



CJLC ISSUE XIX



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Letter From the Editors

Dear **Reader**,

We are very pleased to welcome you to our nineteenth issue.

As the world continues to recover from COVID-19, navigating a culture suffering from social, economic, and political damage has proved to be a sobering challenge. Now returning to work, many of us are reshaping our pre-pandemic conceptions of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle balance. Keeping up with the robotic and unnatural demands of this transition has prompted an evaluation of alternative methods to exist in a world that demands efficient compliance. The result has been a recognition of the importance of personal time, positivity, and play.

The term "play" has one root in the Old English plegan, "to motive lightly and quickly, to frolic, to engage in sport." It has another root in the German pflegen, "to take care of, to nurture." Its range



of meanings is stunning: you can play your part; play the game; play God; or play along. While it may seem an impossible, and indeed flippant, charge to create a space for play in a world threatened by the behemoths of climate change, global inequality, and infectious disease, play is one of the main methods that humanity has used in the past to subvert existing power structures and maintain agency in a fractured world.

In this issue, we offer a wide range of interpretations of the word "play." Margherita Volpato writes about the use and persistence of light verse in literature, featuring the poets Auden and Cope to suggest the need for a light-hearted approach in writing about the world. Recalling the history of colonialism in Ireland, Dylan Hartman employs the post-structuralist concept of signification in his reading of J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. Elizabeth Dillon writes about the use of play in Madeline Miller's *Circe*, describing the titular character's attempt at playing human as well as Miller's playful use of the source text in crafting a modern rendition of the *Odyssey*. In a return to the modern day, Janice Monticello introduces us to IMVU, describing it as a site where we can assume a playful relationship to our identities, our bodies, and our relationships. The essay portion of our issue ends with Angie Lopez's piece about the photographers VanDerZee and Golden and their joint project of Black utopic potentiality, which is a playful doctrine in itself. Finally, as part of our Women in Translation project this

year at the journal, Campbell Campbell and Meg Young interviewed Jhumpa Lahiri about her forthcoming essay collection *Translating Myself and Others*. The issue also features art from our editor Lucia Santos, as well as Diego Antonia Plaza Homiston and Lulu Fleming-Benite.

This issue is a kaleidoscope of play. Through their varied lenses, our great contributors have given focus to multifaceted and highly relevant perspectives. It is our hope that, in reading this issue, you find the value of play

We would like to thank Nicholas Dames, our faculty advisor, for his continued help and inspiration, as well as Philip Mascantonio, our financial advisor, and Alyza Tüchler, the treasurer for the Activities Board at Columbia. Without their resources, guidance, and logistical support, the realization of this issue would not have been possible. We also thank Hazel Lou, our fellow student and graphic designer, for her work shaping this issue, which is a result of her great artistic vision.

Finally, we want to give our greatest appreciation to the wonderful team of editors and authors who have labored for months to bring this issue to fruition. Thank you for your dedication, insight, creativity, wit, and heart.

With pride and gratitude,
Eduardo Espinosa Rodriguez and Annelie Hyatt
Editors-in-Chief



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*“Play, Desire, and
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Imagination in John
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The Playboy of the
Western World
(1907)”*

Dylan Hartman



*Playing Human in
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*Playing With Fire:
The Deceptive Seriousness of Light
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BADDIES & BODIES: Remembering and Disremembering IMVU

Janice Monticello

The third-person social-networking platform known as IMVU is a three-dimensional metaverse teeming with social potential; its visual tenor invites us to dress and undress the meanings of virtuality and corporeality—to play the game and allow the game to play us back. Neither an acronym nor an initialism, IMVU engages us to beg the question: What can it stand for? Virtual bodies posit the opportunity for virtual subjectivity, but more importantly, for the breadth and mutability of such subjectivity. This piece transforms the layout of the essay to bare the uniform of the human body, thereby traversing its organs, systems, synchronizations, breaks, and flows. Like a critical rendition of the board game Operation, this essay evokes the possible veins of thought that the eccentric IMVU bodies and their movement, or lack thereof, specifically animate a discourse on IMVU corporeality. A nuanced understanding of the cohesive IMVU body demands the specificity of the body parts, just

as precision is necessary to win a game of Operation. Drawing upon Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella's assessment of the virtual existence, we will segue into French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the body without organs, which withdraws the image of the IMVU altogether to unveil the implantation of immeasurable human expression. This essay is accompanied by a compilation of critical collages made from scrap magazines and printed images that elicits the heart of its argument: Just as the name "IMVU" is only an arbitrary combination of letters cut and pasted from the birth of the virtual world, these collages emulate the breakage and consequential damage that organization and expectation wrecks against the body. Users revel instead of hide in the haphazardness and excess of curvature seeking to be desired in spaces that make room for the worship of stillness and pose. When we log in, we assume a body prepared for metamorphosis and we do not ever

truly log off; we are always changing—always playing.

TONGUE

The mechanics of communion are the same ones that allow for conversation. To both join the discourse and assist the swallow, the tongue welcomes us to the body of IMVU as an online metaverse and social platform within and without. IMVU was launched in Redwood City, California, in 2004, the first successful product of the Lean Startup approach. It is accessible on both PC and mobile devices, and targeted toward 18-24 year olds. This essay examines predominantly the PC format of the game, IMVU's original and intended medium of play. At the time of writing, there are over 200 million registered users, 7 million of which are active monthly and 60% residing outside of the United States. It is significant to distinguish IMVU as primarily an instant messaging platform, despite its likeness to a virtual game. The company utilizes virtual credits, which can be bought with real currency, to navigate the virtual economy. The true community of IMVU germinates from the ground of other social networks: IMVU avatars can cultivate profiles on Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok, introducing the potential for a following outside of their motherland. IMVU affords its users the opportunity to cultivate relationships beyond that of friendship. The website's clientele takes on an affinity with pregnancy and

familial relationships so that Instagram accounts are dedicated to the unification of IMVU parents and their ideal child. This is to say that the platform itself has the means to accommodate rather complex "virtual projects," consisting of the leveraging of grounded human experiences onto the creation of a virtual existence (Gualeni and Vella 564). Gualeni and Vella posit that these two experiences have a reciprocal relationship. The layers of existence and presence in cyberspace are heightened when users incorporate external values in a world that is valueless. When users rely on interpersonal relationships to guide the narrative in massively multiplayer online role-playing games, the relationships nurtured in the real world imprint on the activity in a secondary virtual world. Ergo, IMVU children are born. Though studies of virtual worlds, including Second Life and Sims, are abundant, IMVU-specific studies are relatively scarce, despite offering social opportunities comparable to those of the aforementioned sites. In fact, IMVU is considered quite niche. The current IMVU corporeality de-stratifies the body more than its contemporary virtual worlds. In tandem with a reading of the zani-ness of IMVU bodies and the uncanniness of the IMVU condition, I will observe how a simple dress-up and chat medium has made off with its caricature of bodily proportions while averting the academic gaze—how it is simultaneously unique and uninteresting.

eyEs

The cyberspace of IMVU consists of variously themed 3D chatrooms, ranging between the luxury of utopian island scenery and the moodiness of the nightclub aesthetic. Each room can showcase up to ten “presenters”, but can be seen by any voyeur. Some rooms even make enough space for over a hundred viewers. As a viewer, you do not inhabit a body, but rather, an eye: “The point now is to see and be seen, to grease the gears of desire and the desire to be desired within the machinery of surveillance” (Rikagos 186). George Rikagos’ triangulation of risk, bouncers, and the nightclub offers an understanding of IMVU 3D chat rooms as loci of desire, situating spaces like these under Thomas Mathiesen’s contemporary critique of the Foucauldian panopticon, the synopticon: where the few watch the many and the many watch the few (Rikagos 186). This system of seeing becomes a playground for human social desire and responsibility over the few, known as a risk group. As opposed to the Foucauldian panopticon, which features an institution of asymmetrical control and objectification over the many, the synopticon inverts this and becomes a bottom-up force regulating the actions of the few. For IMVU, these nightclub-esque spaces, or optic orgies, function similarly: “The desires of the nightclub – what draws bodies and collects them – becomes its own machinery” (Rik-

agos 188). IMVU houses excess in both its bodies and its terrain in the desire to be the most visible in the room, where rooms are optimized for visuals more than any other sense.

Similarly, Keith McIntosh, in his “Social Construction of Virtual Space,” celebrates the “themeing” within MMORPG Second Life as lacking the seduction of themeing in real life—“IRL” (McIntosh). Here, “themeing” represents the extension of real life systems that require representation in order to break and reimagine them. McIntosh asserts an innocence in the creation of space in Second Life that casts light on IMVU’s own erasure of malice in the desire to be desired. In a similar way, the night life of IMVU sheds the antagonisms of true visceral disorientation and inebriation that often occurs in the night time economy. Where real nightclubs commodify and market the cultural and social expression around desire, IMVU nightclubs contain a machinery that does not control the excess of expression. Instead, it merely lets one play. Themeing in IMVU becomes a job of mimicking the physicalities of the nightclub—the dark and the loud—while draining them of their power over the exploited senses. When this breakage happens, all that remains is a caricature.

Stoma ch

Where the IMVU body is a source of inexhaustible creativity, it can

also be a site of damage. Gualeni and Vella warn that the unlimited latitude and instant gratification that come with reproducing the virtual self “very quickly morphs into a compulsion to constantly re-produce ourselves anew” (Gualeni and Vella 3183). “Re-produce” here espouses an abusive meaning as opposed to a creative or fruitful one. This becomes the means by which we oppress and exploit ourselves, where our virtual bodies become victims to the indecision of being. Of course, virtual spaces are praised for this same pliability, but in the face of infinite resources, it becomes easy to neglect the use of caution against the commodification of existence and identity. Identity becomes flimsy and makeshift, ripe for experimentation but weak in its certainty. The self remains ambiguous, ebbing, and flowing. Perhaps that is the point of the IMVU body: the playability of the self in a game that one can never quite win. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Body without Organs, appropriated from Antonin Artaud, allows the IMVU body to become a space of a different form of damage against the organizing principle that is the virtual body (Deleuze and Guattari). The phrase “body without organs” does not claim to be a specifically incarnate one, but follows a panpsychic understanding of matter, in which “everything has a mind” (Goff). It is significant to note that this concept is faithful to a perpetual Brownian motion wherein there is no promise of eventually reaching the state of a body without organs. Neither an emancipatory

concept nor a cynical one, the body without organs is simply the existence of plurality of intensities and the erasure of a stratified system constituting organs.

This damage of the virtual body participates in the dismantling of our own selves as the IMVU body adopts avatar intensities across the unlimited space allotted to the curves of its body. The IMVU body stretches, scales, shrinks; it is irreducible in its magnitude of possibility for becoming-avatar. In Stephen Seely’s exploration of affective fashion, the author adopts an “involutionary becoming” from Deleuze and Guattari that takes place between clothing and the female body in which one “becom[es] out of hegemonic stratifications” (252). Similarly, IMVU bodies are a minoritarian subject: their practice of body-bending renders familiar human body parts absurd and freakish when they operate together, as a product out of not only Western ideals of bodily proportions, but also the established virtual ideals of the representation of the Western body. If the “body without organs” is a cosmic process for experiencing multi-layered intensities, the IMVU body is a reservoir of vast virtual potentials where we find ourselves becoming-mutated. The IMVU catalog sells “body scalers” which grant users the chance to transmogrify the original, default IMVU bodies into a myriad of contours and physiques, even those which are anatomically unsound. There is no concern with designing a mimicry of real life, but an augmentation of it.

