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THE MIDWAY REVIEW

A Journal of Essays



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The Midway Review publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Winter 2017 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult midwayreview.uchicago.edu.

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THE
MIDWAY REVIEW

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The athlete is the tragic hero of modernity—he strives to perform the impossible and comes impossibly close to succeeding.

Art is about longing; about nostalgia, in the serious sense of that term; about re-making and reordering what has been un-made and scattered by time.

It is a liminal object, both strange and deeply familiar, straddling the realms of life and death.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

The essays in this issue of *The Midway Review* emerged from hours of rigorous discussions in a small room buried deep within The University of Chicago's Brutalist library. Despite this taxing process, these pieces convey the joy of writing—of trying out an idea, parsing it out in an approachable medium, and playing with language until it flourishes. It is easy to become estranged from this joy when battling deadlines, paper prompts, and the weight of countless expectations, which is why we feel strongly about sharing these essays with you. We hope you will be refreshed, as we are, by the way these pieces combine inspired ideas and good writing to make art.

In the following pages, Ariella Carmell seeks to repudiate the shame of femininity by examining poetry that is both universal and intimate; Jack Calder takes up a Marxist critique to ponder the meaning of the modern Olympics; Rosemarie Ho interviews University of Chicago creative writing instructor Brian Booker about displacement and narrative; and Anna Christensen dissects her fascination with meat as a vegetarian. Our carefully curated selection of *Punch* cartoons will accompany you as you peruse the work of our authors, for we strive to enliven your curiosity with an added touch of whimsy.

—The Editors

Her Body, Her Voice: Poeticizing the Period

Ariella Carmell

The most overt message I received in my youth was “don’t talk about your period.” This was my first acquaintance with pure disgust targeted at the female body—in elementary school, the boys on the playground asking a friend of mine point-blank if she had gotten her “punctuation point” yet, before wrinkling their noses and running away. The poor girl blanched and bowed her head in shame, though she was not even guilty of their charge. Apparently, I was: I was the only girl in my fifth grade class to have begun menstruating. I said nothing.

Ariella Carmell is a second-year in the College majoring in Fundamentals.

For years, I marveled at, while still participating in, this culture of silence. There was a boggling notion that we needed to use asinine codes to even mention our periods; Aunt Flo, the Red Scare, Shark Week, and so on. My father and brother—grown men—couldn’t even bear to hear me talk about my menstrual cycle without yelping, “Gross!” At the same time, it was these men made this monthly event the focal point of my life by inquiring if I was PMSing whenever I felt irritated, as though male discomfort was the only domain in which anyone could speak of it.

The uterus has been made a synecdoche of the woman herself, and yet historically many cultures have considered it filthy, unspeakable. In some, menstruating women were kept in tents, separated from their communities in the vein of lepers for the duration of their cycle. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, when a woman suffered intense nervousness and malaise, the cause was linked to the unmooring of

the womb. This treatment has caused a crisis of dual self-perception: if so much of women's experiences and identities revolve around their reproductive system, which is seen as grotesque, taboo, how can they express identities independent of these judgments?

One question we must consider is, why is this particular female trait so suppressed in male-dominated discourse? When I have asked men, they tend to mumble responses such as, "Bodily fluids in general are just pretty nasty." While I'd agree, I see no embargo on images or descriptions of vomit or urination. Nor do I see universal fear directed at blood in itself: look at any movie screen, and you will see countless examples of revelry in its copious depiction. Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, puts it rather bluntly for such complex verbiage: "Menstrual blood...stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference."¹ To Kristeva, the period exists beyond the symbolic order of the visible world, our shared framework of representation, and thus propels horror in the few that witness or hear of it.

1. Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Web.



You came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature...

recognition amidst ignorance is a disorienting concept. And in their disorientation, they are nauseated.

Yet I have always looked beyond this nausea and found menstruation a compelling feature in the social construction of womanhood. In times when women were denied a coming-of-age ceremony, the period was seen as the marker of the transition from Girl to Woman, because she could now have a child. Is this all it means to menstruate—a newfound relation to men, no longer as child but as child-bearer? There must be some deeper significance to menstruation, something not informed by the way the men view us.

In my quest to understand my unease in this supposedly revolting womanhood, I looked to poetry. I have always considered poetry the best form of writing to convey a distinct mode and cadence of thought, which is why it often comes off as formless or willingly abstract: our best understandings of own trains of thought are often tenuous at best. Yet this form—constantly shifting, bound only to individual rules—ideally suits the inexpressible. Womanhood, as a concept, has been marred and defined by societal suppression. There is almost no way to speak of womanhood without taking into account its injustices, judgments, and expectations: the sense of "otherness." No way to determine a true "essence" of the concept, if one exists. There is a clear idea of what a woman should be, but not a conception of what she is, or what she could be independent of these societal expectations, because she has historically been denied a voice.

The poet Anne Sexton, in particular, felt to me to have her finger on the pulse of contradictory womanhood—the socially prescribed, "othered" womanhood, and the more personal, visceral womanhood—gleefully taking an unsparing look at all she had been told not to talk about. Viewed (reductively, in my opinion) as a counterpart to Sylvia Plath, Sexton lived and wrote throughout the '60s and '70s and writhed under the constraints of housewifery. She began writing poetry as a means of catharsis, and became associated with a crop of writers deemed the Confessionalists, along with Robert Lowell and John Berryman—known for their vivid accounts of mental illness, alcoholism, and trauma. Nearly all of its members

dismissed the term. Berryman scoffed, “The word doesn’t mean anything. I understand the confession to be a place where you go and talk with a priest. I personally haven’t been to confession since I was twelve years old.”²

2. Stitt, Peter A. “The Paris Review.” *The Paris Review*. The Paris Review, n/a. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

I too dismiss the term “Confessionalism.” Speaking about the issues everyone faces day-to-day but often choose not to discuss should not be considered a “confessional” activity. These writers are admitting to no sins. Yet this term is particularly problematic for women, who are subject to arbitrary social restrictions that isolate them for their female-centric experiences. These norms are why it is shocking to talk about abortion or miscarriage, even though these events occur frequently.

This repression is why Sexton, along with Plath, is considered the female parallel of the Confessional movement, and received harsher criticism of the subjects of her work and general way of being. Whereas Lowell’s and Berryman’s mania and depression were seen as signs of untrammelled genius, Sexton’s stints in mental institutions and her dependence on alcohol rendered her sloppy, a failed woman. Though much of her work revolves around her manic and suicidal tendencies (she killed herself by carbon monoxide poisoning in 1974), she also wrote in depth about sex, menstruation, masturbation, pregnancy, and abortion in a time when those concepts were primarily expressed through shudders rather than words. In a *New York Times* review of Diane Middlebrook’s posthumous biography of Sexton, Katha Pollitt writes, “Male sexuality might have been a shocking subject for serious literature at the time, but at least it was acknowledged as a subject. Female sexuality—Sexton’s other major theme—was just trivial and embarrassing.”³

3. Pollitt, Katha. “The Death Is Not the Life.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 17 Aug. 1991. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

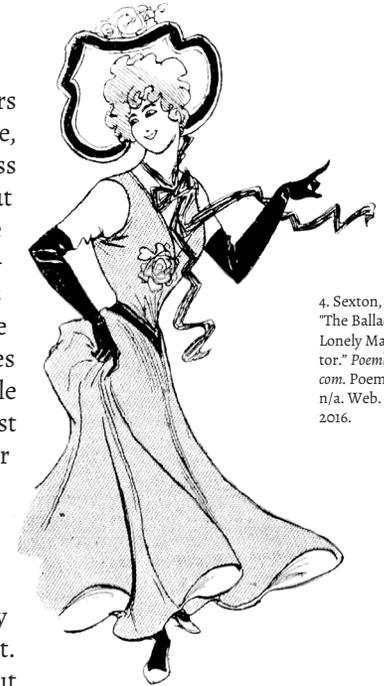
Sexton’s unflinching descriptions in “Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,” are still shockingly intimate:

*Finger to finger, now she's mine.
She's not too far. She's my encounter.
I beat her like a bell. I recline
in the bower where you used to mount her.
You borrowed me on the flowered spread.*

*At night, alone, I marry the bed.*⁴

Whereas society at large considers the woman’s body a source of shame, Sexton revels in it. Her poems possess the delight of a teenager railing about radical politics at the dinner table without overt political terminology—simply writing about these topics was a revelation at the time. The revolutionary nature of her work makes it feel especially derivative to pigeonhole Sexton as a mere Confessional just because her poetry centered around her own body. She does not speak about the female body in broad, feminist terms; instead, she uses her own as a landscape over which she discusses her elations and anxieties, which only happens to be considered a feminist act. The Confessionals wrote openly about the traumas of the psyche and taboo subjects for the time, and while some (such as Allen Ginsberg) seemed to possess an intent to shock the conservative bourgeoisie, most simply opted to write about what felt most personal to them, and not necessarily in a remorseful way. For instance, in “In Celebration of My Uterus,” Sexton writes,

*Everyone in me is a bird.
I am beating all my wings.
They wanted to cut you out
but they will not.
They said you were immeasurably empty
but you are not.
They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong.
You are singing like a school girl.
You are not torn.*



4. Sexton, Anne. “The Ballad Of The Lonely Masturbator.” *Poemhunter.com*. Poem Hunter, n/a. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

Sweet weight,
 in celebration of the woman I am
 and of the soul of the woman I am
 and of the central creature and its delight
 I sing for you. I dare to live.
 Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.
 Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.
 Hello to the soil of the fields.
 Welcome, roots.⁵

5. Sexton, Anne.
 "In Celebration of
 My Uterus." *Poem-*
hunter.com. Poem
 Hunter, n/a. Web.
 22 Nov. 2016.

Stripped of the Confessional mantle, Sexton clearly appears to engage in a tradition that traces back to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" a century earlier, which found inspiration in the body. Now, one could say Whitman is a progenitor of Confessionalism, but, to me, he possesses none of its darkness or tortured self-analysis:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
 And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

*I loafe and invite my soul,
 I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*

*My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this
 air,
 Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and
 their parents the same,
 I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
 Hoping to cease not till death.*⁶

6. Whitman, Walt.
 "Song of Myself
 (1892 Version)." *Poetry Foundation*.
 Poetry Founda-
 tion, n/a. Web. 22
 Nov. 2016.

