unknowable, unsayable failure is a correlation between power and knowledge, and even a mutual constitution: we know in order to have power; we have power in order to find out. A comprehensible, graspable world is a more readily governable world. As Jon Simons summarizes, “[P]ower can only be exercised over something that ‘techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse’ were capable of investing in.” Political power requires that we make people and populations into objects of knowledge.⁴⁸ If we turn ourselves to what avoids being known, we may fail, but we may also resist.

But who are this we? A counterpublic that courts failure and troubles identity makes itself and its members difficult to identify. Yet stubbornly, like Jordan, “I want the possibility of an embodied authorship that can contest power by writing across assigned identities, their privileges and inhibitions.”⁴⁹ The unsettling pleasures of humiliation do, certainly, take identity as among the elements unsettled: like other painful pleasures, they can induce a shattering of the sense of self, from which a return to the selfsame is impossible. So I interpreted several such pleasures, many years ago, and I do still think that there is value to disturbing the sense of a too-steady, securely established ego—the value of an identity that disturbs identification.⁵⁰

But this is not altogether unproblematic. Stephen Bush, considering the possibility of a Bataille ethics, phrases the concern nicely: “[W]hereas a good dose of self-negation could be just what is needed for individuals at the top of the

social hierarchy, whose agency needs to be restrained, it could be precisely the wrong thing for those already marginalized or repressed.”⁵¹ Kent Brintnall points out a recurrent and related queer concern: if we delight in undoing the sturdy, nicely bounded, self-directed ego, we risk offering delight only to those who are culturally positioned for such strength in the first place. If these twisty pleasures belong only to those whose privilege—in class, race, gender identity, able-bodiedness, and more—has already smoothed out many of the daily challenges that others face, then these pleasures don’t resist anything; they just reinforce those normative conceptions, offering one more thing to which only the privileged have access. To value them seems to ignore those for whom incoherence is a less chosen reality. It seems, even, to turn against the needs of some particularly vulnerable groups.⁵² Writing of the urge for shame in early Christianity, Burrus remarks that her students respect

the yearning for transcendence, transformation, and freedom . . . evident in those . . . texts. But they resist . . . transcendence bought at the expense of the shaming of the body (above all the sexual body), transcendence that produces the flesh in and through shame, inscribing it as a matter of shame—the shame of matter itself. Many of them do not fail to note that women, sexual and racial minorities, and the poor or uneducated seem to carry more than their fair share of such shame.⁵³

Burrus herself both takes note of the concern and fails to resist the yearning, a delicate doubling.

And this doubling, however delicate, is essential to understanding these pleasures. Brintnall points out that what is at play may be something less obvious than we think: not the existence of sturdy egos, but the cultural value placed on them. “Western conceptions of autonomy and dignity generate strong affection for the coherent self,” he points out, and so long as those are affections are strong and those selves are normative, are what we are all *supposed to* want, there is value in undoing and resisting them, value in valuing otherwise.⁵⁴ This seems to me accurate and important, as an argument both for a political edge to shattering pleasure and against the queerer-than-thou urge that occasionally runs through politics as much as through theory. Following Foucault’s claim that the analysis of power is an analysis of the ways in which individuals are made into subjects (who may be subjected), we might also suspect that failures in identity and even selfhood are again modes of resistance; they need not presume a clearly identified subject in order to make it problematic. I have come to suspect that we might do better to begin not with the a priori subject who chooses, but with the directions of desire, including paradoxical directions (pain, submission), and impossibilities (succeeding at failure). Failure, as Ellis Hanson points out, “renders identity politics an inexhaustible resource for shame.”⁵⁵

And failure does more. Like madness, it cannot quite be expelled from reason, remaining as “the unsettling force that puts the subject into question.”⁵⁶ Huffer points out that Foucault’s *History of Madness* is “the story of a split that produced the queer.”⁵⁷ The split between reason and unreason is both constitutive and resisted. The exclusion of unreason, she adds, is also “about the internalization of bourgeois morality which produces, eventually, the ‘fable’ of an inner psyche, soul, or conscience.”⁵⁸ What is perceived in this fable is an interior, the place where we look for the secret truth of the subject displayed on the skin. In inside and out, as each complicates and refolds, something remains of the other. With the effort to expel it, the tragic dimension of being human is pushed aside as well, and all pain becomes a problem to be solved by science.⁵⁹ The unreasonable, however, continues to haunt the rational subject. It remains.