SKIN

The novelty of IMVU rests on its rendition of an avatar and its worship of the stasis of image. The degree of inaction within the virtual world reimagines the capacity and responsibility of the body and its organs that inform the limits of this kind of play. This inaction is known as what I will refer to as the perpetual pose, or an uncanny stillness. Rainforest Scully-Blaker investigates the decision behind stillness and stasis in video games, arguing that stasis is a product of game mechanics while stillness is “voluntary inaction” and a product of game aesthetics (2). For the purposes of IMVU, as a game without objective, I will mainly discuss stillness rather than stasis. While IMVU does not follow the same velocities and stakes as traditional video games, the notion of “slow[ing] down our lives” as a counter position is valuable to spaces like IMVU to reveal the privilege of IMVU bodies in their “ability to ease the pain of acceleration” (Scully-Blaker 4). Surrounded by accessible sports cars and designer shoes, it is no surprise that IMVU avatars indulge themselves in the prerogatives of the elite. The game is not intended for the relentlessness of labor, but for the serenity of *laissez-faire*.

Observing the dimensions of virtual movement, travel in IMVU is not just inaction, but often just invisible. Navigating the room involves the pull and drag of the mouse, the screen often reacting slowly as if configured with resistance against any nimble, harsh movements. This mechanism is one of the many cases of a dawdle by design. In terms of

the avatar, every 3D space contains arrows across the landscape that, upon clicking, spawns the avatar to a new position and pose. Avatars exert no energy and therefore implies no attempt within the site to emulate the functions and labor of true human activity. Lacking a linear mode of travel and movement, the site maintains the barrier between the player and the avatar that eschews immersion. Simply hovering the mouse over the arrow generates a holographic image of one’s avatar that previews the potential space one can occupy and how. The physical existence of the IMVU body is a series of aesthetic choices in which the website prompts user meditation on one’s capacity to move. There is no simultaneity of the player and the ‘played’, but a flow between the hover of the mouse, the ponder, and the committing click.

Although IMVU bodies did not always take on these maximalist appearances, the blank, deadpan visage has always colored the community of IMVU. However, the “blank face is not an empty face” (Barker 5). Meghanne Barker’s extensive account of all the motivations of the blank face is a testament to faciality as a process within time, space, and culture, and Barker specifies that the interpretation of the blank face is a product of the viewer and their experiences alone. In the context of virtual worlds, this stillness of the face coupled with the stillness of the body generates a striking pause. It appears contemplative, not only for the avatar, but for the user as well, in which we buffer at the sight

of an inert, uncanny being. More importantly, though the face is often static, the meaning and affect persist fluidly. The IMVU face is in an eternal state of both contemplation and interpretation. Therefore, our ability to play is curbed by the game's inherent absence of movement and expression.

These examinations of the IMVU appearance culminate to the very heart of an unremitting transformation allowed by the IMVU canvas. The complexity of avatar design gives way to a right to over-exist, but the built-in lack of specific expression can regulate the license to play.

HEART

The once evocative poesy of the mating call, “u singl?” [sic] and pornographic spam that held a candle to Wordsworth can now only generate the sigh that blows it out. He who promised to be my kingdom come revealed himself to be from the depths of the underworld: IMVU.

Drama is central to communication on IMVU, promoted on the main website as “the chance to share our secrets, our fears, our passions and our individuality in a low-risk environment” (“Product”). The stakes are expressly acknowledged and erased, even demonstrated in the lack of oversight in its messaging features. IMVU seldom practices censorship or filters obscenity in chat the way most virtual worlds would.

While IMVU bodies undergo self-inflicted aesthetic abuse, the

spaces in IMVU also mutate into hotspots for verbal violence against other bodies. Though IMVU rooms are themed hubs containing real-world sensibilities sans the logic of a capitalist system undergirding IMVU relationships, the verbal abuse that is still made possible and often remains unfiltered is a danger in its own right. While the space for the exploitation of labor is relinquished in virtual worlds, the exploitation of one's presentation via avatar remains a symptom of IMVU's lack of regulation.

The chat system in IMVU enables other avatars to create and send animations with and using the recipient's avatar. Users can send gifs of a variety of interactions, often suggestive or intimate. As a consequence, our avatars are not exclusively ours; they can be appropriated and animated against our will to fulfill the desires of others. This position divulges the manipulation and spectacularization of the IMVU body, whose aesthetic power lessens with the growth of an exploitative origin. IMVU is unique in its seemingly limitless reciprocity of play: a rhizomatic system of players and ‘played’ that extend far past the screen itself.

NERVES

A series of 78 critical collages accompanies the original thesis that operate as a system akin to the, more or less, 78 organs of the human body, transforming this into a “body” of work. Shown are only a fraction of the 78 images that convey the pith of the total work.

The process of such a creation is just as vital to the work as the product: the act of cutting and pasting, printing images just to re-digitize them, and dismembering already cohesive shapes and images. The images are adhered with glue and tape, offering a creation without the promise of permanence, where we can peel back the layers where the paper bleeds and expose a series of breaks and flows and breaks, again. Their presentation reveals these moving parts as, ultimately, a singularity, whose layers are flattened to produce new meanings: a playful and serendipitous cohesion of torn, broken things. It is a process in the same way that IMVU corporeality is a process, existing so that *you*

can

play

you.

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Theater of War or
Play Fighting
Brush pen on paper
Diego Plaza Homiston
(CC '23)

Don't Stop Holding my Picture / Close:

Angie Lopez

The Queer Temporal Closeness of Photographic Works by James VanDerZee and Golden

James VanDerZee and Golden are two Black photographers whose work interrogates the construction of selfhood and community in order to inscribe the existence of an imperceptible, more liberated Black future into the present. VanDerZee worked during early and mid-20th century Harlem and is most known for the portraiture of Black middle class life and family that is central to his work. Golden is a contemporary Black gender-nonconforming trans-femme photographer, poet, and community organizer currently residing in Boston whose work similarly documents the intersection between Blackness and family within a more contemporary context, with a further integration of questions of gender (and its queerness) in his works. Though their artistic productions are isolated

from each other by several decades, their works should nonetheless be considered in close conversation. To consider VanDerZee exclusively within the paradigmatic constraints of chrononormativity—the social construction of time as linear and progressive with the past, present, and future (Freeman 2010)—is to prevent readers from developing a full understanding of his work. Instead, his thoroughly modern approaches to photographic production and staging should be seen as a reflection of his desire to warp temporalities (Willis et Al. 1993). In this way, VanDerZee abides to a queer temporality, a temporality that is affective, non-linear, and corporeal, which allows his work to be in an active and reciprocal conversation with Golden's work. I am basing my understanding of queer temporality and my research methodology on the work of American academic Carolyn Dinshaw who “imagine[s] temporality as queer...seeing [her]

investment in “the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then... such queer historical touches...form[ing] communities across time. This refusal of linear historicism [opens up the possibility of] multiple temporalities in the present” (2007). I thus seek to affirm not only the ways in which the cultural impact of VanDerZee’s work affects the more recent works of Golden but also the ways in which Golden’s works can shed light on the ongoing project of utopic Black potentiality to which VanDerZee’s work contributes.

To bridge these two artists together through a queer understanding of time is to amplify their individual and collective beliefs in the playful potentiality of Utopia, specifically Black Utopic potentiality. Often seen as “something that is embraced at youth and abandoned at maturity” (Zamalin 2019), utopia is the investment in the transformative power of play and imagination, of potentiality unbridled by the constraints of reality. In utopia, there is a child-like wonder that, when pursued into adulthood, manifests in the cultivation of hope, which “embedded in this dream [of utopic thinking]... exists in the stuff of daydreams...where there exists the possibility of realizing a new beginning, a future to come, a society yet unrealized but transformative in its vision” (Zamalin 2019). To believe in utopic potentiality, to invest in the revolutionary pursuit of a future whose resonances remain unanticipated in the present, to believe

in this transformative potential of the future, which, if understood through the lens of a queer temporality that blurs any discreteness between past, present, and future, can result in an equally revolutionary unraveling and reshaping of the past and the present (Munoz 2019). Additionally, potentiality can be the speculation of and the submission to unfulfilled desires just as much as it can be the anticipation of future fulfillment, for the centrality of desire, especially that which is not in the present, can positively disrupt the trajectory of desire in the future. After all, “queerness as utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. This desire is always directed at that thing that is not yet here... moments that burn with anticipation and promise... past pleasures stave off the affective perils of the present while they enable a desire that is queer futurity’s core” (Munoz 2019). Utopic potentiality can be less about the fulfillment of desire as much as it is about the centrality of entertaining the desire, playing with the possibility of its tangibility, even if and especially when it is unreachable in the hopes of rendering a utopic future more possible. Black utopic thinking specifically draws upon a lineage of Black utopic thinkers, with the first clearly identifiable one being Martin R Delaney. These thinkers formulated “new visions of collective life and racial identity. They outlined futuristic ways of being... They speculated on the ideal conditions for fulfilling human desire, while exploding its extant meanings”

(Zamalin 2019). Particularly influential in the conceptualization of this specific project's utopic vision are Samuel R. Delany's utopic work *Triton* that articulates a "spirit of utopia in which freedom needs to embody a state of becoming" and W.E.B Du Bois's work *The Comet* characterized by its "upending of the meaning of community." According to Zamalin, "It became unformed and fluid, organized less around rational communication and realized objectives and more around the shared presence in the face of the unknown... Du Bois rendered [] intimacy speechless—as not confined by words, of a togetherness based in shared solitude, as a struggle to articulate rather than easily realize wants, communicate feelings, and listen" (Zamalin 2019). Delaney's emphasis on the centrality of transformation evades coherence, stability and progressivism, and centralizes desire in the perpetual pursuit of transformation. Echoing Delaney, Du Bois's conceptualization of community similarly valorizes the irrational, the queer, and the relationality of bodies untethered by language and brought together through more urgent means underscored by utopic idealism and desire-driven potentiality. I am particularly interested in the pursuit of becoming as a state of being, with transformation existing as the root of both identity and change; furthermore, I am also curious about queerly constructed and sustained communities. Therefore, in this essay I draw upon the ideals of black utopic potentiality, as foregrounded by Delany and Du

Bois, to position these two photographers in speculative intimacy. My pursuit is not a conventionally art historical one in which questions of provenance and influence take center stage; on the contrary, my pursuit is a playful, utopic one that disentangles these photographers' works from the shackles of chrononormative restraints and returns them to an idealized state of intimate and revolutionary contact; it is to stage these photographers in a "moment[] of queer relational bliss" which has "the ability to rewrite a larger map of everyday life". When I ground my visual analysis in both of these artist's unique and interconnected gestures towards "future generations", I mean to center their "[signals of] a queerness [and Blackness] to come, a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life... These future generations are... the invocation of a future collectivity, a queerness [and Blackness] that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence" (Munoz 2019). To playfully place these photographers into conversation both with each other and with future generations is to embrace the revolutionary potential of connections across time and space that are rooted in utopic speculation, fantastical imagination, and transgressive searching of intimacy. If these two photographers' works can be considered both in close contact and in direct connection to the construction of Black futurity, then the revolutionary potentiality of art and of play is undeniable.