When set beside "Song of Myself," Sexton's "Celebration of My Uterus" feels neither dissimilar in tone nor aggressively radical in content. There is nothing "Confessional" about expressing love for one's body: as Berryman said, a confession arises from a sense of wrongdoing, and Sexton never adopts such a tone. She proudly claims all her faults, all the aspects of her form—even the ones that her society deems distasteful. She has nothing to confess. In "The Black Art," she takes a tongue-in-cheek look at her motivation to

write:

*A woman who writes feels too much,
 those trances and portents!
 As if cycles and children and islands
 weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
 and vegetables were never enough.
 She thinks she can warn the stars.
 A writer is essentially a spy.
 Dear love, I am that girl.*⁷

7. Sexton, Anne.
 "The Black Art." *Poem-*
hunter.com.
 Poem Hunter, n/a.
 Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

This poem is an object lesson in female expression because it is aware of the expectations placed on women at this time period, of what she *should* want, versus what she knows she is. Such consciousness differentiates women's writing from men's writing, the frustration at the gendered limitations foisted upon one in society. In calling herself a "girl," she recognizes her yearning for more than what is "never enough" makes her seem childish in the eyes that determine success: On paper, she has it all, everything she is supposed to want. But as has historically been the case, that hardly suffices—she wants to write, to unleash her torrent of feeling. Through works such as these, Sexton unapologetically asserts her individuality, while still acknowledging the societal factors that have played into her self-awareness.



After Sexton broke barriers for writing about women's lives and issues, there has been a tendency to label all women who write openly about their bodies and sex lives as Confessional or as following in her footsteps. The poet Sharon Olds is an example. Olds deftly explores every angle of her life, meditating on

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love and sex and the development of the body. In “After Making Love in Winter,” she is keenly aware of her inner self after participating in an external act:

In the mirror, the angles of the room are calm, it is the hour when you can see that the angle itself is blessed, and the dark globes of the chandelier, suspended in the mirror, are motionless—I can feel my ovaries deep in my body, I gaze at the silvery bulbs, maybe I am looking at my ovaries, it is clear everything I look at it is real and good...⁸

8. Olds, Sharon. “After Making Love in Winter.” *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n/a. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

Here, her ovaries become a fixture of her environment, objects akin to glass bulbs. This matter-of-fact comparison completely eradicates common cultural association of women’s bodies with something aqueous, insubstantial.

Though critics often point to Plath and Sexton as her predecessors, Olds refutes this claim, instead pointing to poets such as Muriel Rukeyser and Galway Kinnell as inspirations. She says:

Those were the poets whose lives I loved and whose work I loved. Although I felt, once I read her, that Plath was a great genius, with an IQ of at least double mine, and though I had great fellow feeling for Anne Sexton being the woman in that world, their steps were not steps I wanted to put my feet in.⁹

9. Patterson, Christina. “Sharon Olds: Blood, Sweat, and Fears.” *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 26 Oct. 2006. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

Placing all of these women writers in the same canon eradicates their ample differences and limits the scope of discourse surrounding them. The female body is so personal a space that to put all those who write profoundly about it in the same category diminishes their unique prowess. It is as fallacious an act as claiming all alcoholic writers were inspired by each other. Though Olds’ subject matter often overlaps with Sexton’s, Olds takes on a more conversational tone, while Sexton experimented more with meter and verse. Sexton was also preoccupied with different influences: fairy tales, mythologies, Shakespeare. Olds grapples with her background as

ARIELLA CARMELL

the daughter of Calvinists, and the kind of aura sex takes on when it has been hidden.

Though the politicization of female bodies play a role in women’s writings, each has a different relationship to her body: Sexton sees it as a vessel of inspiration, Olds talks about it as she would discuss grocery shopping, and Plath rarely addresses it directly, almost frightened by physical sentience. As she writes in “Lady Lazarus,”

*A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.*

*Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—*

*The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.*

*Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me*

*And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.¹⁰*

10. Plath, Sylvia. “Lady Lazarus.” *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n/a. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

The speaker of the poem is terrified of aging—the decay of the body. Plath is less concerned with the immediate present and more with far-off anxieties. She inhabits an entirely different frame of mind than Sexton or Olds. A single glance at all of their poetry show that they are not the same writers at all, and yet they have consistently been grouped together artificially in an attempt to make it seem like women poets who write from a personal perspective are all alike. It contributes to a culture where reading Plath has been seen as “girly”: where she has been stripped of respect as a poet and seen first as a diarist.

It is unfortunate we still live in a time when writing about the intricacies of the female body is still considered a deviant political act. Those who write about these forbidden experiences are bold for it—because for better or for worse, writing about it will always be seen as transgressive. This is certainly unfair for women who simply want to speak to normalize the quotidian events of cisgender womanhood, or for those who wish to erase its illicitness. Until we arrive at the point when women’s bodies are no longer objects of aversion, we have to acknowledge the importance of women writing about what it means, to them, to be a woman. The art we view informs our identities, and it is not enough to rely on depictions of women through the lens of male writers.

However, the discussion of their personal fixations should not overwhelm the dialogue surrounding their adept use of language, rhythm, and imagery, and the effects they have had on the poetry community as a whole. In a time when meter was going out of style, Sexton’s poems rhymed, in a way that did not feel old-fashioned but seemed to critique the prudishness of the old form itself. For someone who only began writing poetry seriously in her late twenties, her mastery of it is a force to be reckoned with.

These women were, and are, geniuses. Reading their work made me end my silence about discussing myself as a woman, even if it made those around me uncomfortable. It just made me wonder more, “Why does this make them uncomfortable?” Should the fact that a woman writes about her period really be a source of intense, negative scrutiny? If examination is necessary, let it be one of open-mindedness and celebration—there’s a whole well of life that is being given exposure, from all kinds of angles. As Maggie Nelson put it in her devastating book *Jane: A Murder*, “How we’ve fooled ourselves, / we who’ve split blood / into that which pollutes, / and that which redeems.” The blood that emerges from women should be allowed to have the same artistic focus as the blood spilled in wars and hospitals has received. If those around us are disgusted at the mere mention of our bodies, then we live in a culture that vilifies us for simply existing at the basic level. To write about it is to reject this erasure of existence.

Borromean Olympic Rings: The Spectacle of Modernity

Jack Calder

The first time I went to an event at the Olympic Aquatics Stadium, I couldn’t find my seat. More accurately, it didn’t exist. The Olympic powers-that-be had ceased construction at F7, leaving me stuck at the edge of a platform that dropped away into an abyss. I clutched my (now useless) ticket bearing a glossy “F8,” and a whole host of anti-counterfeit measures that hadn’t been so much graphically designed as graphically engineered.

Jack Calder is a third-year in the College majoring in Fundamentals.

It feels as if you’re at the edge of a divine trespass as you look between the platforms of a large stadium. It’s like something you’re not supposed to see—a rough concrete well, straight down thirty feet to a floor strewn with eclectic refuse; littered or lost. You can imagine living down there—eating the scraps that fall from the bright square of light above, listening to a crowd cheer for something you can’t see.

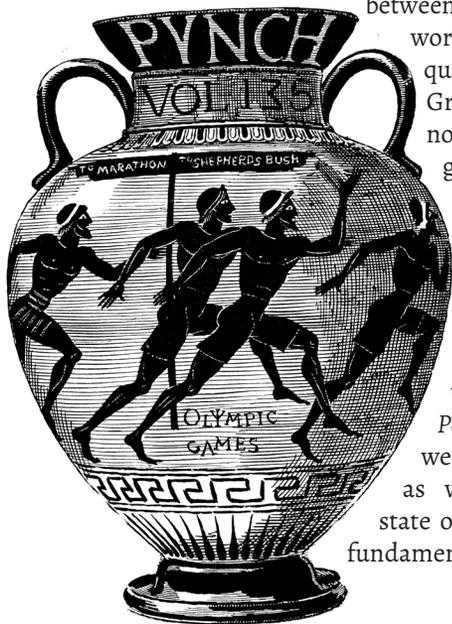
The stadium is full of spaces like this. In the corners rise huge support pillars—behind which, inexplicably, are entire sections of seats. A few people sit on the edges, right up against the pillar. They have to sort of curl their bodies around to see the swimming.

Seeing the Olympics live is fundamentally a weird experience. When you watch the Olympics on TV, it feels like a world event, the very peak of human competition. It’s the spectacle of modernity, the biggest and the glossiest. In person, you clutch at your fancy ticket and search a pit for a seat that never existed. What’s happening?