Phenomenologist Jacob Rogozinski theorizes this unknowable other-in-self as the *remainder*—a slippery concept, an attempt to conceptualize precisely what eludes, cannot be caught up, or will not stay in place. He writes, “The remainder is the untouchable of my touch as well as the invisible of my vision and the inaudible of my hearing.”⁶⁰ It cannot be encountered. Our means of knowing, “inside” or “out,” are frustrated. The distinction itself is threatened. Rogozinski reads the remainder as a constitutive, necessary impossibility at the heart of the self. The I touches upon and is touched by a strangeness, a break—but this strangeness, this throwing into question, is constitutive of it rather than transcendent to it, as the will begins in a fracture, as the self begins where an edge is cut into the world, or as late antiquity argued that God is found within those who are not God, as their own centers. In the beginning, there is multiplicity. The heart of the I is broken. Rather than being tidily harbored, the remainder would necessarily rupture, or disrupt, the neatness of the self’s boundaries. The edges of the self are jagged and uncertain.

Rogozinski suggests that the embodied self demands both an enveloping flesh and an opening to the world; the envelope is perforated. But we have to hold on to the sense that in the beginning is the break; there is no primary integrity. Rogozinski’s understanding of openness includes the possibility of incorporation, taking more into the self, even enlarging it. But it includes an unbearable vulnerability too—the impossibility of excluding with sufficient force. We may literalize the remainder as small separated and abjected bits of ourselves, objects that can excite both desire and disgust; we may project it in hate or in love, in an effort to exclude.

Julia Kristeva, for whom remainder is likewise theoretically significant, writes in *Powers of Horror*, “Remainders . . . pollute on account of incompleteness.” This concept of incompleteness is essential, she adds, to nontotalizing thought.⁶¹ Pollution links the remainder to the object—the impure that is nonetheless crucial to any possibility of purity, the pushed-aside that haunts the center.⁶² We reincorporate the remainder constantly and incompletely. At heart, our hearts are restless.

These three entangled constructs will emerge repeatedly in the discussions that follow: the interior, the secret or mystery, and the remainder. The interior is never wholly nor securely enclosed; the secret that it seems to harbor is never quite there, but neither is it somewhere else to be found. Something remains and resists, and without that remainder, the enclosed self, which the remainder seems to break, would not be at all.

The identity of the self is in play, not at base. It is fairly common to defend unusual choices in pleasures by appealing to freedom of choice: even if a choice might displease us, we are obligated to respect the autonomy of the chooser. Paradoxical desires and pleasurable failures undermine this option. Does this undermine their value?

“The value of some aspects of historical gay identity . . . have been diminished or dismissed with successive waves of liberation,” Halberstam warns. “Central among these is the association between homosexual love and loss—a link that, historically, has given queers insight into love’s failures and impossibilities (as well as, of course, wild hopes for its future). Claiming such an association rather than disavowing it, I see the art of losing as a particularly queer art.”⁶³ The queer embrace of failure is both aesthetic and political.⁶⁴ Halberstam suggests “that there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner.”⁶⁵ Bringing down the winner, do we win instead? We do not: the queer art is far subtler.

WORDS FAIL

For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up.

—Job 6:3

“Free me from the too-long speech,” writes Blanchot, fifty pages into *Le pas au delà* (*The Step/Not Beyond*).⁶⁶ Blanchot’s style here is fragmentary and aphoristic, each little speech brief in the extreme. Success! But he repeats the line on page 137, and now we wonder—if he was becoming concerned eighty-seven pages ago, what must be happening now? The line is typical of Blanchot: concise to the point of opacity, yet just translucent enough to be almost endlessly provocative; self-reflexive (the imperative is exemplarily brief), epigrammatic, enigmatic—and almost prayerful. In his repetition, Blanchot awakens in us an uneasy awareness that no speech, no text, is quite short enough to be safe. It would be safest not to speak, not to write. Perhaps he has failed, after all; perhaps despite their brevity those aphoristic bits have accumulated until he worries at their excess. Perhaps that particular request is one that *must* fail; maybe every speaking is too much, somehow, already—and not enough, either, too, again. In excess, and too limited.