To begin, it is worth considering *Twin* (2021) (fig.1) and *Identical Twins* (1924) (fig.2) by Golden and VanderZee respectively. Both of these works document a pair of twins and in doing so epitomize the relationship between these two photographers' works. By drawing upon similar compositional and thematic elements in order to affirm the twins' unions as having strong

spiritual resonance, these works can themselves be considered twins, complementarily participating in the creation of an otherworldly Black spiritual identity that transgresses normative time. In engaging with questions of mysticism and parallelism, both photographers individually and collectively participate in the creation of a community that is similar to the one Du Bois outlined, rooted in the playful and utopic sharing of space and the communication with and about the unknowable. Spirituality in these works serves a medium through which the utopic potentiality of community and cross-temporal intimacy is achieved. In considering these works in conversation with each other through a playful approach to analysis untethered by constraints of chrononormativity allows for the auratic gravity of these works to emerge. VanDerZee's

Identical Twins features two women sitting on a furnished couch, with their legs crossed and pointing at each other, a book held up by the woman on the right taking on a central significance. Most notably, both women are dressed in the same robes and headscarves, wearing bracelets and bangles that equally mirror each other. Though scholars are quick to point to both the historical resonances of these accessories—the bangles connoting slavery and their garb connoting traditional African wear, and the historically specific resonances of modernity; the books seen as signs of Black cultural status, leisure time, and intellectual curiosity—it is only when the picture is considered in conjunction with Golden’s work that other compositional elements of the work begin to take new importance (Siddons 2013). In the ostensible foresight of Golden’s contemporary (re)iteration, it is the womens’ headscarves, adorned with a radiant sun, that begin to imply a psychic endowment that telepathically connects these women to each other and to the future. As Golden affirms in both the creation of their photograph and more prophetically in a written work of theirs, these twins become “omniscient / like light” (Golden, 2021). The iconography on these headscarves endows their posed asymmetry with nymphic playfulness, the tilt of the left-hand woman’s head with clairvoyant knowingness and the book held cryptically between them with prophetic charge. In this way, VanDerZee’s work does not simply construct a vision of Black modern

identity rooted in both in acknowledgement of historical oppression and present bourgeois lavishes, but more pressingly it constructs a vision of a Black potentiality that playfully anticipates the future and moves beyond antiquated narratives of oppressions towards speculative, utopic imaginings of what is to come.

Golden’s work, *Twin*, as *Identical Twins*’s atemporal twin, is equally endowed with psychic affect. The straight-forward gazes, Golden’s on the left being slightly more vacant, more reflective, and their twin’s, on the right, more knowing, more anticipatory, visually parallels the gazes of the aforementioned women in VanDerZee’s work. It is as if these contemporary twins are also given the gift of temporal disruption, of futuristic anticipation and historic embodiment. In this contemporary work however, there are no books, no telephone, no prop indicating a lavish modernity, only a picture frame, depicting a Black parental figure holding a child that hovers above the pair of twins. If Golden’s work amplifies the prominence of the headscarves in VanDerZee’s, the consideration of VanDerZee’s work similarly amplifies the gravity of the painting in Golden’s work. That this rectangular form takes center-frame visually echoes the book in VanDerZee’s work and its depiction of nurture, enveloping them in an air of elder’s protection, activates the phantasmic presence, the unseen but spiritually felt imprint, of VanDerZee’s twins in this 21st century work. Golden’s twins become the future itera-

tions of the baby in the frame, the centralization of their moment of nurturance serving as an acknowledgement of their linkage with a past that their currently bent knees, hanging wrists, and complementary asymmetry emulates. These twins are the futurity that VanDerZee's twins anticipated. They do not, however, simply converse with the past; they equally co-create a Black futurity of potentiality, one that "exists...as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future" (Munoz 2019). By choosing to close the gap between their bodies, as they have closed the gap between the past, the present and the future, they hold space for all temporalities with intimacy and resolution.



Despite the optimism in which both Twin photographs sketch potentiality, it is not always a task that lightens the future. On the contrary, works like Golden's *I just want to wear my orange dress to the tennis courts & come back home unbothered* (2020) (fig.3) and VanDerZee's *Her Cigarette* (Date Unknown) (fig.4) reveal that potentiality can be the speculation of and the submis-

sion to unfulfilled desires just as much as it can be the anticipation of future fulfillment, for the centrality of desire, as aforementioned, especially that which is not in the present, can positively disrupt the trajectory of desire in the future. Both of these works, in their use of photo-collage, assert the tantalizing omnipresence of impossible desire in which an alternative present is born. Despite desire's inability to fulfill itself in real-time, it ruptures the present with the mark of possibility and is therefore a revolutionary act rooted in playful exploration. In *Her Cigarette*, VanDerZee depicts a still-life of a woman's tabletop, cluttered with several items, including flowers and a telephone in the background, and cosmetic items in the foreground. At the center of the image is a lit cigarette in an ashtray whose smoke takes the form of a man's portrait. This untraditional portrait anticipates the surreal manipulation of images for the creation of fictionalized photographic narratives by several decades and thus reflects VanDerZee's queer interest in playing with photographic manipulation and documenting what "should be there" when it is absent (Willis et Al. 1993). By adding the cigarette smoke by hand and printing the portrait and the still-life simultaneously, VanDerZee created an image of desire that can only take form through surreal means; surrealism in this work being the material manifestation of the irrationality of playful utopic potentiality (Willis et Al. 1993). The cigarette acts as the ideal conduit to concretize

the intangibility of the woman's desire, through its intimacy with the woman's lips, its consumption through heat, and its propensity to incite reflection in its consumer, is In manifesting the man's image in its smoke, the cigarette represents the woman's yearning for a man whose image is made visible but, like smoke, ephemeral. When considered alongside Golden's work, a piece whose desire is not singular but politically charged with the social implications of marginalization, it becomes clear that the man's image in smoke is indicative of romantic desire—however, this desire for a man is itself a reflection of her unachievable desire to adhere to conventions of desirability and femininity. Seeing as the cigarette is posed among cosmetic items, the yearning for attractiveness, desirability, and male attention beyond that of love, takes hold. The man is seen looking away, implying that, intrinsically, something about this woman does not attract the male gaze, so even when solicited imaginatively, it is always out of reach. Therefore, VanDerZee creates a representation of not simply of singularly unrequited love but more urgently of Dubois's affirmation of socio-politically "feeling like a problem" (Du Bois 2005). Nonetheless, Vanderzee's playful posing of this feeling, despite its unattainability in the present, infuses the future with the moment's potentiality.



Golden pursues this sentiment through the exploration of the similarly unfulfillable desire of belonging, unbothered, to a public space as a gender non-conforming individual. Equally making use of photomontage, Golden creates a disjunctive image of themselves in which they superimpose an image of them wearing an orange dress and posing mid-swing with a tennis racket within the visible confines of an interior onto an image of an empty outdoor tennis court. The visible disjunction of these two images when considered alongside the image's title speaks to the work's centralization of the unfulfillable desire of existing as a gender-non-conforming individual in a public spaces with ease. Golden can only superimpose themselves onto the tennis court: fabricating themselves an indoor exterior, as indicated by the baby blue blanket behind them as a replacement for the sky. Unable to both wear a dress and be in public, to both playfully undermine binary understandings of gender and simultaneously participating in acts

of leisure, they are confined to the safety and isolation of an interior space, their presence on the court taking on a phantasmic quality similar to the man's portrait in VanDerZee's work. The tennis court, like the cosmetic items in *Her Cigarette*, becomes embedded with an aspirational quality. It is easy to see how this piece constructs a potentiality that socio-politically confronts marginalization and challenges the erasure of gender-nonconformity through its candid representation of this public omission. This work is a potentiality of absence, of unfulfillment that is activated to imagine an alternative present one day achievable in the future. Like the cosmetics in VanDerZee's work, the tennis court is a medium through which the unfulfillable desire, the desire to fulfillingly play, is made evident. When considering it in conversation with VanDerZee's work, the traces of loneliness, of sentimentality additionally emerge and endow the socio-political project with intimate importance. In Golden's work, their hand is open, palm facing up, gesturing upwards as one would do in order to throw a tennis ball into the air, or, alternatively, to solicit the hand of someone else. Thus, when Golden asks, in the work's title, to "come back home unbothered," they could either be aiming to play without disturbance but also, as implied in the ambiguity of their hand gesture and in conversation with the interpersonal urgency inscribed in *Her Cigarette*, seek to play in an accepting community (tennis after all, being a sport impossible to play alone). The potentiality of

this work then does not simply remain a political commentary on the marginalized position of gender-nonconforming individuals but also acts as an intimate gesture motioning towards empathy-building among previously hostile parties. Both works inflect each other with meaning and intensify the urgency of the unfulfilled desire they each represent. They co-create alternatives to the present that, though doomed to remain normatively unfulfilled, nonetheless succeed in considering "problem of feeling like a problem as not simply an impasse but, instead, an opening" (Munoz, Ochieng' Nyongó, and Chambers-Leston, 2020) in which innovative artistic techniques and utopic aspirations emerge.



Ultimately, the project of utopic Black potentiality that VanDerZee and Golden participate in is founded upon temporal multiplicity and photographic intervention. One last work to consider is Golden's "I'm searching for & from freedom" (2021) (fig.5). Although this work does not have a historical equivalent produced by VanDerZee (in this way it is anticipating a future kindred piece still in works), it nonetheless participates in the creation of a queer temporality that collapses the discreteness of the

past, the present, and the future in order to work towards the achievement of socio-political and artistic freedom while also centralizing the importance of photography in this pursuit. In this way, it is the artistic culmination of Golden and VanDerZee's collective efforts to build a utopic Black potentiality. "I'm searching for & from freedom" (2021) depicts Golden in a high lunge facing the right of the composition, their right arm extended behind them. They are standing on top of a cylindrical metallic structure that is framed by a photographic backdrop stand holding up a draping cloth. The center of the image, which encompasses both Golden and the cloth, is in black and white while the periphery of the image, in which the exterior of a home is visible, is depicted in color. The temporal collapse of this work, its co-presence of the past and the future, in addition to its self-referential meta-inclusion of the art of photography, affirms the necessity of both photography as an art form and queer temporality as a paradigm in the construction of potentiality. The juxtaposition between black and white and color speaks to a co-existence of the past, as seen by the former, and the present, as seen by the latter, that affirms the existence of multiple temporalities in the present. This affirmation further allows for a closeness of the past and the future to emerge. Golden's choice to depict themselves in black and white in conjunction with the title's use of the words "for & from" suggest an intimate relationship between the past and the futurity

building, or as Golden frames it, the searching for freedom, thus becomes a revolutionary act, in both senses of the word, a turning back and a complete, dramatic change (Freeman 2010). Freedom can be conceptualized both as a general socio-political freedom currently inaccessible to Black individuals but also, seeing the centrality of queer time in this work, a freedom specifically from chrononormativity, or the freedom from all the above, the freedom thus to engage in the meaningfully playful and utopic manipulation of time, space, and belonging.