The modern Olympics began in 1896, the brainchild of Pierre de Coubertin, an aristocrat and classicist. Despite its ancient pedigree, Coubertin's Olympics was a distinctly modern project. In fact, I would argue the Olympics remains *the* modern project, and thus the perfect avenue to the general condition of modernity and its fundamental contradictions—the reason the Olympics left me standing by a dark pit. I will begin to explore this idea by contrasting the ancient Olympics and the modern Olympics.

The ancient Olympics were the result of a social-political totality. The primary questions of philosophy and politics, as the Greeks saw them were the best way to live and the form of society that would be most accommodating to this life. However, the ancients believed these ideal forms were given from the start; nothing fundamentally *new* could emerge as history progressed. The experience of humanity was eternal and unchanging, and thus the “good” form of society as well.

This notion forms the fundamental difference in *consciousness* between the ancient and modern worlds. What came into question for the ancient Greeks was not whether notions like virtue, justice, or glory were meaningful, but rather how they could best be expressed. That is, their values, society, and form of life were necessary—given by the gods—and thus unquestionable. Consider the first section of Aristotle's *Politics*. He asserts that slaves were necessary for a society, as was self-evident from the state of the world itself. Since the fundamental state of the world could



not change, the fundamental forms of society present in the world could not change either. Indeed, change itself could only be seen as perversion from the perfection of necessity. Thus, slavery was judged good by necessity. The forms of society—that which was considered integral to society's very existence—were inherently meaningful by virtue of existing. They are affirmed by the gods themselves.

The ancient Olympics was not only an athletic competition but a religious-artistic-political gathering: a time for the *poleis* to interact, form alliances, and jointly honor the gods. Furthermore, the competitors competed to prove their superiority, not just as athletes, but as *people*. A champion javelin-thrower, to a modern observer, might only have succeeded at a javelin competition, but for the Greeks that activity in fact proved him to be a superior person—a favorite of the gods. His victory was necessary, ordained by the gods, just as divine will spoke through all facts of the world by dint of their bare existence. The competitive form of activity expressed an innate, given content.

Modern competition, on the other hand, appears to exist entirely for itself. Olympic athletes train obsessively to play one specialized sport. We do not think their success proves they are great at anything other than *that thing*. Yet, at the same time, we maintain that their pursuit is also valuable in and of itself: it is still laudable, for some reason, to win an Olympic medal. In the absence of gods that imbue our actions with inherent content, we must determine what pursuing a sport means.

In modernity, we do not live in a social-political totality, but in a state of critical, self-conscious subjectivity. We must determine what activities mean for us on the basis of the activities themselves. They cannot express anything more than what they contain. Thus we must take activity in modernity to have a particular character in order for them to be meaningful.

In modern critical self-consciousness we must suppose there are aspects of an activity that make it inherently worth pursuing: we swim because the activity is sensuously pleasurable, we dive because it is aesthetically pleasing, etc. An important aspect of this type of

BORROMEAN OLYMPIC RINGS

meaning-generation is that form and content are mutable, and interact with each other. We swim sometimes as an expression of our happiness (you leap, exuberantly, into the water). We swim to clean off. We swim to look at the bottom of the river. Thus, the “for itself” of swimming is the result of an interaction between form and content. Both fit each other, and compose the entirety of what the action involves.

It appears that in this modern conception, competition should be something organic. Unlike the competition of the ancient Greeks, which had a rigid form, and a supplied content, here both form and content should be malleable. Why we compete, where, and how would all be concrete—subject only to its own particularity, the whims of the moment. However, we find this is not in fact the character of modern activity. Our activity does not live up to the possibility that emerges as a result of modern consciousness.

In fact, modern sports are subject to the most fundamental contradiction of modern society: the phenomenon of reification. Form becomes fetishized, and adopts the *appearance* of necessity, coming to determine content. This contradiction emerges with the rise of capitalism. According to Marx’s *Capital*, human activity becomes subject to commodification in capitalism. Commodification makes concrete, qualitative aspects of the world commensurable with others through exchange. To exchange, one must quantify the two objects in some way. Two objects become commensurable through their exchange value, which reflects the amount of socially-necessary labor-time used to create them. Their use-values, on the other hand, remain fundamentally incomparable. Use-value is precisely the qualitative content of the commodity, which is hyper-particular and concrete. Say I have a picture of my grandmother with enormous sentimental value—this emotional content is specific to me, but does not affect the photo’s exchange value as a commodity.

In capitalism, exchange value comes to dominate production. That is, we produce objects not because of their concrete, particular qualities, but because of their universal value in exchange. Thus, the *form* of production becomes determined by the prerogatives of exchange value. Think of planned obsolescence—the creators

JACK CALDER

Your case demands a
remedy that shall go
deeper.



of such a device do not design it to be good at its “purpose,” but to function well as an exchange value. The use-values of objects produced as commodities can be *entirely unrelated* to their mode, scale, and method of production. The form (exchange value) comes to dominate the content (use value), such that we do not appear to control our own production. We produce according to prerogatives that seem to come from outside of us, despite the fact that the act of production seems to be predicated on the notion of producing *for use*.

This is the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, and of modernity. The form of activity comes to dominate the content of that activity—a phenomenon known as reification. At the same time, we are conscious that only the organic interrelation of form and content can render activity meaningful. So too with competition. For activities to be made commensurable with each other they must develop a strict “form.” They must be given rules, measurements, tiers of competition. Take modern Olympic swimming: there are four strictly delineated strokes that swimmers must complete in certain strict distances, and judges evaluate them purely on the basis of time. How far from the possibility of swimming for its own sake!

How then do these competitive forms come to dominate the content of the sport? This is best illustrated through an analysis of one of the more aesthetic sports—diving. As diving has evolved into a competitive sport, it has become increasingly codified. To

commensurate different dives, they must acquire a form by which they can all be quantified and compared. In diving, this form—the set of rules for judging, as well as the weighting system (the “degree of difficulty” of an individual dive)—comes to dominate the activity. Though the scoring system initially sought to capture and codify the transient aesthetic power of a dive, it helped lead diving to become defined by the ability to perform high scoring dives, regardless of their aesthetic content. The form itself began to govern how the activity was pursued. At high levels of competitive diving, what is exhibited loses almost all aesthetic qualities. For men’s 10-meter diving, the mark of excellence is the ability to perform a front four-and-a-half flip. This dive is not pretty, and in fact the divers often cannot even perform it very well, scoring much lower than they would on an easier dive. Its extreme difficulty (and thus, high “value” in terms of scoring) is its only notable quality.

In this way, sports in capitalism come to take on a workmanlike quality. Just as the form of the commodity becomes governed solely by exchange value as a measure of invested labor, so does a sport become governed purely by labor in service of its form, as opposed to its concrete qualities. Consider an Olympic level breast-stroker. Breast-stroke, as a form of swimming, is notably slow and inefficient. However, as it is one of the “forms” which swimming takes, swimmers must invest their labor towards it. There appears to be a contradiction within the activity—if the supposed “athletic content” of swimming is measured in terms of time, why would an inadequate form be pursued? It is because its form has ceased to relate to its content. Labor invested in the activity is not invested for the activity itself, as a modern critical consciousness requires, but is invested purely in the reified form.

This reification of competition is the fundamental structure that governs the modern Olympics. Now that we have arrived at a full-fledged conception of the state of modern competition, I will offer a final example to underscore the specific condition of modernity.

The role of the referee in the two eras serves as this epitomical example. In the ancient games, the referee’s decisions were final and could not be contested. He did not exist as an impartial arbiter

of the rules, but rather served to make the contest as “good” as possible. The rules did not constitute the entirety of the sport, as in modernity. They merely served to guide the higher purpose of the sport—the manifestation of divine glory. As such, the referee could not transgress “against the rules,” they had no sway except insofar as they allowed for the content to emerge. Infractions were not punished on the basis of a procedure for each codified infraction; rather, the referee would often simply beat the competitor committing a foul until he would stop. The punishment occurred not *because of the rules*, but because the competitor was perverting the form by which divine will emerged—the competitor ceased to be glorious.

The modern referee, on the other hand, is entirely subject to the rules of the sport, which dominate him. This phenomenon is epitomized in sports where referees have become superfluous, like tennis, where cameras can call shots better than a human. Ideally, the referee does not have any executive power. If a modern referee actually makes a *decision*, his decision represents an intervention, and a failure. Referees do not guide a sport such that it gains a certain type of content; they merely serve to administer its form as exactly as possible. He cannot take independent action to support “the spirit” of the sport—the form is the entirety of the sport’s content.

—

However, the Olympics is not reducible to reified competition, although this is the fundamental form that structures everything about it. What is important is that reified competition comes *into contradiction* with our modern critical self-consciousness. There is anxiety at the heart of our experience. I now hope to explore our experience of the Olympics, how it *appears* to us, and through this analysis gesture towards a full critique of modernity. The Olympics is composed of a tripartite structure: the spectators, the competitors, and capital. These structures interweave like Borromean rings, each mutually sustaining the others. I will begin with the spectator.

The Olympics appears to us in the first instance not as a competition for itself, but as a competition from the standpoint

of the spectator. Much of the work invested in the Olympics is not primarily to serve *sport-as-sport*—that is, athlete accommodation, facilities for competition, etc.—but to serve *sport-as-entertainment*. Practically any pool could serve as the venue for the Olympic competition itself, but we do not build a pool, we build a natatorium. A stadium.