In theory as in practice, religious history has important connections to the unsayable pleasures of paradoxical shame. The negative or apophatic theological tradition, denying the ability of language to grasp anything about “God,” declares instead that we can only use words to say what-God-is-not, or, in many versions, that-God-is-not. Western negative theology traces back at least to the Platonic “One” that Socrates’s creation Diotima sets forth in the *Symposium* as the object of the highest love—not a body nor a body part, she says; not “one idea or one kind of knowledge . . . not anywhere in another thing”⁶⁷ Negation might take the form of simply defining very narrow limits to theological language—insisting, for instance, that such speech must be analogical, or approximate. As a rule, though, such language courts failure. Apophasis, literally “saying away,” is focused upon the necessary failures of speech, but its attitude to those failures is not one of discouragement. Words are used *so that* they fail; so that, in reading them, we are struck by the hints of what exceeds the grasp of saying, peeping through the gaps where words cannot perfectly mean. Such indirect expression serves as a reminder of humility, since it emphasizes that human concepts and words are inadequate to divinity, no matter how powerful the intellect that produces them.⁶⁸ We sometimes find warnings against using words at all, given our temptation to prattle on once we begin to speak: “So be silent, and do not chatter about God; for when you do chatter about him, you are telling lies and sinning,” Meister Eckhart sternly warns in the fourteenth century, channeling Augustine from the fifth.⁶⁹

But theirs is the less common perspective—and in fact, neither Eckhart nor Augustine is short on words. The paradigmatic negative theologian in Christianity is probably the fifth-century author known as Pseudo-Dionysius, who joyfully piles up the names of God, delighting in the revelations created by each new failure to designate the divine. Those images may harbor more than one mode of negation. They may negate simply by saying not-this. But they may also be “negative” in the sense in which we speak today of a negative attitude; that is, they may say that God is worthless, or other bad things. In fact, declares Dionysius, the shock of saying unattractive things about God is great enough to make those associations even more revealing than positive ones: they show up our inadequacy all the better.⁷⁰ If we say that God is a worm, then we are not so tempted to try to work out the logical accuracy of an analogy as if we say that God is a flower.⁷¹ Unsayings inheres within saying, as a failure essential to the possibility. For Pseudo-Dionysius, nonsensical seeming images that appear to be humiliating to the divine allow “interpreters of the secret wisdom” to “keep [it] undefiled.”⁷² This is nothing so simple as the presentation of special facts that the best people keep for themselves; rather, it is the interpretation of what nonetheless is and remains mysterious. Language that sounds nearly contemptuous is appropriate to its own inadequacy.

This interest in the failure of words is taken up by literary theorists and extended beyond descriptions of divinity. For Blanchot, writing is bound to fail,

and that is just what it should try to do. “Express only that which cannot be expressed. Leave it unexpressed,” he instructs in *L’Attente, l’Oubli*.⁷³ The “worklessness” of writing, Ann Smock points out in introducing Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, does not call upon a writer’s strength, as if she could gird her mental loins and confront failure successfully with her sword-surpassing pen. Instead, it “calls upon . . . weakness, the incapacity . . . to achieve anything at all.”⁷⁴ It’s not just that writing is very hard to do successfully, but rather, that what it does—no matter how successfully—is to fail.

This literary tradition is perhaps best known through Samuel Beckett, who famously mutters in *Worstward Ho*, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”⁷⁵ As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit point out, this is a text that seeks its own failure, gradually divesting characters of identifying attributes, sentences of completion and structure. It aims worstward, never failing enough. In fact, “The text would appear to be concerned with little more than obstructing its own progress.”⁷⁶ A proper failure of writing would be “to fall permanently into silence,” but in this, Beckett fails to fail.⁷⁷ His writing never quite manages the “unlesenable least” that would be “best worse.”⁷⁸ One of the central paradoxes of humiliating failure emerges: to succeed is to fail at failing.

It’s hard to accept failure, even better failure, and Beckett’s epigrammatic line has been bizarrely taken up as a mantra of success—keep trying! A better failure is a success! (Or, at least, it shows us the way to the success! Try more! Fail heroically!) It is hard to overestimate how appalled Beckett would likely be—or perversely delighted, perhaps—by seeing how completely his own remarks have failed. They fail, in part, because they are cut short. *Worstward Ho* in fact continues, “Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good.”⁷⁹ As insufficiently uplifting, this more thoroughgoing expression of failure fails to make it into the popular culture of self-improvement, of always seeking and looking after one’s own interests. Apparently, even Beckett can be reappropriated for entrepreneurial enthusiasm, but his texts offer us still more strongly a resistance to that constant boosterism.