Overall, James VanDerZee and Golden are two photographers whose intimate artistic connection overcomes the normative constraints of time. By inflecting each other's work with new and dynamic meaning, they participate in an ongoing conversation about Black selfhood, community, and socio-political bearings. Despite working seventy years apart, they nonetheless participate in a collaborative generation of utopic potentiality that continually constructs an articulation of Black futurity. By collapsing the discreteness of the past, the present, and the future in their works and co-creation, they shed light on the radical freedom that queer temporal re-imagining can provide. In doing so, they construct a vision of the self and of the world that is rich with alternative explorations of temporality, desire, and closeness.

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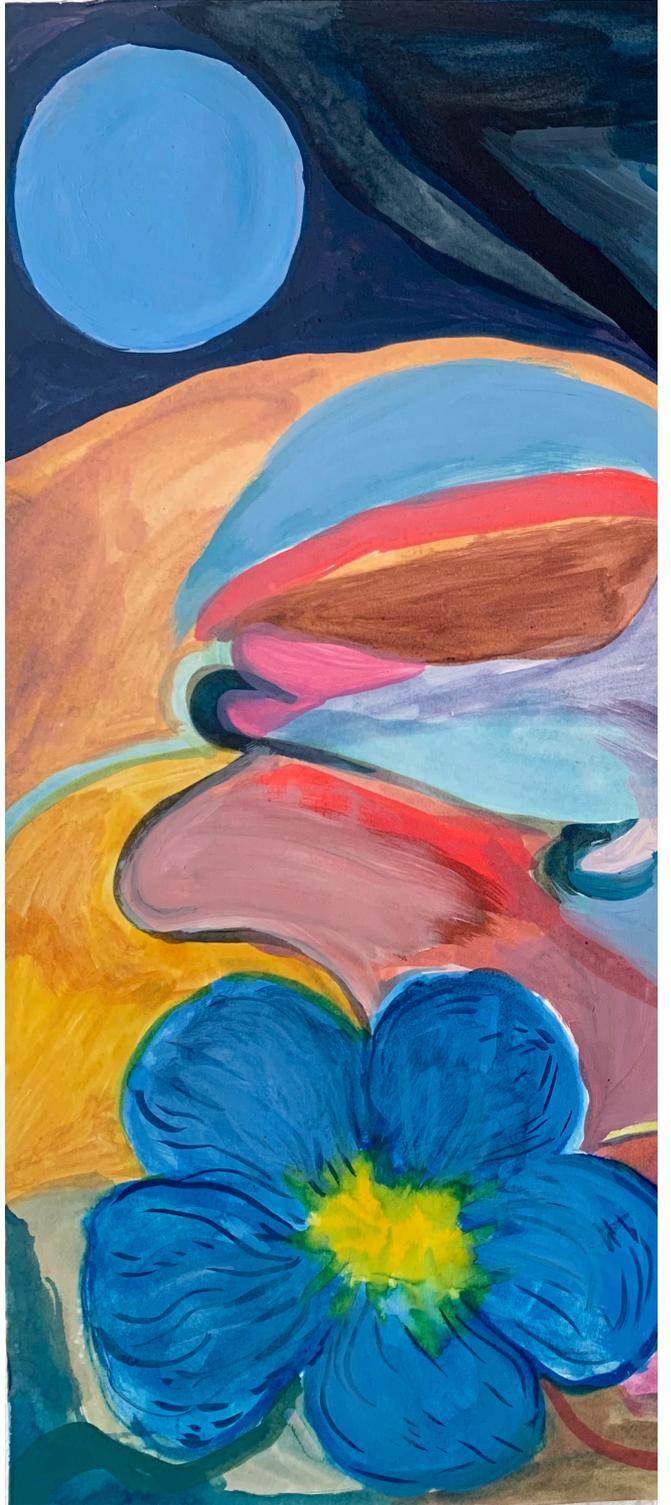
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Night
Oil on Canvas
Lucia Santos
(CC '25)



Playing Human in MADELINE MILLER's Circe

Elizabeth Dillon



Madeline Miller's 2018 best-selling novel *Circe* explores the intersection of mortal and immortal existence through the eyes of its eponymous heroine, a goddess from Greek mythology endowed with a curiously human-sounding voice. Instead of rejecting her mortal-like voice, Circe inhabits the liminal space between humanity and divinity, finding freedom in playing and performing humanity. Miller's novel is an endeavor to play with her source material, the *Odyssey*, in a way that blurs the line between translation and adaptation in its exploration of meaning. Play is an integral part of the interpretive process for both Miller's textual interpretation and her character Circe's self-interpretation.

From the outset, Circe's interactions with her divine contemporaries mark her as an inferior due to her voice. Her sisters tell her that "it is a shame you cannot hide your voice," which is "screechy as an owl" (Miller, 9-10). Despite her sisters' mockery, Circe does not come to realize the full ramifications of her voice until the god Hermes explains:

"Most gods have voices of thunder and rocks ... To us, mortals sound faint and thin ... It is not common," he said, but sometimes lesser nymphs are born with human voices. Such a one are you" (93). In the world of Miller's novel, the role into which gods and goddesses are born dictates their physical aspects as well as their abilities. As a "lesser nymph," Circe has no power to alter the quality of her voice and what she calls "the strangeness that [lies] there" (94). Her human-sounding voice is thus a physical representation of her marginal role within the divine hierarchy, making her powerlessness immediately evident to her godly peers. Because her voice seems to transgress the boundary between mortality and immortality, it firmly prescribes her lesser role in the divine realm, leaving limited room for Circe to engage in self-determination and play.

Even as Circe is circumscribed by the immortal world, she becomes fascinated with mortal existence. She steals away to speak to the god Prometheus, who is receiving punishment for unlawfully

giving fire to the human race (21). When Circe asks Prometheus what a mortal is like, he tells her that “There is no single answer. They are each different” (22). He introduces Circe to a world of possibility and diversity, where the variety in humanity lies and where, as Prometheus adds, “not all gods need be the same” (22). Reflecting on this conversation, Circe considers the value of difference and of challenging categories, realizing “that all my life had been murk and depths, but I was not a part of that dark water. I was a creature within it” (24). Circe finds divinity to be dark and confining rather than full of power and potential. For the first time, Circe is able to differentiate herself from the “murk and depths” of her divine existence, recognizing her autonomy as a “creature” capable of movement and of play. Emboldened by this realization, Circe hesitantly begins to reach across the immortal-mortal divide. One day, as Circe spends time on a deserted island and struggles with loneliness, she encounters Glaucos, a humble human fisherman (37). They converse, and when Glaucos expresses a desire to see Circe again, she observes that “it was not until that moment that I think I had ever been warm” (38). As they spend more time together, Circe eventually falls in love (40). Like Prometheus, Circe learns to see the beauty and value of human life. Looked down upon by her divine peers, Circe first finds genuine connection with a mortal. As a result, her voice becomes a meaningful aspect of her immortal identity, such that she feels “some-

thing almost like recognition” when contemplating its human quality (94).

Circe’s love for Glaucos also prompts her to play with the boundary between mortality and immortality. Fearing the inevitability of Glaucos’ death, she secretly turns to witchcraft, which is forbidden by the gods. Using the sap of an herb grown from the blood of the gods, Circe makes Glaucos immortal (50). Unfortunately, her plan backfires when Glaucos rejects her in favor of the nymph Scylla, and Circe again resorts to witchcraft to turn Scylla into a hideous monster (57). Once caught, Circe is banished to the Mediterranean island of Aeaëa. Her marginalization as a lesser goddess and her fascination with human life jointly motivate both her transgressions on her divine power and on Glaucos’ lifespan; her resulting exile makes her alienation from the divine realm complete. Playing with the lives of others—as powerful gods do—brings Circe only punishment.

Yet Circe’s permanent banishment from the immortal realm gives her the space to further immerse herself in the human experience and to attempt to play with her identity. When wandering sailors wash up on her island, they assume her to be mortal. Circe seizes this moment as an opportunity for imaginative play: “I stood there, charmed by the idea. What would my mortal self be? An enterprising herbwoman, an independent widow? No, not a widow, for I did not

want some grim history. Perhaps I was a priestess. But not to a god” (185). For Circe, the idea of playing mortal suggests a myriad of possible identities and thus frees her from her role as a lesser nymph. She allows herself to ask questions and posit hypotheticals. Instead of wielding her witchcraft to impose a new existence upon others, Circe is using her imagination to envision new ways of being for herself. Pretending to be human enables Circe to cease relying on witchcraft to renounce the divine world, which has restricted and exiled her. Playing human is liberating for Circe because the limitations of her own immortal life seem to disappear.

Despite the benefits of imaginative play, it is still risky for Circe because she must confront harsh realities on her own. The wandering sailors are unafraid of Circe because of her human-sounding voice, leading them to sexually assault her (185). In response, Circe again resorts to witchcraft, turning all visitors to her island into pigs until the hero Odysseus catches her in the act. As Circe’s life becomes entangled with the fate of the hero Odysseus, the Olympian gods Apollo and Athena appear on her island and violently assert their authority over her (229, 246); Circe cannot escape her divine past even on her island. Yet Circe continues to assert the value of her selfhood, telling Apollo that “I will not be silenced on my own island” (229). Lacking the comparative safety of bounded categories and the communities that

they provide, Circe must rely on her own sense of self to keep going—a sense of self that is crucially expressed by her human-sounding voice and her rejection of silence.

However, the mere performance of humanity is no longer fulfilling for Circe. Her dissatisfaction with imaginative play reveals where her more authentic identity lies. Suggested and aided by the innate sound of her voice, her performance of humanity allows her to identify more completely with the human experience. As Circe’s life intersects with those of Odysseus and his son Telemachus, she finds that “though I looked and sounded like a mortal, I was a bloodless fish” and wishes she could “cross over” (377). Circe’s final divine act is to choose true mortality: “I have a mortal’s voice, let me have the rest” (385). By playing with categories, Circe effectively interprets the human-like voice she was born with; she ‘tries on’ mortality and finds that it represents a truer version of herself. Playing this role brings the self-knowledge she needs to make her performance into a reality.

In fashioning the character of Circe, Miller engages as an author in her own form of interpretive play. The author’s depiction of Circe’s human-sounding voice stems from Homer’s own description of the goddess in the *Odyssey*. Miller has disclosed that the Homeric phrase *δεινή θεός αὐδήεσσα*, which she translates as “dread goddess who speaks like a mortal,” was “vital in shaping Circe’s story” and, to her, “suggested a person who was

caught between worlds—born a goddess but drawn to mortals, an outsider who doesn't quite know where she belongs" (Miller 2020, p. 4). In interpreting the Homeric phrase, Miller does not employ one-to-one Greek-to-English translation, nor does she ignore the substance of the original language. Instead, Miller operates based on suggestion and possibility to interpret the phrase and allows it to profoundly influence her characterization of Circe. Miller's use of her source material blurs the boundary between different textual approaches, playing with the distinction between translation and adaptation.