How fitting that modernity has furnished us with a far superior form of spectating: television. Around 3.5 billion people tuned in to the 2016 Olympics at one point or another, a figure likely greater than the sum total of spectators in the entire history of the ancient Olympic games. No longer must we come to the stadiums to spectate. And so no longer must they exist solely for us, the obsolete live spectators. Rather, they have become a televisual set-piece, an architecture of entertainment. The few remaining live spectators have transformed into a spectacle themselves. Who are these live spectators?

This past Olympics, one happened to be me. When you enter any of the numerous Olympic stadiums, one of the most striking features is the amount of physical space devoted to television production staff. In the natatorium, almost a quarter of the physical seat-space was taken up by producers—surrounded by a complex tangle of wires, laptops, headsets—arcane equipment of every kind. This section is, of course, never shown on TV.

There is a camera hung on wires strung from four huge support beams, the same beams behind which sit swaths of empty seats. This camera is entrancing. It moves gymnastically around the stadium, pirouetting and swiveling along every axis. Sitting in the stands, you feel somehow envious of this camera. It is the ideal eye, soaring dramatically to whatever is most compelling. Suspended just above the froth of the water, it practically touches Phelps' feet. You almost salivate thinking of all the overlays and statistics. The high octane SFX transitions. The triumphant music. You feel discombobulated, like you're living a sort of spectatorial half-life. Is this what you came to see? It really looks just like a bunch of people swimming back and forth. Up here in the stands they don't even seem to be going all that fast. You could have just gone to the pool down the block. What's

missing?

In person, the utter domination of form over content becomes more clear. It is the unspeakable secret at the heart of the competition, the possibility that the activity in front of you really might not mean anything. But the spectator doesn't stop to pose the question. This is because we attach some kind of "stakes" to the form of the competition that appear to render it meaningful. These stakes are ideology, narratives by which we attempt to resolve the contradictions of our own experience.

TV is the perfect medium by which these stakes can be attached to the competition. There are a couple methods by which competition is invested ideologically. These methods differ structurally, and help to explain the status of the modern spectator.

The first way in which competition is invested ideologically is on the basis of the form itself. Think world records, hitherto unperformed maneuvers (the four-and-a-half in diving), and other statistical quirks. This response to reification, characteristic of capitalism, is to *dig* in. However, the contradiction is immediately evident. This sort of call to investment is ideologically begging the question. The exceptional elaboration of a form—swimming one millisecond faster than ever before—cannot be any more meaningful than the form itself. The form cannot conjure content *ex nihilo*.

Spectating live, this contradiction becomes only more apparent. It is difficult to assess what is and isn't spectacular, especially in the more niche sports. What should we cheer for? No announcer is there to assure us that yes, this has never happened before. This is truly *exceptional*. The disconnect is evident in diving. After each dive, the cheers are practically uniform. They all look about as good. However, it is when the numbers flash on the screen that the real cheering begins. We don't cheer for the dive, we cheer for the numbers. Not the content but the form. A group next to me, after a while, just began to yell for the number 10. After every dive: "10, 10, 10!!!" They were hardly watching anything but the scoreboard, waiting to be told what was exceptional.

On its own, of course, this investment on the basis of form cannot be sustained. Any number of world records occur every day; the sheer size of the *Guinness World Records* is a testament to the mundanity of the exceptional. Do we really care all that much about how much long someone can pogo-stick for? No, but then why should we care about some forms and not others? Something else must be rallied in order to legitimate the Olympic forms. We must enlist the help of some other superstructure in order to invest the competition with meaning.

The primary Olympic investment arises from a sort of petty, contradictory nationalism. We go to root for *our team*. We hope America will emerge victorious and prove its superiority. However, do we really just want to win? The answer is, paradoxically, no. We don't truly want America to win every single gold medal, unchallenged and dominant. That would make for boring competition. That would make for boring TV.

This contradiction is the path by which we can understand a fundamental aspect of spectating in modernity—we are not rooting for the *competitors*, we are rooting for *entertainment*. We don't want athletes to dominate—to be the best—we want them just barely to win. We want drama. Underdog victories and surprising reversals. Hometown heroes and first-time champions.

On some level, we know the form of the competition is empty. To hold our interest, it must become a vessel for ideology. To properly be entertainment, we have to suppose some meaning. Otherwise, we might as well watch the play of dust motes in air, and tell ourselves tales of triumph and loss.

This contradiction is especially pointed for the live spectator, cast out of the ideology-machine of the television. As the athletes perform, we cannot easily determine who exactly is an American. We do not know where these people came from, what their life stories are. We do not know when to celebrate the underdog. We do not know *who* is the underdog.

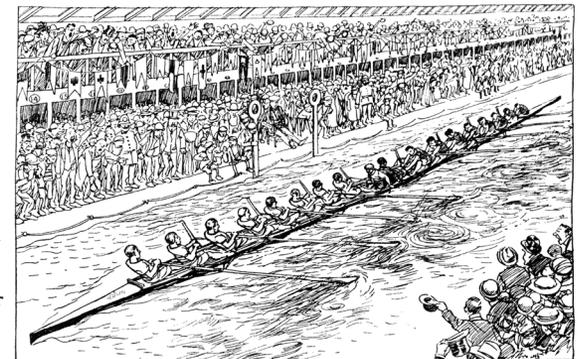
This contradiction in the live spectator becomes elaborated into an

especially strange case of ideology-investment: it is strange precisely in its disregard for the specific form of the Olympics. Unable to offer TV narratives, the stadiums proffer, almost apologetically, the same forms of mass excitation as attend any large spectacle. There are dance cams, kiss cams, cams of every kind. There are calls and responses. We do the wave, and then later we do it again. The wave never gets old.

What is so especially strange is that these incitements often happen *at the same time as the events*. During every swim, there is loud dance music blasting. Some people sing along. During the running there is the omnipresent wave. At one point, the jumbotron becomes superimposed with a 2D-caricature of bongos. The camera pans around the stadium, singling out hapless individuals to mime banging the drums. We are all very excited by this clever trick, and gesticulate wildly in hopes the camera will swing to us. We too want to play the bongos. At the same time, the hammer toss is concluded, and a Tajikistani (widely considered the favorite) is declared the winner. The jumbotron changes briefly to indicate his victory. We are all a little miffed—they took away our bongos for this? Everyone already knew he was going to win—and where the heck is Tajikistan anyway? Who cares about hammer toss?

In the morass of excitation, it is this last question that provokes anxiety. The ideology that allows us to invest in the competition-as-entertainment must at the same time root itself in a presupposition that the form itself is meaningful. Otherwise we're back to dust-motes and concocted stories. To specify, we must be able to suppose that the stories we tell ourselves are not *mere* fantasy. That we didn't come here *merely* to play the bongos.

Thus, it appears that our ideology does not solve the question of



BORROMEAN OLYMPIC RINGS

meaning, but merely pushes it one step further. We have found that we can construct compelling stories that operate of their own logic around the play of forms: the drama of the underdog, the glory of the nation. However, these stories must ultimately be about something meaningful in order to become themselves meaningful. Once again, *ex nihilo nihil*.

What, finally, can we root our ideology in?

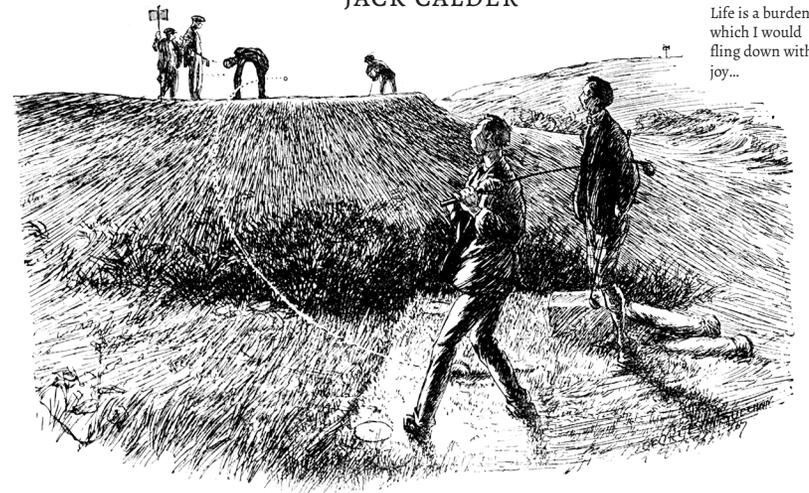
We support our ideology on the basis of the athlete himself. That is, we seize upon the athlete's own investment into the activity to prop up the activity-as-entertainment. We read investment *into* the athlete. How does this structure function?

To compete at the absolute highest level of a sport, the athletes must devote nearly all their time to training. A sort of crude solipsistic wager obtains here. The athletes' investment appears clear: they could not possibly perform and aspire to perfecting the form if it were not meaningful for them. The alternative is to view them as automatons, structures that move ceaselessly in forms that hold no necessary meaning.

Instead, we hold that in fact these athletes do *subjectively* what it appears we ourselves cannot, on the basis of their *objective* action. This projection is almost mystical. To maintain the athlete's ability to invest *fully* in what appears to us as an empty form, their subjectivity must become for us hidden, mysterious. We cannot know by what means they manage this modern impossibility, but we suppose they must. How could they spend all day swimming up and down in a line? How could they spend every moment eking out another centimeter in a javelin toss? Every thought marshalled, integrated into a perfect machine. Must not the form of the activity, for the athlete, become transcendental? Filled with a divine, unfathomable meaning?