Closer than corporate mottos to Beckett, Blanchot, and apophysis alike is the queer embrace of failure with which we began, an embrace that does not refuse its dark ineffectiveness, its weakness—the depths of its powerless shame. The very term *queer* begins its political and theoretical life apophatically, as an attempt to name a defiance of categorization. Queer failure is necessarily embarrassed, necessarily tangled up with rejection—and older than we might think. An image of shame lies behind the famous phrasing of Alfred, Lord Douglas, who wrote, in 1891, of a dream in which there appears a beautiful sad youth calling himself “Love.” A much happier and more outgoing youth, however, declares this name false: “He lieth, for his name is Shame . . .” The happy, shameless love adds proudly, “I fill / The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame,” and the sad replies, “Have thy will, I am the love that dare not speak its name.”⁸⁰ This shameful Love,

refused its name, is nonetheless the love that Douglas prefers. In another poem, he declares, “Of all sweet passions Shame is the loveliest.”⁸¹ It is a bit embarrassing to see such a surplus of sentimental sighing. But it is just a bit of an embarrassment, too, to feel this fondness for shame drawing us in, ashamed and embarrassed and desirous ourselves.

Language, like shame, is contagious. Language, said Laurie Anderson in the 1980s, is a virus—a notion she may have taken from William Burroughs, who suggested novelistically that language began as an extraterrestrial virus that lodged in the throats of prehumans, mutating from biology to information.⁸² This is disappointingly unlikely, but language remains information and biology both, and as both, it travels across us, (sub)vocal vibration and conceptual sharing. Failures of words belong necessarily to bodies as well. Jordan quotes Foucault: “Really, writing tries to make the whole substance—not only of existence but of the body—pour itself out, through the mysterious channels of pen and letters, in the minute traces that one deposits on paper.” As Jordan drily points out, “The effort cannot succeed.”⁸³ This might be some part of the reason that it matters.

Bodies even more than words are frequently, inadvertently ridiculous, and it is embarrassing as well as delightful for language to depend upon our physical capacities. Failures of words and failures of flesh, as I shall try to show, are quite caught up in each other. The relation between word and flesh can be itself one of failure; as Jordan reminds us, bodies resist the legibility of writing.⁸⁴ Bodies are not quite legible and not quite speakable; like the divine of the negative theologians, they cannot quite be read, nor quite known. They cannot quite truthfully be said, in the face of constant contestation; they are all the more difficult to say because the theological, the literary, and the queer are entangled together—and are an embarrassment sometimes to one another.

Speaking is an exposure, though apprehension regarding it is unevenly distributed. Some people seem, even, to be eager to speak. Perhaps they feel exposed insufficiently: “In the beginning,” says Jacques Derrida, “I would like to entrust myself to words that, were it possible, would be naked.”⁸⁵ Derrida might be among those for whom the imperative to truth is especially strong, those who must speak or be faced with their own sense of dishonesty. Perhaps others are sure, somehow, of their right to occupy the aural space. These experiences of speaking confront little of the resistance that Blanchot voices. Few of us in or out of academia today can quite manage Blanchot’s wonderful pictorial reticence, but we may well ask along with him when it comes to language: Free me from the too-long speech. Allow me, even, to remain in the innocence of silence, not to speak: to remain whole within it, and safe, as if wholly inside myself, keeping secrets. Yet the pleasures of failure show us repeatedly that neither inside nor self is undisrupted. Shame attaches to the need to speak, to impose—to the desire inherent in language, to the fear of the body convulsing there on the page rather than

proceeding to the conclusion at a stately pace. It attaches to words' inadequacy, to our inability to make them say exactly what we want them to, to our inability to present our bodies just as we think they ought to be. The pure, blissful freedom from the too-long speech, from too-much saying, would be silence, were it not for the perverse urge to say the silence too, to lay out the body on the page.

We want the safety of silence because we accept the imperatives of words. All language use responds, says Michel de Certeau, to "an infinite volition," an "inner yes." In fact, he declares, "to say is to want."⁸⁶ The infinity of this volition is most marked in what he calls "mystic discourse," language in which desire is especially bare, and words especially likely to fail in reference. This affirmation is not so distant as it seems from Beckett's crystalline pessimism, Blanchot's self-effacing imperative, or Halberstam's queer and resistant art. Between body and body, word and word, word and flesh, desire moves, and desire—like the Cynic or fool, saint or martyr, sadist or masochist—is indifferent to reasoned measures of success.

One reason that desire is so obvious in mystic discourse and apophatic speech is that such language must try to say what it acknowledges must be unsayable. Mysticism and perversion alike are suspended in this pair of tensions, to reveal and conceal, to say too much and to respect silence by trying to keep it.⁸⁷ Every speech is too long, and insufficient.

BARE TEXT

One ought only to write when one leaves a piece of one's flesh in the ink-pot each time one dips one's pen.