In fact, the three words δεινὴ θεὸς αὐδήεσσα—so inspiring to Miller's imagination—are not unique to Circe in Homer, nor are they always thought to possess such a strong connotation of liminality. The descriptive phrase occurs only four times in the *Odyssey*, three times of Circe and one time of the nymph Calypso, another of Odysseus's divine lovers. The Cunliffe Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect defines these uses of αὐδήεις as "using the speech of mortals (as opposed to that of the gods)," differentiating from its uses "as a general epithet of human (as opposed to divine) beings" (60). The Liddell-Scott-Jones Lexicon defines the adjective generally as "speaking with human voice," and specifically in the case of the goddesses Circe and Calypso as "using human speech." Two translators of the *Odyssey* into English have aligned with these interpretations, with A.T. Murray in 1919 translating 'dread goddess of

human speech' and Emily Wilson in 2018 writing "the beautiful, dreadful goddess Circe, who speaks in human languages/"the goddess who can speak in human tongues." To other scholars, the phrase denotes a god using mortal language, not the inherent mortal-like quality of voice that Miller envisions.

Miller's interpretation is able to fully explore the implications of boundary crossing identified by Michael Nagler in his article "Dread Goddess Endowed with Speech." Nagler asserts that the phrase is not exceptional, considering "the common poetic and mythological concern for 'voice' as an identifying characteristic" (77-78). In addition, Nagler claims that the focus of the phrase lies more with the word θεὸς ("god"), emphasizing the way Circe speaks to humans specifically in her capacity as a goddess; Homer uses the phrase of goddesses who possess "a precious contact with a realm that is usually inaccessible to the mind of man" (79-80). Miller's decision to have Circe opt for a mortal life is bold given that Nagler associates the epithet with contact between the immortal and mortal spheres.

Yet the choice of mortality over immortality is also central to the *Odyssey* itself, in which Odysseus rejects the immortal life offered to him by Calypso in favor of living out his days with his mortal wife Penelope. In fact, scholar Vincent Tomasso views the epic poem's first word, Ἄνδρα ("man"), as emblematic of the centrality of mortality as opposed to immortality throughout the epic (135). Similarly, classicist

Lillian Doherty describes that the Odyssey often celebrates “various forms of escape from [social and divine] constraints,” and that mortality actually represents an “open” choice because immortality “conceived as repetition of the same, can seem ‘closed’” (52, 62). Miller’s interpretive process is characterized by play, where three little words from the Odyssey become an opportunity for thematic investigation, one that deepens and develops ideas present in Homer’s epic.

The notion of play offers a richer way of viewing the interpretive choices involved in modern myth retellings like Miller’s. Feminist revisions in particular are expected, as Elena Theodorakopoulos notes, to challenge and subvert the classical tradition (152). Indeed, in her review of Miller’s *Circe*, Alexandra Alter of *The New York Times* calls the novel “a bold and subversive retelling of the goddess’s story.” However, labeling Miller’s adaptation as “subversive” ignores her studied attention to Homer’s original wording and insinuates that her novel undermines or contradicts Circe’s portrayal in the *Odyssey*. While it is common for modern myth retellings, and for minor-character elaborations more broadly, to offer a critique on their source text(s), it is clear that Miller is doing something different. The expectation of subversion in feminist adaptations favors a closed interpretive choice marked by reversal, and thus places limitations on the interpretive process. In contrast, Miller’s playful adaptive process more closely resembles

Theodorakopoulos’s description of a “decidedly feminine way of thinking about translation, with its emphasis on open-endedness and darkness, its rejection of totalizing or closed meanings” (152). Defining postmodernism as “playful and ironic” (42), scholar Bojana Aćamović identifies that the aim of the postmodern epic is “to indicate that the canonical texts can be read in many different ways” (44). Miller’s interpretive play and rejection of fixed meaning is reminiscent of a postmodernist textual approach. She is neither limited by the constraints of ‘accurate’ translation nor by the demands of ‘subversive’ feminist readings. Miller’s novel explores the depth of Circe’s character in a way that is rooted in Homeric language and themes but also influenced by Miller’s own unique creative perspective.

Only in Miller’s playful text, which rejects straightforward interpretive categorization, can a goddess dare to choose mortality. Surrounded by the limitations of her immortality, the character Circe acknowledges the humanity of her voice and dares to be inspired by it, to taste mortality and imagine a new reality for herself. Miller appreciates the language of her source text and dares to be inspired by it, to blend open-ended translation with adaptation and re-imagine the character of Circe for herself. In Miller’s and Circe’s searches for meaning, play is an invitation to a world of possibility, exploration, and the freedom to choose.

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Memory of Youth
Digital photograph
Diego Plaza Homiston
(CC '23)





Playing with Fire: The Deceptive Seriousness of Light Verse

Margherita Volpato



For those unfamiliar with the term, ‘light verse’ (often obfuscated by slippery definitions) is traditionally characterised as a harkening back to children’s verse, in the form of nursery rhymes, sing-song rhythms and nonsense poetry. In the wake of modernism, poets such as W.H. Auden began arguing that “light verse is any verse [. . .] in which the author demonstrates a relaxed intimacy with his audience, its language, and its concerns” (Behlman 485). This sense of familiarity with the reader is visible in Auden’s own delivery, which is often conventional or extremely rhythmic. Auden mixes humour with repetitive forms, allowing light verse to be aware of its own simplicity and liberated from any anxieties about appearing high-brow. This sense of connection defines the form for Auden, and others (such as E.E. Cummings, Louis MacNeice, and Kenneth Fearing), as “a quintessentially liberal form that can only emerge in functioning democracies” (Behlman 486). Therefore, light verse recognises itself as a product of a liberal society and is implicitly

(or explicitly) involved in political and societal conversations. Auden, I argue, was the first to recognize the true power of light verse, as we understand it now; with it he addresses those concerns which he feels speak to his contemporary reader during the 1930s: war, fascism, totalitarianism, and other violences.



Critics have largely forgotten the personal yet political power of light verse, and many no longer consider it in terms of Auden’s vision. Patrick Kurp, writing in 2019 for the Los Angeles Review of Books, states that “only in the last half-century or so has light verse become less than respectable among readers, poets, and critics, and less ubiquitous in popular culture” (Kurp). Considering everything that has happened since then, light verse deserves to be reconsidered in terms of its relevance to today’s context. One of the foremost figures of twenty-first century light verse is Wendy Cope, whose work takes its formal inspiration from Auden. Her own poetry has achieved longevity because it too deals with personal concerns,

specifically from a woman's perspective, that pervade and define daily life. Like Auden and other interwar poets, her poetry feels a responsibility "to attend to the ordinary and the habitual as well as the miraculous" (Baldrick 106). This familiar sense of repetition should appeal to our contemporary sensibilities as well, and in particular our need for quick and small snippets of information to go viral in seconds; indeed, "in an age of entitlement and political strife, when memes and snark ad hominem assaults go viral, perhaps light verse is recapturing some of its broader appeal" (Kurp). In turning to Cope, therefore, I will look to the politically precarious context of today and argue for the continuing relevance of light verse to our understanding and communication of the world around us.

Light verse makes its impact primarily through its compact form. This is why repetition is so important, and why Auden's commentary is enacted primarily through the disruption of grammar. In his early poem, "What in Your Mind, My Dove, My Coney" (1930) Auden explores what it would mean for animals to hold the same individualistic motivations which govern human mentality. The subject matter is decidedly light, as Auden is intent on anthropomorphising animals (such as birds and bunnies) and questioning their motivations, which readers know are not truly conscious, but rather instinctual. There is a tension, therefore, between the schematic imposition

of form and rhyme and the content; the poem becomes humorous for its ridiculousness. The third and fourth line of the poem exemplify this tension:

**Is it making of
love or counting of
money,
Or raid on the jewels,
the plans of a
thief? (Auden 4)**

There is no set meter which governs this short poem, and this makes readers question the omission of the definite article in both of the lines above. This omission of articles eludes specificity, as certain actions—such as 'making' or the 'raid'—are suspended as hypothetical gestures which never definitively take place. This reflects the way the poem deals with the subject-matter in general. Auden allows for readers to question the unfamiliar but not philosophize too much; indeed he tells us so in the second line: "thoughts grow like feathers, the dead end of life" (Auden 4). Thoughts on the page, and in poetry, he suggests, can be stated prettily enough but are quite useless in the course of daily life. Auden prefers the poem to proceed in an instinctual, primal form, letting the speaker succumb to their 'fight-or-flight' mode of response, which he exemplifies in the last stanza:

**Rise with the wind,
my great serpent;
Silence the birds**

and darken the air;
Change me with terror,
alive in a moment;
Strike for the heart
and have me there. (Auden 4)

Sound, through the rhyme scheme, becomes the creator of meaning, as rationalism is denounced for the immediacy that sound is able to communicate. The poem's aversion to a fully-rhymed ABAB scheme (opting instead for pararhymes or half-rhymes) speaks to the "emancipation of modern verse techniques from earlier constraints" (Baldrick 77). This poem, with its base subject matter and simpler, but more flexible, rhyme scheme, makes the reader "[g]o through the motions of exploring the familiar", because it recreates a childlike experience of communication (Auden 4). The form asphyxiates the content but is enjoyable exactly because of this, in the way it reflects how societal mores and codes can be equally confining in life. Its playfulness lies in its lack of meaning, which becomes distinguishable only via the sounds created. Auden is all too aware of the difficult task of reading poetry and so, with "My Dove, My Coney", wishes to revert to a simple, basic, sonorous understanding, irrespective of whether it borders on the nonsensical or not. This poem is about enjoying the sounds of form only and exploring the possibility that meaning may simply be instinctual.

Sound is equally important to Auden in his other forms of light verse; for example, in poems like "The Three Companions" (1931) where he adapts Anglo-Saxon alliterative patterns for his own modern intentions. This satirical heroic poem is thematically centred around the contradictory relationship between change and fixedness; in terms of content, the hero argues against nay-sayers who dissuade him from his journey, while the form reflects on the content by ironically using a medieval alliterative verse form to communicate this contrast. This aligns with Auden's interest in employing light verse as a commentary on modern society. The repetition of form expands our understanding of content—playing, again, with expectations to deal with serious and perpetual concerns light-heartedly.