The athlete is truly the hero of modernity, but a tragic one. His subjectivity has been transformed and identified with the divine, but, at the same time, he has ceased to be human. When we suppose the

JACK CALDER



Life is a burden
which I would
fling down with
joy...

athlete has access to this “secret” at the core of the empty form, when we suppose he has “escaped” the meaninglessness of modernity, we deny in him what must constitute the modern human—the critical engagement with form and content. Thus, in a way, these athletes do become automata for us. It is only possible to discuss them as human through a modern animism, keepers of the mysterious secret that underpins our own investment. Through them, we may arrogate a mystical meaning to the empty form of the activity, and thus invest in that activity-as-entertainment.

It is important to return again to this: we must not be misled into believing that this projected investment (the mystical character of the athlete) is marshalled for the spectator to justify activity-as-activity. We cannot really deliberately rationalize that the form of the activity is meaningful in itself; we merely allow ourselves to start from the supposition that the question is *taken care of* by the existence of the mystical athlete. The spectator invests no independent critical thought in the meaning of the activity.

This contradiction expresses itself most powerfully in the moment of victory. For the athlete, victory is the most complete fulfillment of the form of the activity-as-activity. However, for the spectator, the victory is simultaneously the best and worst moment. We explode into cheers as the runners cross the finish line, but in

the same moment we detumesce. The competition is now over. The entertainment has concluded. When we get there, we find victory never quite what we desired. We cheered our athlete, invested him with all the ideological apparatus we could manage (the underdog, the hometown hero, the potential record breaker), but in the moment he completes the activity, he ceases to mean anything to us.

The Olympic medal ceremony exemplifies the heart of this contradiction. The athletes troop dutifully up to the stage, but for us, they are used up: detritus, the scraps of a meal consumed too fast. Why are they showing us these people again? Why are they showing us these mystics, not engaging in their rituals? Simultaneously, we must suppose this is the apex for the athlete, the moment they are fulfilled. Anxiety swirls in this contradiction.

On an average night in the track stadium, there would be about 7-10 medal ceremonies. These ceremonies were carefully spaced into passing moments, calculated not to overwhelm. The ceremonial music marks its unobtrusive passage—a rich orchestral swell, communicating passion, triumph, glory. Except, as the days progress, the music changes. Sometimes it is a stripped-down guitar version. Sometimes it is almost samba-esque. The music mustn't get old; the glory must remain apparent.

Herein lies the whole dual-function of the medal ceremony, carefully constructed so as to sustain and suture the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Olympics. The athletes are instrumentalized in the ceremony to shore up the rest of the competition. At careful moments throughout the competition nights, we are shown again the victorious athlete. This is the moment all the others strive for as well, we suppose, and thus we can continue to apprehend them as entertainment. The changing music illustrates this purpose. The pageantry is proffered as an invitation into the ceremony as entertainment. "Here is the celebration of the athlete!" it asserts bombastically. Of course, it is not for the athlete. The ceremony serves as a necessary reminder of the secret underpinning the competition: it is the mystical athlete, turned towards victory, that *allows* our investment.

Is the athlete upon the podium himself conscious of this contradiction? Does he realize how truly lonely he is, in the midst of victory? The adulation of the masses is not directed at him, but at a phantom. An abstraction. A piece of entertainment to be consumed and thrown away.

I will offer a gesture at what the subjectivity of the truly great athlete is. The animism that sustains our ideology is impossible to maintain. If the athlete were able to truly invest in the empty form, he would become inhuman, akin to a god. He would become an identity with form itself. However, I will argue that it is exactly the extent to which an athlete is able to perform that contradictory investment that determines his greatness. The extent to which they can suppress the contradiction at the heart of their being.

David Foster Wallace has remarked on this quality of great athletes—how they are almost categorically incapable of speaking about their own subjective experience. What seems to mark great athleticism is not a complex system of ideology and projected justification, as characterizes the spectator, but in fact an almost total lack of thought. So Wallace:

The real secret behind top athletes' genius, then, may be as esoteric and obvious and dull and profound as silence itself. The real, many veiled answer to the question of just what goes through a great player's mind as he stands at the center hostile crowd-noise and lines up a free-throw that will decide the game might well be: nothing at all.¹

1. David Foster Wallace, "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007)

The athlete is the tragic hero of modernity—he strives to perform the impossible and comes impossibly close to succeeding. He is the champion of humanity, striving for meaning in a world dominated by form. For him, the world becomes for him a true meritocracy; his objective results the index of the spiritual war inside himself. He takes the contradictions of modernity into his soul and attempts to fuse them into greatness. Every match he wins is a testament to the possibility of meaning. Every broken record is an act of defiance against a god that remains all-too hidden.

But from the beginning he is doomed. Every victory is pyrrhic; it

The fatal hand had grappled
with the mystery of life



can never be enough. Consider the doleful archetype of the athlete past his prime. He is caught in the past, remembering the days when he *could*. The days when he was *great*, before the world caught up to him.

One night in Rio I spoke to a fencer who had just placed fourth in competition. She told me she had been one touch away from the medal stand. It wasn't her performance that bothered her, however. We had spoken about the emptiness at the heart of perfection. How, when one is truly "in the zone," the body almost acts on its own. She wasn't upset about

losing; she had been as empty as she had ever been.

But now she was 24. Another Olympics was unlikely, at that age. What scared her was that she only knew fencing.

All her life she had lost herself in the emptiness of thrust, parry, repeat. Now she felt anxiety closing in upon her. She hadn't had to think about anything else, lost in that emptiness. The world was self-evident. Now it just looked dead.

—

When we tear away the Gordian knot of ideology, what is left in the Olympics? Why do we participate in it? Why does it exist? Must we content ourselves with this emptiness—forms that can only justify themselves reflexively, but fail? A desperate scrabbling for content that comes up empty-handed, pitiable, empty? Why bother?

I now turn to the third structure of the Olympics, which undergirds, energizes, and dominates the other two: capital. It is capital that motivates and determines the structure of the Olympics. It is capital that creates the reified competition, the schizophrenic spectator, the tragic athlete. I will analyze the way this contradictory structure lies at the heart of the Olympics, and thus modernity.

It will suffice as exposition to allow the Olympic Committee to speak for itself. In a report compiled for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, which offers recommendations for changes, the committee asks, "Why should we make important and far-reaching changes in the Olympic Movement?". Why something changes contains the key to why something *is*, in the first place; the fundamental principle occluded in stasis may be described in motion. So, the report states:

*We have had brilliant Olympic Games in 2012 and 2014. We enjoy financial stability. We redistribute more than 90 percent of our revenues to sport and to the athletes. This means: The IOC invests more than three million dollars a day—every single day of the year to support worldwide sport. Never before have so many people all around our globe followed the Olympic Games. So, we are successful.*²

2. Speech by IOC President Thomas Bach on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony, 127th IOC Session, Monaco, 7 Dec. 2014

The committee asks: "Why change? We are successful." What is successful? We might acknowledge the "brilliance" of the games themselves—here are the athletes again, underpinning our ideology. But immediately emerges the real reason: the Olympics is a tremendous money-making operation.

Note the ideological elision in this sentence: "The IOC invests more than three million dollars a day... to support worldwide sport." The money goes to "sport." What does this mean? Equipment, construction of facilities, commodities. The IOC judges itself as successful on the basis of its reproduction of capital, which, by its own logic, exists simply to grow and reproduce itself. It is a form, stripped of content, endlessly elaborating itself on its own internal logic.

Consider a recent controversy around the 2020 Olympic Games. The committee voted to remove wrestling from competition. If sports were considered on the basis of their "intrinsic value," wrestling seems almost ideal—one of the few sports competed in both the modern and ancient games. It has the largest number of competing nations, and the most diverse medal pool of any sport. Yet it was cut. Why?

From the standpoint of capital, the answer is clear: not many

people watch Olympic wrestling. Thus, the possibility for advertising revenue/ticket sales is very low. Further, it requires almost no equipment, and can be competed practically anywhere. Therefore, investment in structural content is also impossible. Wrestling does not serve capital's reproduction very well. In the eyes of the IOC, driven by the logic of capital, wrestling fails on the most fundamental criteria. Compare the sports considered for its replacement: squash, baseball, roller sports, wakeboarding, and a couple others. The sports are all equipment heavy, crowd-pleasing, or (ideally) both.

This is reification—capital's imperative to reproduce itself coming to dominate any activity through which it is expressed. Again emerges the contradiction of the commodity: production is not production of use-values (content), but production of exchange values (form). It is important to elaborate this structure as *always in contradiction*. Wrestling did not simply perish, caught ineluctably in the logic of capital. The individual Olympic committees of many different countries joined together to resist a change nakedly driven by the logic of capital, and ultimately succeeded in having it reinstated.

This sort of resistance points to a *possibility* present in capitalism's contradiction. The various countries had a consciousness of the possibility of an Olympics wherein content could be rescued, not simply dominated by form. They were driven by the possibility pointed to by modern critical self-consciousness—the possibility of sport being for itself. This is the promise of modernity: that the contradictory appearance of content dominated by form points to the possibility of its overcoming. Our awareness of this contradiction creates the possibility for modernity to become meaningful.

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The Olympics is the project of modernity. In it, we have the consciousness that we come together as equals. In the ancient Olympics this was not true. The victor in the field of competition emerged as truly superior. His superiority was established in a competition watched over by the gods, the form and content inherently divine. The gods spoke through their actions, manifesting

the great chain of being for all to see. Alive, moving, real.