—Leo Tolstoy, with Aleksandr Goldenweizer, in *Talks with Tolstoy*

Too long and too little, speech sins by saying at all and by its failure to say what it seeks. We are returned to my opening concern, to the shameful of writing shame. Stretched between excess and inadequacy, hyperclarity that reveals too much and illegibility that cannot tell what it wants, words try to place upon the page the body's excessive desires. We find ourselves, as soon as we try to say any of this, at an impasse. It is not by chance that Blanchot writes so often of mystery and secret, of silence that can neither stay unsaid nor be well spoken. We cannot expose the secret; it eludes the grasp of our words. Our urge to exposure, as much as our failure, can shame us.

The more words we pile up, the less we are able to hide behind them, as if, using them and using them up, the writer gradually and paradoxically laid herself bare. What's more, we are uncomfortably aware that the dramatic display might reveal a bareness that no one is very interested in seeing. As Derrida writes, "As soon as I leave a trace, I have to ask for forgiveness, because I imply, I assume, that it is interesting. . . . And then of course, there is guilt and I'm ashamed."⁸⁸ We are

exposed, ashamed, and unable to deny our responsibility for this intrusion on the world. Against the constraint of brevity, one pushes on: one has spoken too much, already. There is little to do but fail more (“fail without fail,” says Blanchot).⁸⁹

Michel Leiris (like Blanchot, a close friend of Bataille) “cites a sentence that Picasso said to him: ‘Reading poems in public—it is as if I was being asked to strip in front of everyone.’”⁹⁰ For Leiris, as presumably for Picasso, an exhibitionistic streak is not quite enough to keep this possibility from being horrifying. Against the urgent desire for silence and shelter, though, we sometimes find the perverted pull and pleasure of the risk. People do, after all, read poems in public. People do strip. In perverse and ascetic pleasures, we find an effort to bare, but one that fails again.

Milo Sweedler writes of Colette Peignot, who wrote under the pen name Laure: “Leiris and Laure seemingly agree that communication and nakedness are intimately related, but whereas one wants to keep his clothes on, the other would strip herself bare before the world.”⁹¹ What complicates this binary, and makes it far more interesting, is that Laure’s sense of shame is no less developed, and no less entangled with words, than is Leiris’s—only differently complicated by desire. In fact, Leiris’s autobiographical writings suggest that they are perhaps not even all that different; the lady only doth protest a bit less.⁹² Leiris, Laure, Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida—even Picasso, as a poet—are all writers; their very bodily, tangled-up erotic shame is also the shame of speaking. “[L]anguage is always involuntarily ridiculous,” Bataille remarks, in his novel *L’Abbé C*; “that aspect is deliberately obscured: which is the reason for all the subterfuge, the circumlocution, the ‘tricks’ serving to disguise the horror that disarms one’s pen.” In this text, Robert, the titular Abbé, stutters to speak what is shameful, because it eludes words and because we would rather it were still more elusive, that it kept itself out of our speaking altogether. “[A]n unspeakable shame was perceptible apart from the sentences that were lying; it was perceptible directly: in the feeling I had of a suffocating silence. For that silence was so precisely what Robert wanted to say.”⁹³ To speak of it is no less awkward than to silence it. Either one fails.

Complete truthfulness is impossible. The unsayable does violence to words, echoing in them as a reminder of surplus and tragedy. Certeau writes, “Thus, in a thousand and one different ways . . . the sayable continues to be wounded by the unsayable. A voice comes through the text, a loss transgresses the ascetic order of production, an intense joy or suffering cries out, the sign of a death is traced upon the display windows of our acquisitions.”⁹⁴ The unsayable secret is kept in mystic discourse, apophatic theology, obscenity, and the language that struggles to theorize them all. “What if philosophic writing—or philosophic writing so far as it is resistance—is more like a convulsed cry than voluntary speech?” Jordan asks.⁹⁵ And cries are limit-sounds, voice at the very edge of sense: “Foucault’s longing to record these sounds—he crouches again and again to hear them—is always

checked by his conviction that they occur at the limit of language. They resound in the place he sometimes associates with the poetic but also with the holy.⁹⁶ What if we try to take philosophy to the limit where it must be poetic, holy, obscene, and wholly corporeal, to the truth sounding only in the frustrated, wordless humiliated cry of failure?⁹⁷ The sense of the cry must register imperfectly, in the incompleteness of truth. In it, a mystery remains unsaid, but it may yet register, and the arrogance of trying to tell it may leave us ashamed. Shamelessly, we cannot help but try.