Auden composes his best light verse, however, when he combines the habitual with the occasional, especially his poem "Danse Macabre" (1938) which deals with (what he saw as) the impending war in Europe through the form of a medieval death allegory. Even more so than "The Three Companions", "Danse Macabre" expands the medieval form by integrating modern registers and vocabulary into the poem without delimiting and separating them via caesura and reported speech. The conversational tone speaks directly to the reader, and yet "[a]lthough the voice speaking in first person singular appears to reveal a human being rather than death personified" Auden "shares

the typical properties owned by the medieval representations of death”, thus doubling the voice to encompass multiple perspectives, through multiple forms (Bús 90). The content of this poem, however, is darker than “The Three Companions”, and demonstrates light verse’s ability to deal with genuine, and horrifying, subject-matter. War is discussed in “Danse Macabre”, but it is never downplayed. To borrow from Kurp: “[a]s to the charge of frivolity, the poet Bruce Bennett notes that the best writers of light verse “not only verge on seriousness; at times they embrace it” (Kurp). Although Auden embraces seriousness here, there is still an enjoyment in collaging the modern with the medieval. Auden comments on the futility of war, and the childishness and despicability of those that incite violence for their own hatred. Throughout, Auden does not only personify Death, but further humanizes him and ridicules him through a collage of contemporary dictators of the 1930s:

**For the Devil has
broken parole and
arisen,
He has dynamit-
ed his way out of
prison,
Out of the well
where his Papa
throws
The rebel angel,
the outcast rose.
(Auden 39)**

The fixed ABAB quatrain rhyme turns the nursery rhyme style on its head and allows it to self-reflexively point the finger at the Devil, who is demeaned. The repetition of ‘arisen’ and ‘rose’, which show the Devil fighting to stay on top, seems futile in comparison to the overwhelmingly fixed rhyme scheme and register, where ‘Papa’—God, or the fair and just authoritative figures of the world—will always win. Thus, the rhyme simultaneously laughs at the subject-matter and comforts the reader in the face of it. Just like a nursery rhyme the poem wants to assure its reader that though war may happen, justice will prevail. But it never does this in a condescending fashion. He allows moments to shift in tone, so as to encapsulate all of the nuanced feelings that war dredges up within the civilians that must face the consequences of such figures as the Devil. In the end, through seriousness Auden manages to make these figures unserious, as he rhymes a list of Biblical names, ending in “Paul, [a]nd poor little Horace, with only one ball” (Auden 40). The expert pun here is an explicit reference to a certain dictator. Tone is actively in tension in this poem, but necessarily so, because it is this playful back-and-forth that allows Auden to nuance war into a playground scuffle, while never allowing the true horrors of it to escape the reader’s mind. Escapism is allowed, but only temporarily—and as readers, we revel in it.

It is this expert handling of tone,

the ability to juggle pure, humorous poetic escapism, which is paradoxically situated firmly in the habitual, that Wendy Cope inherits from Auden. Her collection *Serious Concerns* (1992) never strays to discuss the same horrific subject-matter that Auden tackles in his light verse; regardless, she tackles another war: that which exists between the sexes. Her ability to nuance individual moods relies much on the conversational nature of light verse. Cope opts for a ballad for the collection's opening poem, "Bloody Men", which harkens back to the traditionally oral nature of the form.

"Bloody Men" is equally invested in its oral and colloquial inheritance, as it plays on the popular idiom of busses coming in threes, and the expectant passenger never being able to catch one. The familiar alternating rhyme of ABCB in this opening poem immortalises the female frustration with men and figures it as never-ending. This is important, because "[l]ight verse has to deal with timeless issues [...] to have any longevity at all" (Kurp). Just as Auden, in his anthology *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1937), wanted to satirize the canonization of literature (which the likes of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats had undertaken) to include all verse styles and modes, so too is Cope interested in inserting the female perspective into the history of light verse. Furthermore, the poem takes inspiration from Auden's own light verse, as the interior structure resembles "The Three Companions" take on alliterative verse, significantly reaching

back into the past and adapting it, just as Auden intended:

**Bloody men are like
bloody buses—
You wait for about
a year
And as soon as one
approaches your
stop
Two or three others
appear. (Cope 3)**

Cope's opening poem is rife with internal rhymes and sounds. Not only does she repeat 'bloody' frequently, showing the reader exactly where to place the emphasis in the line because of the word's expletive nature, but she alliterates 'bloody' with 'buses,' making the poem fun to say for how emphatically it can be read aloud. This opening line sets out the flexible alliterative pattern that marks the rest of the poem. The second line is bookended by the 'y-' sound of 'you' and 'year', which aids the flow of air while reading; this is in contrast to the 't' sound at the end of 'about' and 'wait', halting the reader because of how difficult this alveolar plosive is to say quickly in succession. This pattern emphasizes the juxtaposition of time in this line, as the speaker is in a constant state of waiting but simultaneously anticipates that her bus (or man) is about to come. The 'stop' at the end of line three, therefore, holds a double meaning as it both stops the narrative of the poem—because of the bus (/man) has arrived—and suspends the experience so as to

render it universal; thus, in “Bloody Men” she captures the repetitive nature of female frustration with their opposite sex realistically but also humorously.

Despite clearly preferring topics that are personal, and perhaps even mundane, Cope (like Auden) is not afraid to venture into more serious concerns (hence the title of her collection) and to comment on the problems that she perceives in society. In “Noises in the Night” (reproduced in its entirety below), Cope tackles elements of systematic unfairness that women face by reflecting on it through the familiar lens of differing domestic experiences. By clearly setting the poem at home, in the comfort of a bed, Cope highlights how these spaces are still of heightened significance for women and can be charged for them, despite being spaces of relaxation for men. While her partner sleeps, the speaker questions and wonders how he can sleep so peaceful, and if it is only because he drank:

**Why are men so good
at sleeping?**

**Is it just the
drink?**

**While we're toss-
ing, turning, weep-
ing,**

**Why are they so
good at sleeping?**

**Snoring, whistling,
grunting, beeping—
No one else can get**

a wink.

**Why are men so good
at sleeping?**

**Is it just the
drink? (Cope 73)**

The constant reiteration of action in the present participle, which the speaker uses to describe the noises her partner is making whilst sleeping, is so ridiculous that it incurs laughter. The change from ‘snoring’, an obviously normal though annoying sound one might make whilst asleep, to ‘whistling, grunting’ and then ‘beeping’ is hilarious because there is truth in it. However, this is contrasted with her ‘tossing, turning, weeping’. These distinct experiences, which are figured in the same way but incur very different responses, are the daily struggle which the poem is trying to communicate. There is also an extreme tonal shift which occurs throughout this small poem; in the opening, the two questions hold an exacerbated and yet affectionate tone, but they change with every incarnation, and are infused with more and more desperation. Cope is conveying the unfair, illogical, pressure she feels women are placed under in contemporary society, but she doesn’t need to fill in what these injustices are: what the poem doesn’t spell out, it allows the reader to fill for herself. Ultimately, the pithiness of this poem’s form, most of which is a form of repetition, and its reliance on readerly participation mark it as decidedly light. However, this does not take away from the daily struggles that it looks at, nor does it

diminish the serious concern which is its subject-matter.

Cope is a clear inheritor of Auden's light verse style for the way she validates the everyday struggle, not just the miraculous or mysterious. Just as Auden's own light verse surely helped readers deal with their situation in the early days of the Second World War, I read Cope's *Serious Concerns* during the national lockdown of 2020. Despite having been written almost thirty years previously, her collection—and one poem in particular—stuck with me for how well it described and captured what I was feeling. Her poem 'Some More Light Verse' is repetitious, jaunty, and yet "cynically out of sync"—reminiscent of many peoples' experiences during the Covid-19 quarantine (Waterman 30). The speaker of the poem writes about not being able to achieve much of anything, let alone the goals she sets for herself. Her actions are therefore marked by desperate and routine repetition, which is communicated by the constant epistrophe, as the line-endings see below are repeated throughout:

And nothing works. The outlook's grim.

You don't know what to do. You cry.
You're running out of things to try.
(Cope 8)

These endings are also the only instances of full rhyme throughout this poem. They also contrast her use of caesura; each action is separate, and yet they feed into each other with the overuse of certain

sounds and the monotony of every clause. Cope's overuse of 'cry', 'try' and 'sigh' communicate an entirely different tone to the previous two poems; rather, the content of "Some More Light Verse" contrasts its title entirely. And yet, the constant parataxis communicates a subtle optimism, as the speaker never gives up, despite everything. The last two lines of the poem communicate this brilliantly:

**You cannot see the
point. You sigh.
You do not smoke.
You have to try.
(Cope 8)**

The ending clause, paratactically isolated, leaves no room for argument. It is an instruction to the reader, as well as a comfort: this familiar struggle continues through daily life, even without the pressing issue of a pandemic. Justifiably, Cope's light verse was a beacon of hope in that period

To end, I want to look at the present state of light verse. In his article for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Patrick Kurp does something similar and points out a vital source which has kept this mode of poetry alive, despite its current unpopularity: he champions *Light*, a journal of light verse which has existed since 1992 (which has featured the likes of Wendy Cope, and other similar poets). Since discovering it, I've had a chance to read light verse that is submitted weekly, which reflects on the current state

of world affairs. These poets are also inheritors of Auden, and the tradition that he revitalised in the early twentieth century; they reflect on daily life and invite conversation. Alex Steelsmith's 'Bios Fear' is an example of the vivacity which light verse still holds. He captures our current fears, frustrations and the irrationality of it all, in a way only light verse could:

"The fate of humanity suddenly seems to be in the unsteady hands of an isolated, frustrated, and potentially unhinged Vladimir Putin... 'The fact that there's a very short path from, say, Putin feeling humiliated to the end of life as we know it,' the sociologist Kieran Healy wrote, 'is literally insane.'" — The Atlantic

**Fearfully, tearfully,
life in the biosphere
hangs in the balance of
Vladimir's wrath.**

**Sociologically,
life may depend on
a
very short path—and
a
short psychopath.
(Steelsmith)**

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Kilrona
Ink and watercolor on
paper
Lulu M. Fleming-Benite
(BC '25)





Play, Desire, and the Anti-Imperial Imagination in John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)

Dylan Hartman

Around the turn of the 20th century, influential Irish playwrights, scholars, artists, journalists, and poets disseminated works seeking to revive Gaelic cultural and literary traditions in Ireland. The proximity of this revival to, and the occasional involvement of its contributors in, the revolutionary acts which ultimately severed Ireland's imperial bonds to the British government—particularly the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence (or Anglo-Irish War) of 1919-1921—has suggested that the Irish cultural revival constitutes a necessary moment in the development of Ireland's anti-colonial revolution. While the return to Gaelic traditions manifested an assertion of the sovereignty of the Irish people against colonial governance by the British, the revival's political content was nevertheless neither the singular cause of nor a reliable foundation for the anti-colonial nationalism which motivated

the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. Throughout the revolutionary period, as R. F. Foster observes, “the relationship between the revolutionaries of 1916 and the literary revivalists remained ambiguous.” (193). Moreover, the very works which most conspicuously contributed to the political ambitions of the literary revival often undermined the beliefs and practices of those who shared such ambitions.