Now, god is dead. The great chain of being has been broken. Our actions can only speak for themselves. Yet, our actions, and us in turn, have become subject to the imperatives of a form which seems to stand above us. We come together as countries supposedly equal, and yet, who wins? The rich, the well-equipped: capital. And what do they win? Success in forms that have come mean nothing, that can no longer claim to be anything other than what they are.

Humanity no longer receives meaning from on high. We have come to know that we can only find meaning in ourselves. And yet, the world we create remains meaningless—dominated by forms which appear to come from beyond ourselves. It is an alienation we reconstitute constantly.

How can we return meaning to the world?

It is not by taking the route of the spectator. We cannot suppose some absent meaning at the heart of our forms. We cannot muster endless ideologies to support each other; they are rooted in the same contradiction they seek to escape. We cannot rescue our ideologies by projecting the problem onto a mystical other. He knows no more of god than we.

It is not by taking the route of the athlete, the tragic hero. He takes the contradictions of the world into himself, and attempts to live them. He tries to lose himself in an absolute identity with an impossible paradox. This route can only end in despair. It is a nihilism, resigning the task of changing the world—accepting what cannot be accepted.

To rescue the Olympics is to rescue modernity. It is to rescue ourselves. Meaning cannot be found in accommodation to contradiction. Faced with contradiction, we must turn upon the world. We must force humanity to become human.

Dislocation and Narrative Possibilities

A conversation with Brian Booker

Rosemarie Ho

Are You Here for What I'm Here For?

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Rosemarie Ho is a third-year in the College majoring in Comparative Literature.

Last spring, I was privileged to have had the leisure—and the delusion that creative writing classes would constitute *some* intellectual respite from the grind of the quarter system—to take a creative writing class here at UChicago. It never ceases to amaze me that my instructor remained incredibly patient with me, despite my second-year hubris and inflated sense of my talent. I learnt a lot from him. Even now, as I read, I find myself utilizing the vocabulary he gave me to critique his own writing. His name is Brian Booker, and I had the honor to interview him over the weekend to discuss the art of putting words together into a beautiful grammar-assemblage that illuminates the human condition in some way or another.

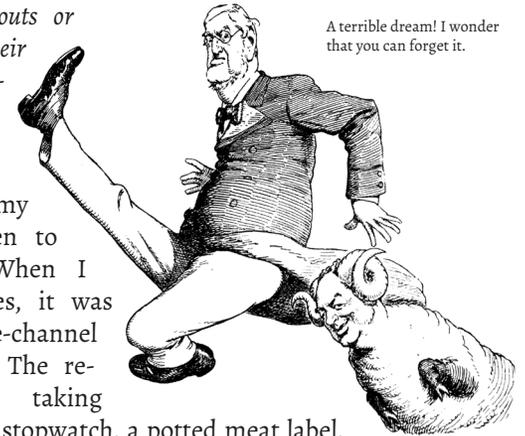
Brian Booker is the author of the acclaimed short story collection, *Are You Here for What I'm Here For*, a member of the Creative Writing faculty at the University of Chicago with a PhD from NYU and a previous Iowa Writers' Workshop Fellow.

RH: *You've mentioned time and time again that a writer has to tap into her vein of obsession to truly start producing mesmerizing stories; from your (amazing!) new collection of stories, Are You Here for What I'm Here For, your obsession seems to be with neurosis, illness, a person being displaced in some way from capital-R reality—a subjectivity grappling with a de-familiarized world. In the assemblages on your website, individual*

objects, be it newspaper cut-outs or seashells, are removed from their familiar environment and re-contextualized. What interests you most about displacement?

Brian Booker: One of my obsessions has always been to collect, arrange, curate. When I started making assemblages, it was discovering a way to re-channel certain childhood fetishes. The re-contextualization involves taking some object—a snail shell, a stopwatch, a potted meat label, a celluloid die—and situating it in a compartment or chamber or framing it against paper or cloth, often embedding it in a block of resin. The object is singled out, specially chosen, exposed or revealed in some new way, sometimes starkly so, but also protected, sheltered in an ambient space, sometimes veiled or partially obscured. You're trying to fix the viewer's eye, to make your fixation their fixation in that moment. I suppose that's what we try to do on the sentence level in fiction, to have a *thing* in the sentence, something irreducibly unique and therefore irresistible. If the sentence functions as a good display case, ordinary words and phrases take on a lapidary quality, a pellucid aura that exceeds their denotative value.

In the displacements of artifice, you're trying to transfigure things but also somehow preserve them. You're trying to capture some living piece of reality in a medium of words ranked on a page or objects arranged in a box. Art is about longing; about nostalgia, in the serious sense of that term; about re-making and reordering what has been un-made and scattered by time. The things (and people) to which we form attachments are always disappearing (and reappearing), always shifting and eluding us, but the desire to attach persists. Kazuo Ishiguro says that writers are people who are trying to remake their world in the aftermath of trauma, whether "trauma" in the conventional sense or something more subtle, like coming-of-age disillusionments.



A terrible dream! I wonder that you can forget it.

I've gotten away from the illness/neurosis part of the question, the "subjectivity grappling with a de-familiarized world," as you put it. What happens when the body becomes a zone of estrangement, of menace but also fascination? I'm interested in the hypochondriac moment as a kind of existential slipperiness, when everything *might* have changed in some horrible way, but it's too early to tell, or you can't be quite sure. I'm interested in that space of deep ambivalence, when someone is beginning to be displaced from capital-R reality, as you say.

It feels weird to be talking about my literary interest in stories about nightmares seeming to come true, or about to come true but maybe not, stories imbued with a sense of dreadful intimation, a couple of weeks after election night, but there you go. Historically, we're in a moment where something terrible is emerging, but we're so close to its grotesque orange face (temporally speaking) that we can't yet fully see what it is. It's as if, simultaneously, we see exactly what the horror is, but also recognize that our reflexive certainty about what's in front of us is to some extent a fiction, a coping mechanism. Maybe we've been here before; maybe we're in wholly uncharted territory.

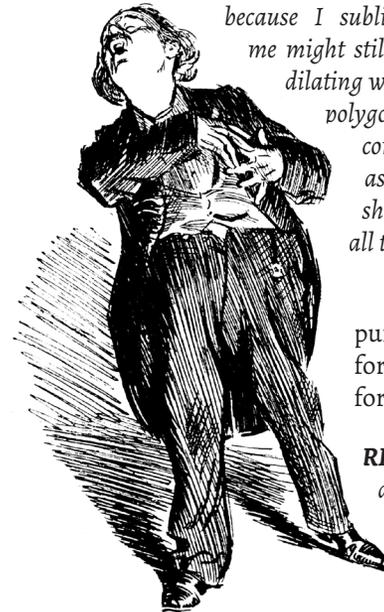
Samuel Beckett says we suffer when our shroud of habit gets injured and raw reality seeps through our defenses. This has to do with the moment of "ego break" we often see in stories (which I may have mentioned time and time again). Beckett also says that when we really suffer, when shit gets real, we experience "the free play of the senses."

You find this in grief, especially grief that comes suddenly. It's like falling. You feel how tenuous—how, basically, delusional—is your sense of control. The world is so much bigger and scarier—but also somehow more substantive, more mysterious—than it was ten minutes ago. You could call it the sublime, or awe. In Flannery O'Connor, it's when grace rides in on a storm of ugly violence. It's a complex of feeling that totally kicks your ass. Fortunately it doesn't last long—for poets, maybe, it lasts longer—before habit kicks in with a healthy dose of ego-anesthetic and you go back to the more tolerable ambient dread. Anyway, I went through all this on election

night, for sure.

The displacements of illness are not all about dread and grief. Often in fiction illness has been a zone of enchantment, of rarefied perception and privileged insight. I'm thinking of Dostoyevsky, and especially of Thomas Mann's work—*The Magic Mountain*, *Death in Venice*. The danger of illness transfigures the character's inner and outer world in such a way that new desires come into focus. Illness—whether individual or public, as in a plague scenario—becomes a space for transgressive adventure. I also think of one of my favorite scenes from Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading*, about the author's childhood illnesses. It's the scene where his mother goes out to buy him a gift. Depleted by fever dreams, he is lying in bed in a calmly euphoric and "strangely translucent state" in which he seems to experience his mother's carriage-ride to the shop in hyper-realistic detail through her senses, down to the clacking of the horse's scrotum. When she comes back, she's carrying the oversized novelty pencil he had "seen" her purchasing:

It had been, in my vision, greatly reduced in size—perhaps, because I subliminally corrected what logic warned me might still be the dreaded remnants of delirium's dilating world. Now the object proved to be a giant polygonal Faber pencil, four feet long and correspondingly thick. It had been hanging as a showpiece in the shop's window, and she presumed I had coveted it, as I coveted all things that were not quite purchasable.



Attempting to purchase the not quite purchasable: it's Nabokov's metaphor for memory here, but it's not a bad one for writing itself.

RH: *Speaking of Nabokov - you've moved around the country a lot! New York, Bethesda, Iowa City, Madison, now Chicago. It reminds me of Nabokov's road trip, whose psychic-geographical*

A man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy



map of America consequently informed and practically produced *Lolita*. Has this literal, physical displacement informed your writing?