One of the seminal, and most controversial, texts of the Irish Literary Revival is J. M. Synge's 1907 comedy *Playboy of the Western World*. As the riots which accompanied the play's premiere at the Abbey Theater imply, the play assumed a critical, often hostile posture toward the anti-imperial and revolutionary politics which the Revival broadly endorsed. The play is centered around the changing appearance of an anonymous young farmer, Christy Mahon, who resides in a rural peasant community in

County Mayo. The narrative follows the community's odd celebration of Christy after he recounts for them a fabricated tale of in which he brutally murders of his father. But when his (still living) father arrives in the village, the villagers violently renounce him. The first time Christy is enunciated as the "Playboy of the Western World" (Synge 94) occurs just after his father enters the play: a villager proclaims to Christy "you're the walking Playboy of the Western World, and that's the poor man you had divided to his breeches belt" (94). The parallel gesturing toward "you" (Christy) and "that" (Christy's father)—the former of which is the "Playboy of the Western World," and the latter of which is a dead man "divided to his breeches belt"—denies the object-correspondence of each claim. "That" man who is walking out of the room cannot be the mangled corpse to which Christy supposedly reduced his father, and thus, through the logic of parallelism, "you"—Christy—cannot be "the walking Playboy of the Western World." Throughout the remainder of the play, various speakers attribute the word "playboy" to Christy, culminating in the final tragic eruption from the young villager (and Christy's lover) Pegeen: "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World" (112). As a signifier— a mere textual sign distinct from its meaning (or the signified)— "playboy" becomes thoroughly attached to Christy, even as its meaning apparently does not apply to him. It is tempting to suppose that despite the new signifiers attached to Christy—

"daring fellow" (106), "fool of men" (107), "good-for-nothing" (107), "ugly liar" (108), "idiot" (108), "holy terror" (110)— somehow "playboy" resists displacement, recurring even though so many other signifiers seem to negate it. However, if "playboy" is first enunciated at the moment that Christy's self-narrative is breached, and if it is enunciated in a claim that rhetorically denies its own object-correspondence, then "playboy" may be a signifier that is iterable because of the presence of contradictory signifiers, because of the destabilization of signification itself. In this case, Christy is a "playboy" because he is inciting and accenting the act of play, compelling an awareness of the play of language— the lack of stability in a signifier's attachment to an object— in a people who fiercely resist such awareness. Through Christy's transformation, Playboy dramatizes the movement, in Homi K. Bhabha's terms, from cultural diversity to cultural difference, from the constructed "separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations" (50) to that play which "undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons." (52) The radical debunking and re-writing of Christy Mahon's origins— and the accompanying disruption of the symbolic order of desire for the inhabitants of the Mayo village— produces an awareness of cultural difference, representing the potential for a liberated, playful mode of anti-colonial identity construction which avoids the homogenizing and polarizing

characteristics of Irish nationalism.

When Christy first enters the shebeen— long before he is named “playboy”— the villagers rapidly attach various signifiers of crime or violence to him, hoping that the reason for Christy’s sudden appearance is because he is on the run from the law. When Pegeen laments the punishment of the men who “knocked the eye from a peeler” and “got six months for maiming ewes” (Synge 70), her glorification of violence is inseparable from a life under colonial law in which “no such heroes remain in the village, because the very acts that would allow them to emerge would also cause them to be imprisoned, executed, or forced to emigrate” (Cusack 579). In this entanglement of desire and oppression, the colonial law is the set of prohibitions which make signifiers of violent action function as paths toward pleasure. Jacques Lacan claims that the notion of an extremity of pleasure— *jouissance*— depends on the existence of prohibition: “transgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law” (177). Those who live under an oppressive colonial law, then, experience a collective, social desire for those acts which transgress against such a law. When Pegeen’s father Michael eagerly asks Christy, “Is it yourself is fearing the polis?” and enthusiastically concludes “If it’s not stealing, it’s maybe something big” (Synge 73), he— like many others in the village— pursues a pleasure of political transgression, a communal pleasure which presupposes the

existence of an unjust, overbearing law to transgress.

Nevertheless, the speeches of the villagers do not represent their object of their collective desire— the destruction of colonial authority— but crucially approximate and gesture toward that object. When the villagers conjecture that “maybe the land was grabbed from him, and he did what any decent man would do,” or that Christy “beat Dan Davies’ circus, or the holy missioners making sermons on the villainy of man,” or that he did “strike golden guineas out of solder,” or that he did “marry three wives” or “went fighting for the Boers” (Synge 74), these representations point to the absence, and precisely not the presence, of what the villagers principally desire. If the human-crafted signifier is that which “creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it” (Lacan 120), then the signifier does not represent the filling of the void but is “an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real” (Lacan 121). Accordingly, the villagers generate a mass of signifiers which bring a void into being but do not fill that void; the source of colonial authority, and violence toward it, are conspicuously absent from their violent, impassioned speeches. The reason Christy’s declaration, “I killed my poor father” (Synge 74), captivates those in his presence is that it metaphorically gestures toward the object they seek. It mirrors the destruction of the colonial father, the authority from which colonial law derives, but it still only represents the future possibility of obtaining

that object. The enunciation of Christy again and again as “the man [that] killed his father” (84) makes Christy (temporarily) the embodiment of this potent signifier, to the (temporary) pleasure of the young women and old men of the village. Christy’s embodiment of this created signifier ceases in the third act when Christy’s father emerges into the shebeen to claim that he is “His father, God forgive me,” after which Pegeen almost immediately exclaims to Christy that “it’s lies you told, letting on you had him slitted, and you nothing at all” (Synge 107). In this spontaneous reversal, “the crowd’s fury at the Mahons stems from the fact that the two tramps dispelled the community’s collective fantasy which they structured around Christy as their object cause of desire” (Murphy 135). The rapidity with which Pegeen re-enunciates Christy as “nothing at all,” one whose speech is only “lies” and “letting on,” one whose origins really are “doing nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear” (Synge 107), demonstrates the insufficiency and instability of any created signifier. Because the construction of Christy as the killer of his father only points to an absence—will never be that something else which Pegeen, as a member of a community living under an oppressive colonial law, centrally desires—Pegeen can easily dismiss it when it ceases to suggest that void. Similarly, the other villagers “jeeringly” call out to Christy “There’s the playboy!” (107). By enunciating Christy as “playboy” instead of “man [that] killed

his father,” the villagers identify a rejected signifier that has no means of sustaining their desire for the destruction of colonial authority, which is why Pegeen implores Old Mahon to “take him on from this, or I’ll set the young lads to destroy him here” (108). While the “man killed his father” encircles and introduces the possibility of filling the lack that is their collective object of desire, the “playboy” must be removed or destroyed, as it represents not a specific emptiness but something far more fragmentary and discontinuous: that instability which is the condition of all signifiers, that limitation of any national myth—any origin story—to preserve unity and continuity.

The traumatic crisis of *The Playboy of the Western World*’s conclusion—wherein the villagers torture and attempt to execute Christy—is implicated in the very nature of the metonymic chain of signifiers, which only encircle but do not lead toward obtaining the object of desire. Christy’s attempt to actually murder his father by “doing it this time in the face of all” (Synge 110) does not represent the absence of the destruction of colonial rule but rather brings the villagers too close to that imagined object, threatening them with the knowledge that the transgressive objects they seek out are not, in fact, the object cause of their desire. In facing a violent and actively parricidal Christy “the villagers become agents of colonial control: out of fear for the English authorities, they enforce that authority themselves” (Cusack 585). The claim made by Michael that “if

we took pity on you, the lord God would, maybe, bring us ruin from the law to-day” (Synge 110) suggests a sudden increase in the authority of the English colonial father, which has been made into that “lord God” that would punish the villagers “from the law.” In a space which supposes the murder of a father, the father becomes all the more powerful, all the more prohibitive: “not only does the murder of the father not open the path to jouissance that the presence of the father was supposed to prohibit, but it, in fact, strengthens the prohibition” (Lacan 176). When Pegeen suddenly moves toward Christy and “burns his leg” after exclaiming “God help him so” (Synge 111), she is acting under and as an extension of the redoubled force of the prohibitive colonizer now made into that very “God” she implores to aid the one she punishes. In an attempt to prevent a signifier which too closely approximates the transgressive object of desire from demonstrating that signification itself inhibits the attainment of the object signified, Pegeen and the others enact the authority of that very law which the transgressive object would destroy.

This framework for reading *Playboy* intersects with critical controversy concerning the political potential of the play. Edward Hirsch states that “Synge’s claims to linguistic and ethnographic fidelity created expectations (the audience after all had its own pastoral vision of the western world) which were then exploded by the violent and unrealistic mode of *Playboy*.” (“The Gallous Story” 91). The play contains

an essential ambivalence: it is to be read as representative of the structure of desire intrinsic to life under imperial rule, while its characters, far from naturalistic representations of “real” Irish peasants, function as farcical metaphors for nationalist constructions of narratives of originality. Benedict Anderson describes nationalism as “a project for coming home from exile, for the resolution of hybridity, for a positive printed from a negative in the dark-room of political struggle,” but in which “home as it emerged was less experienced than imagined” (319). If colonial law in the *Playboy* is an ever-present reminder of that which is decidedly non-Irish— and is a force which puts many formerly dominant figures from the village into exile— then the desire for the destruction of colonial authority is a desire for “coming home from exile” in one’s own country. The signifiers of transgression which the villagers create are a resistance against that cultural hybridity which is so apparent in an exile-like state: the imagination of a home is achieved by the filling of a space with constructed signifiers that represent the possibility of a destructive event which would eliminate colonial authority. That the villagers’ chain of desire replicates a nationalist impulse to construct an identity in response to a lack runs up against Kiberd’s claim that *Playboy* represents the condition of a dying peasant culture, in which Synge “knows that that condition cannot last and so it has, therefore, the added charm of an exquisite, dying thing” (172). The villagers in *Playboy* do not act as if

they were themselves a mythical, authentic people, but rather they act as mythologizers themselves, those who seek to construct an authentic culture, to turn back to their past. As Hirsch notes, “the Middle-class Catholics of Dublin formed a ready audience for the Irish theater movement because the idealization of the peasant instilled a sense of pride in the native culture and fit in well with their social and economic aspirations” (“The Imaginary Irish Peasant,” 1125). Playboy does not represent the peasant as the preserved, originary “native culture” which the Dublin audience would have expected, but rather integrates the ideal image of the “peasant” with the desires of those who idealized it— manifesting a critique of nationalist cultural constructions by farcically representing nationalists as their own constructions.

While the instability of cultural difference and hybridity deconstruct the order which nationalism had supplied, the effects are not merely negative: Christy and Old Mahon suggest the possibility of a new anti-colonialist, anti-nationalist, liberated and hybridized framework for understanding and living through Irish culture. The chief evidence for an optimistic, revolutionary vision of the future lies in Christy’s sudden declaration that he will depart with Old Mahon, but only “like a gallant captain with his heathen slave,” to which Mahon exclaims “with a broad smile” that “I am crazy again!” (Synge 111). While Kiberd reads this exchange as emblematic of “a revolutionary community” in which “the old take

their cue from the young (rather than the other way round): so the stage directions emphasize Old Mahon’s delight at this new assertiveness of his offspring” (175), the “broad smile” does not necessarily signify delight at mere “assertiveness.” Only a couple lines earlier Christy had been “kicking and screaming” before “scrambling on his knees face to face with OLD MAHON” (111); Christy’s sudden construction of himself as “master of all fights from now” is not for a moment stabilized as a believable identity. Rather it inhabits the Third Space, “the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 55). And yet, Kiberd is right to note “Old Mahon’s delight”: a new pleasure emerges as the unstable signifier plays in the space of enunciation— a pleasure of the rapid construction and deconstruction which prompts a glimpse toward the excess of difference which cannot be contained in any single identity construction. In delightedly submitting to the unbelievable assertion of authority in Christy’s commands “Not a word out of you. Go on from this” (111), Old Mahon is playing along with Christy, allowing identities to be constituted and reconstituted within that Third Space. The implication is that these roles are unstable: Christy will not be contained in “gallant captain” and Old Mahon will not be contained in “heathen slave.” Rather, the two will play in the instability

of the sign as such— recognizing a manifold of difference which would be concealed and forbidden in a static binary.