BB: Yeah, and you're leaving out Claremont, California, near the terminus of old Route 66. Now I live in Chicago, where Route 66 begins. Did you see that *New York Times* article that had photos of the landscapes and motels and tee-pee shaped efficiencies and various kitschy tourist trappings in the small towns Vera and her husband drove through on those road trips? The country was a weirder place (also a more dangerous, less tolerant place)

where local particularities hadn't yet been erased by the progress of capitalist modernity.

Every story in *Are You Here For What I'm Here For?* has some kind of trip informing or inspiring it, usually a road trip. I've always been fascinated by the sensations—and the narrative possibilities—of being *en route*, of being here but not really here, of moving through space toward a destination. It was better when you had to navigate by paper maps and atlases, and sometimes ask for directions. I discovered Johnstown, PA, this way, which ended up becoming the setting for "A Drowning Accident." Once, trying to find the old asylum at Cresson, I met a man who kept bees in his backyard and sold honey out of his home.

Another time I was looking for the ruins of the state asylum at Dixmont, on bluffs above the Ohio River outside Pittsburgh. Several years later I went back for a better look, and found I was too late, that the asylum had been bulldozed for a Walmart. On that occasion a car seemed to be following me for many miles, even after I detoured.

The "going back" is key. In 2003 I was driving through the southern Sierras, looking for an old lodge I'd spent a bizarre couple of nights in ten years earlier. There's a whole cast of characters from that stay—a man who was talking about the Nazis, a guy with some special dental device who was bleeding into the sink, a drifter who claimed he'd gone to high school with Whitney Houston—and in my imagination they're all still back there; in some sense I'm still back there with them.

RH: If writing is therapeutic in the sense that the author is confronted with trauma, which may align with her vein of obsession—this seems to be the case for you—then what is editing? I remember you talking in class about leaving drafts for weeks in the drawer before you could bring yourself to edit them. Editing is a type of masochism in this sense then, no? And I suppose the million-dollar question is this: why writing? Why art?

BB: Because you have to do it, because it's your substitute for religion, or because it's your insane way of attempting to make a living. Much gets made in the corpus of writertalk about how fundamentally superfluous and quixotic an activity writing is, how truly the world does not *need* your book. But *you* need your book. Much is made about how much suffering writing entails, and it's true that writing is painful, but is it any more painful than any other kind of work?

There's a real difference between revision and editing. Revision involves asking the tough questions about the story shape, the scenes, the cast of characters, or, most crucially, the voice. Editing is somewhat less hard. Maybe you reverse-outline your scenes, thinking through their order and necessity. Least hard is when you have a story that's actually *there* but it's a matter of pruning and paring and polishing. Writers find this agonizing—like when an agent or editor forces you to cut your story by 1k or even 2-3k words—but it's really a gratifying situation knowing the gem is there and you just have to surgically remove the excess.

Some writers—myself included—go through both revisions and editing while the story is in process. In my case, this involves a lot of messing around and false starts with the beginning of the story—for instance a narrating voice that seems strong but ends up being

not at all the person who's telling *this* story. A lot of this turns out to be stuff you're just doing while waiting for the unconscious to give up the goods and clue you in—until something catches, clicks, and carries you into the middle; at that point there should be enough momentum for the story to build itself toward the end it can now envision. But I don't sit down to write something that I haven't already been thinking about and mulling both consciously and subconsciously for a long time.

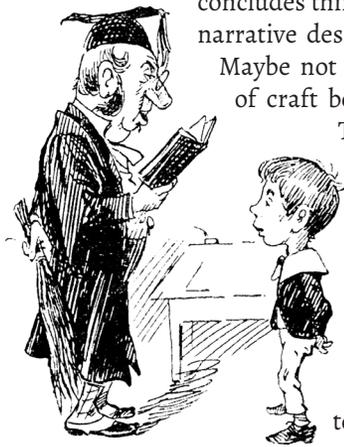
Yes, indeed, I sometimes put a story in the drawer for weeks, months, a year, before I can look at it with fresh eyes. But it is possible to put a story away for too long. I've been working on a revision of a story from over a decade ago that never quite worked. The best thing about the story was its weird, propulsive, frenetic voice. What I discovered is that I can no longer write in that voice—to do so would be faking it—so I have to recreate the world of the story from the ground up. And now it's a completely different story. So it goes.

RH: *What is it like to teach UChicago students the very basics of craft, having done your time on the other side of the workshop table? Why teaching, even?*

BB: You know what my teachers taught me when I was on the other side of the workshop table? The very basics of craft. Just in a different register. The “fundamentals,” as we call them here, involve questions that occupy writers at every level and every stage. Nobody ever concludes thinking about voice, and point of view, and narrative design, and how to make a sentence good.

Maybe not in the abstract, as teachers and writers of craft books do, but thinking through practice.

The fact is, whether you've published a book or are writing your first-ever story draft, we all want to write Flannery O'Connor's “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” and Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, and *Lolita*, and none of us fucking knows how, and it just kills us. So there is a sense of collaboration, of learning together, that I think maybe you don't get



It is dangerous to read in a sorcerer's books...

in other subjects in which “fundamentals” are being taught. I learn about writing (and reading) through teaching—if that's a cliché, it is so for a reason.

The *Why teaching?* answers itself if you're talking about UChicago. I don't know any writer for whom teaching is even a little bit fulfilling who wouldn't love teaching at this place. It's a privileged position for the teacher, because the students come already so well prepared, particularly as readers. I'm continually amazed at how biology and mathematics and economics majors are such good readers of literature. I have not seen this at other universities.

RH: *Joke question that may or may not be serious: Are MFA programs really the bastions of privilege I keep hearing about?*

BB: Of course they are. If you are an aspiring writer who happens to be so fortunate to be in an MFA program that pays you a somewhere-near-living-ish wage to attend workshops and seminars and lectures and readings, all in a vibrant community of peers from which you'll draw lifelong friends and colleagues and collaborators, and in exchange you have to maybe teach a few courses, or, lucky you, maybe not even teach any courses except voluntarily for extra cash—who wouldn't want that privilege? Now, is access to these privileges, in the larger context, as fair and just and equitable as it should be? Certainly not. Certainly not. But the privilege itself is a good. As Marilynne Robinson told us at Iowa, “Think about how many people in the entire fucking world are in a position where their only job for two years is to make beautiful things.” I mean that's obviously not a quote—she wouldn't have used profanity in that context—but you get the gist.

RH: *What is the role of literature in a world where people have overwhelmingly voted for political candidates and/or causes that are openly xenophobic, racist and misogynist? Is writing political?*

BB: First of all, nobody in this country “overwhelmingly voted” for the person I think you're referring to. He lost the popular vote. 70%-75% of the country did not vote for him. Remember that. Still, I get your point.

Carefully,
thou human
machine;
carefully, thou
man of clay!



Probably the role of literature is no different. People have always written literature—great literature, okay literature, forgotten literature—under regimes far more scary and brutal than any we’ve seen so far in this country or are likely to see anytime soon. It’s always worth keeping a historical perspective: think about, e.g., how and what people wrote in this country while their government was waging war on Vietnam, committing atrocities of monstrous proportions. Or, for that matter, while their government was operating a slave state. Or writers in other societies for whom writing itself was a political act because it drew the attention of power.

So what is happening now that the apocalypse has occurred? This starts to get back to what I said in the beginning—the shock of the real, that sense of collective trauma, is part of how we remember that history exists, that it’s something we’re part of, not outside of, not even in America. There’s real amnesia in our society; we keep forgetting history hasn’t ended because the Berlin Wall fell, or because lots of people got rich in a tech boom, or because President Obama was elected and re-elected. It sometimes feels like we’re living in a Francis Fukuyama Groundhog Day. History doesn’t end, and it ain’t pretty. See Walter Benjamin, Angel of.

The role of writers is to bear witness however they can, through whatever modes of representation they can. As to whether this work will end up saying anything of value about our cultural moment, our political moment—that’s out of our hands. It only becomes clear in retrospect. We do what we can, and we’ll find out later what really sticks.

Writing is political insofar as it helps us grasp reality rather than ignore it or misconstrue it. But writing isn’t politics. Organizing is politics.

RH: Last question: What projects are you currently working on?

BB: More stories. A novel. Now you know how to make me shut up.

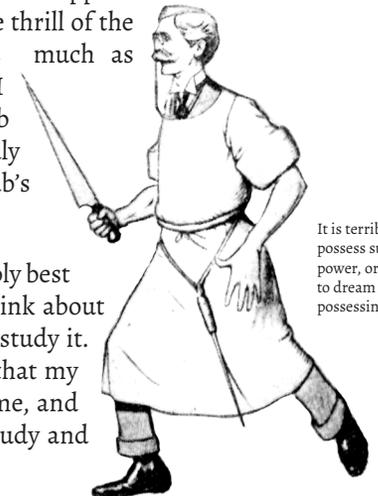
Meat and the Herbivorous Imagination

Anna Christensen

I have a somewhat fraught relationship with the raw meats and seafood aisles of the supermarket. As I pass I hold my breath and quicken my pace like any good vegetarian should, yet I can’t help but stare at the bloody ribs, the raw ground beef, the fish fillets. On a visceral level, my delicate vegetarian sensibilities are offended by the audacity of displaying a dead fish whole, its black eyes staring into the distance. But privately, I revel in the carnage, in the vacant stare of death, in my own disgust. That I love meat so much seems to confuse people whose relationships with it are squarely grounded in their own consumption of the stuff. My relationship to meat is just as physical, just as sensuous as theirs, but it’s grounded in a perverse fascination as opposed to some kind of simple pleasure. It’s the thrill of the encounter that holds my interest. And as much as I like to complain about the time that I was served the legless torso of small crab with beady black eyes in a supposedly vegetarian pancake, I still keep the crab’s picture on my phone to look back at.

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My relationship with meats is probably best characterized as theoretical. I like to think about meat, to look at it, to read about it and study it. The most likely explanation for this is that my vegetarianism makes meat strange to me, and thus better situates it as an object of study and



It is terrible to possess such power, or even to dream of possessing it.



fascination than a carnivorous diet would. As someone who has been a vegetarian for most of my remembered lifetime, my experience of meat has never been one of commonplace domestic consumption—instead, it's a brief and dangerous encounter. The fact that I am appalled by the bravado of those who would dare to be so intimate with dead flesh as to consume it only fuels my curiosity. The initial and sensuous thrill I take in coming into contact with meat is grounded not only in physicality but partly in imagination, which positions meat for me as something to be imagined and theorized rather than eaten. In this sense, the language I use to describe—to imagine, to theorize—meat should not be taken too personally. Often when meat is described as the repulsive, bloody flesh of a dead animal, it is with a specific political aim. If I invoke that same imagery, it is only because I find value in the estrangement that such grotesque language can achieve. If anything, there is something essentially good about what is bloody and mangled and dead because of the response it can provoke in those who contemplate it. Not that there's any good to be found in the processes that transform a living thing into a butchered, dead one, of course. But once it's there, meat is a profoundly interesting and valuable object, capable of driving deep reflection on the self and on the world around us.

To make a brief foray into this realm of meat as a source of reflective value, we can contemplate Charles Simic's poem, "Butcher Shop." Simic describes the experience of looking into the window of a closed butcher shop at night—the light "in which the convict digs his tunnel," an apron covered in "great rivers and oceans of blood." The poem ends with this stanza: *There is a wooden block where bones are broken,*

*Scraped clean—a river dried to its bed
Where I am fed,
Where deep in the night I hear a voice.*

In an interview with Simic in the *Paris Review*, Simic agrees that

these lines suggest a relationship between violence and creativity. Something good is made manifest from the violence and its remnants, whether a poem or a decent cut of meat. Simic calls the displays of meats that he would walk past "wonderful," evoking a kind of awe, but in his poem he clearly recognizes the grotesquerie of the butchering business.¹ In this way Simic's work and attitude point to a certain reverence for the creative potential of meat's more unsettling qualities or associations. His poem represents the reflective value of meat as a gateway to thinking about broader ideas. But Simic is intimately familiar with meat and butchery. In his childhood, as he recalls in the interview, he slaughtered chickens and watched pigs being killed and butchered. It seems natural that someone whose life experiences are so fundamentally and viscerally connected to meat would find value in reflection on it. Simic's early experiences with the process of butchery, in all its grotesque violence, give him his own degree of both intimacy with and estrangement from the meat itself. In this way, getting to know the meat too closely affords Simic the mental distance to reflect on its creative potential. What potential, then, can the vegetarian read into meat's presence? It is first worthwhile to explore how I perceive meat, as someone for whom the thought of eating the stuff is unfamiliar, even unsettling.

To begin to comprehend a vegetarian's attitude towards meat, one can perhaps turn to those meats that repulse the typical omnivorous American. Take the meat of a whale: though certain adventurous eaters would be glad to sample a whale steak, few would accept it as a regular dietary staple. A large part of this hesitance is due to the privileged position the whale now occupies as a symbol of animal sentience and the environmental movement. But even before the whale became a sympathetic figure in American culture, we were hesitant to consume its flesh. Nancy Shoemaker, in her essay "Whale Meat in American History," notes how, from our earliest encounters with whales in the New World, we have always viewed them as sources of oil and baleen but not of food. Even the whalers who occasionally partook of whale meat



1. Charles Simic, "Charles Simic, The Art of Poetry No. 90" Interview by Mark Ford, *Paris Review*, Spring 2005. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5507/the-art-of-poetry-no-90-charles-simic>

2. Nancy Shoemaker, "Whale Meat in American History," *Environmental History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Apr., 2005.

never viewed it as a normal entrée.² The average American may be fascinated or disgusted by the idea of whale meat, but will likely never consider it as a typical food source. This is the attitude that I take towards all meats. To me, meat is not evaluated on the basis of whether or not I will eat it. Unless I choose to ignore meat altogether, then, I am forced to find other ways to wrap my mind around its presence and existence.

Given this relationship, what could be the value of meat in the eyes of the vegetarian? Or of meats that make even regular carnivores uneasy? That it's possible for meat to have value outside of a culinary context might seem somewhat strange at first. When removed from this context, meat becomes an aesthetic object and a testament to the various biological, social, and societal processes that produced it. Asked to consider a cut of beef as a non-food item, even meat-eaters will first turn to the factory farms—the cruel and environmentally damaging practices that landed it on the plate in front of them. But that's what just came before, the context in which the meat was created. What about the here and now of the meat, the meat that sits on the plate in front of you? Considering meat as a physical and aesthetic presence, it becomes an unnerving, and quite literal, reflection of our inner selves. The bloody flesh that sits before us is relatively indistinguishable from our own, serving as a reminder of our embodied physicality, our mortality, and our intimate

connection to other living things. It is a liminal object, both strange and deeply familiar, straddling the realms of life and death. In looking at the meat we are humbled by the reminder of what we share with other living beings and by



It is so beautiful to the eye that I could imagine it the elixir of life.

the realization of our own fragility. It is good for the mind and the soul to be disturbed by the perception that things once held to be commonplace are now made strange and unfamiliar. This is where the valuable dimensions of meat as an object come into play: the disruption of everyday perception is the only way to forge a different kind of intimacy with what we regularly encounter. This intimacy is not grounded in the physical closeness of domesticity or the corporeal exchanges innate to digestive consumption, but in the closeness brought about by critical contemplation and the challenging of one's own closely held assumptions. Meat is uniquely situated as an extremely familiar object with great potential to move and disturb those who make the effort to complicate their interactions with it.

Returning to the meat of the whale—a meat that failed as a dietary staple because it was the site of these same complicated interactions—it is not just the whale's particular position within Western culture that made it an unappetizing entrée, but the physical qualities of the meat itself. Just as any meat, when conceptualized as an aesthetic object, becomes a liminal entity and a tool for theorizing about our own mortality and interconnectedness, whale meat's physical properties situate it as a strange and unsettling object. The meat, beefy in texture and appearance, nonetheless has a fishy flavor, generously described by one 1948 newspaper as "the flavor of a choice steer that has been hanging around the waterfront."³ This fishy flavor was the subject of much consternation, as newspapers reported on scientist's attempts to remove the fishiness of the meat and bolster its beefy qualities.⁴ The fact of the matter was that consumers found something uncomfortable about the whale's liminality and taxonomic uncertainty made so physically manifest. The prospect of taking such strange flesh into their own was simply not an appealing one on the grounds that even its physical presence broadcast uncertainty. People were forced, for a moment, to think with the whale meat, because the physical experience of eating it posed the unavoidable question of its proper taxonomic niche. Here, we learn a disheartening lesson: the experience of being forced to question and think about what the physicality of their meat is telling them is an unwelcome experience for the average meat consumer. For the vegetarian, however, this uncertainty can serve

3. "What a Whale of a Bargain!" *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), Aug 12, 1948.

4. "Tastier Whale-meat This Year", *The Manchester Guardian* (1901-1959), Feb 15, 1950; "Whale Meat as Food." *The New York Times* (1923-Current File), May 02, 1948; "Whacon for U.K. dinners." *Sunday Times* (Perth, WA : 1902 - 1954) 8 Jul 1951.

MEAT AND THE HERBIVOROUS IMAGINATION

as a springboard for further thought and theory. Undaunted by the implications of theorizing our own supper, we are free to use meat as a mirror into human uncertainties and insecurities. Meat eaters who wish to have the same experience (and perhaps this would benefit quite a few of them), must exert greater effort to estrange themselves from their meal. Though they need not perform this kind of thinking every time they sit down to a nice steak dinner, the purposeful extraction of meat from its culinary context affords a kind of freedom that would be valuable if exercised in omnivorous minds in addition to vegetarian ones.

In that freedom lies the importance of my abstention from meat, regardless of how fascinating and wonderful it is. It seems, in a way, that consumption of meat would be the ideal consummation of my relationship with it, the ultimate manifestation of an attempt to know, to connect with the meat. But an academic and ritualized act of consumption would be fundamentally different from a permanent dietary shift. Even apart from the fact that regularly consuming meats would limit the joy I take in their strangeness, I would much rather think about meats than eat them. I simply don't have the desire to partake of delicious cooked flesh. Vegetarianism, like so many other voluntary diets, is often framed as an ascetic form of self-denial, but for many of us that idea couldn't be further

from the truth. Despite what certain adamant culinarians would claim, vegetarians are not all stubbornly denying themselves the pleasure of eating meat for the sake of some moral superiority. I take great joy in eating whatever it is that I want to eat, and my vegetarianism is a direct result of that joy. Meat, in all its complicated strangeness, makes an unappealing entrée. I'd rather feast on what I know and love—what doesn't remind me of myself and plunge me into the realm of the theoretical while I'm trying to enjoy a simple meal. Perhaps

I've spent too much time contemplating the form and connotations of meat as an object to ever be able to enjoy its culinary value. For me, meat will always be good to think, but not to eat.



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