Christy and Old Mahon neither retreat into “social exclusion” (Murphy 136), nor do they constitute merely another construction in which “the old man is now happily tractable to the son’s future designs” (Kiberd 187)— rather, they point toward the potential for those who are called Irish to “elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha 56), the potential for the affirmation of difference as such. Christy has brought Old Mahon— the embodiment of that authority whose destruction the villagers so desire— into an in-between space, where father and son are not bound within a merely differential opposition, where identities can be adopted and discarded without the threat of traumatic collapse. In this, the play hopefully proposes the further potential for a rearticulation of the terms of the colonizer-colonized relation, wherein liberation can be achieved without the (impossible) destruction of the father, but through a process of renegotiation. Because the play’s focus on the failings of the peasant community only hints at the possibility of liberation, the character of that liberation itself is largely critical and immaterial. Nevertheless, this suggestion of a notion of culture which may sustain desire and permit difference in a way that nationalism cannot is a necessary, albeit limited, critique of those who too dogmatically believe in the stability of the signifiers they construct. And yet, the text of the

play itself— as a created signifier— is just as unstable as the construction of Christy-the-father-slayer: it has provoked spirited praise, bitter criticism, utopian visions, and riots. Around the turn of the 20th century, influential Irish playwrights, scholars, artists, journalists, and poets disseminated works seeking to revive Gaelic cultural and literary traditions in Ireland. The proximity of this revival to, and the occasional involvement of its contributors in, the revolutionary acts which ultimately severed Ireland’s imperial bonds to the British government—particularly the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence (or Anglo-Irish War) of 1919-1921— has suggested that the Irish cultural revival constitutes a necessary moment in the development of Ireland’s anti-colonial revolution. While the return to Gaelic traditions manifested an assertion of the sovereignty of the Irish people against colonial governance by the British, the revival’s political content was nevertheless neither the singular cause of nor a reliable foundation for the anti-colonial nationalism which motivated the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. Throughout the revolutionary period, as R. F. Foster observes, “the relationship between the revolutionaries of 1916 and the literary revivalists remained ambiguous.” (193). Moreover, the very works which most conspicuously contributed to the political ambitions of the literary revival often undermined the beliefs and practices of those who shared such ambitions.

One of the seminal, and

most controversial, texts of the Irish Literary Revival is J. M. Synge's 1907 comedy *Playboy of the Western World*. As the riots which accompanied the play's premiere at the Abbey Theater imply, the play assumed a critical, often hostile posture toward the anti-imperial and revolutionary politics which the Revival broadly endorsed. The play is centered around the changing appearance of an anonymous young farmer, Christy Mahon, who resides in a rural peasant community in County Mayo. The narrative follows the community's odd celebration of Christy after he recounts for them a fabricated tale of in which he brutally murders of his father. But when his (still living) father arrives in the village, the villagers violently renounce him. The first time Christy is enunciated as the "Playboy of the Western World" (Synge 94) occurs just after his father enters the play: a villager proclaims to Christy "you're the walking Playboy of the Western World, and that's the poor man you had divided to his breeches belt" (94). The parallel gesturing toward "you" (Christy) and "that" (Christy's father)—the former of which is the "Playboy of the Western World," and the latter of which is a dead man "divided to his breeches belt"—denies the object-correspondence of each claim. "That" man who is walking out of the room cannot be the mangled corpse to which Christy supposedly reduced his father, and thus, through the logic of parallelism, "you"—Christy—cannot be "the walking Playboy of the Western World." Throughout the remainder of the play, various speakers attri-

bute the word "playboy" to Christy, culminating in the final tragic eruption from the young villager (and Christy's lover) Pegeen: "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World" (112). As a signifier—a mere textual sign distinct from its meaning (or the signified)—"playboy" becomes thoroughly attached to Christy, even as its meaning apparently does not apply to him. It is tempting to suppose that despite the new signifiers attached to Christy—"daring fellow" (106), "fool of men" (107), "good-for-nothing" (107), "ugly liar" (108), "idiot" (108), "holy terror" (110)—somehow "playboy" resists displacement, recurring even though so many other signifiers seem to negate it. However, if "playboy" is first enunciated at the moment that Christy's self-narrative is breached, and if it is enunciated in a claim that rhetorically denies its own object-correspondence, then "playboy" may be a signifier that is iterable because of the presence of contradictory signifiers, because of the destabilization of signification itself. In this case, Christy is a "playboy" because he is inciting and accenting the act of play, compelling an awareness of the play of language—the lack of stability in a signifier's attachment to an object—in a people who fiercely resist such awareness. Through Christy's transformation, *Playboy* dramatizes the movement, in Homi K. Bhabha's terms, from cultural diversity to cultural difference, from the constructed "separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their his-

torical locations” (50) to that play which “undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons.” (52) The radical debunking and re-writing of Christy Mahon’s origins— and the accompanying disruption of the symbolic order of desire for the inhabitants of the Mayo village— produces an awareness of cultural difference, representing the potential for a liberated, playful mode of anti-colonial identity construction which avoids the homogenizing and polarizing characteristics of Irish nationalism.

When Christy first enters the shebeen— long before he is named “playboy”— the villagers rapidly attach various signifiers of crime or violence to him, hoping that the reason for Christy’s sudden appearance is because he is on the run from the law. When Pegeen laments the punishment of the men who “knocked the eye from a peeler” and “got six months for maiming ewes” (Synge 70), her glorification of violence is inseparable from a life under colonial law in which “no such heroes remain in the village, because the very acts that would allow them to emerge would also cause them to be imprisoned, executed, or forced to emigrate” (Cusack 579). In this entanglement of desire and oppression, the colonial law is the set of prohibitions which make signifiers of violent action function as paths toward pleasure. Jacques Lacan claims that the notion of an extremity of pleasure— *jouissance*— depends on the existence of prohibition: “transgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional

principle, by the forms of the Law” (177). Those who live under an oppressive colonial law, then, experience a collective, social desire for those acts which transgress against such a law. When Pegeen’s father Michael eagerly asks Christy, “Is it yourself is fearing the polis?” and enthusiastically concludes “If it’s not stealing, it’s maybe something big” (Synge 73), he— like many others in the village— pursues a pleasure of political transgression, a communal pleasure which presupposes the existence of an unjust, overbearing law to transgress.

Nevertheless, the speeches of the villagers do not represent their object of their collective desire— the destruction of colonial authority— but crucially approximate and gesture toward that object. When the villagers conjecture that “maybe the land was grabbed from him, and he did what any decent man would do,” or that Christy “beat Dan Davies’ circus, or the holy missionaries making sermons on the villainy of man,” or that he did “strike golden guineas out of solder,” or that he did “marry three wives” or “went fighting for the Boers” (Synge 74), these representations point to the absence, and precisely not the presence, of what the villagers principally desire. If the human-crafted signifier is that which “creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it” (Lacan 120), then the signifier does not represent the filling of the void but is “an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real” (Lacan 121). Accordingly, the villagers generate a mass of signifiers which

bring a void into being but do not fill that void; the source of colonial authority, and violence toward it, are conspicuously absent from their violent, impassioned speeches. The reason Christy's declaration, "I killed my poor father" (Synge 74), captivates those in his presence is that it metaphorically gestures toward the object they seek. It mirrors the destruction of the colonial father, the authority from which colonial law derives, but it still only represents the future possibility of obtaining that object. The enunciation of Christy again and again as "the man [that] killed his father" (84) makes Christy (temporarily) the embodiment of this potent signifier, to the (temporary) pleasure of the young women and old men of the village. Christy's embodiment of this created signifier ceases in the third act when Christy's father emerges into the shebeen to claim that he is "His father, God forgive me," after which Pegeen almost immediately exclaims to Christy that "it's lies you told, letting on you had him slitted, and you nothing at all" (Synge 107). In this spontaneous reversal, "the crowd's fury at the Mahons stems from the fact that the two tramps dispelled the community's collective fantasy which they structured around Christy as their object cause of desire" (Murphy 135). The rapidity with which Pegeen re-enunciates Christy as "nothing at all," one whose speech is only "lies" and "letting on," one whose origins really are "doing nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear" (Synge 107), demonstrates the insufficiency and

instability of any created signifier. Because the construction of Christy as the killer of his father only points to an absence—will never be that something else which Pegeen, as a member of a community living under an oppressive colonial law, centrally desires—Pegeen can easily dismiss it when it ceases to suggest that void. Similarly, the other villagers "jeeringly" call out to Christy "There's the playboy!" (107). By enunciating Christy as "playboy" instead of "man [that] killed his father," the villagers identify a rejected signifier that has no means of sustaining their desire for the destruction of colonial authority, which is why Pegeen implores Old Mahon to "take him on from this, or I'll set the young lads to destroy him here" (108). While the "man killed his father" encircles and introduces the possibility of filling the lack that is their collective object of desire, the "playboy" must be removed or destroyed, as it represents not a specific emptiness but something far more fragmentary and discontinuous: that instability which is the condition of all signifiers, that limitation of any national myth—any origin story—to preserve unity and continuity.

The traumatic crisis of *The Playboy of the Western World's* conclusion—wherein the villagers torture and attempt to execute Christy—is implicated in the very nature of the metonymic chain of signifiers, which only encircle but do not lead toward obtaining the object of desire. Christy's attempt to actually murder his father by "doing it this time in the face of all" (Synge 110)

does not represent the absence of the destruction of colonial rule but rather brings the villagers too close to that imagined object, threatening them with the knowledge that the transgressive objects they seek out are not, in fact, the object cause of their desire. In facing a violent and actively parricidal Christy “the villagers become agents of colonial control: out of fear for the English authorities, they enforce that authority themselves” (Cusack 585). The claim made by Michael that “if we took pity on you, the lord God would, maybe, bring us ruin from the law to-day” (Synge 110) suggests a sudden increase in the authority of the English colonial father, which has been made into that “lord God” that would punish the villagers “from the law.” In a space which supposes the murder of a father, the father becomes all the more powerful, all the more prohibitive: “not only does the murder of the father not open the path to jouissance that the presence of the father was supposed to prohibit, but it, in fact, strengthens the prohibition” (Lacan 176). When Pegeen suddenly moves toward Christy and “burns his leg” after exclaiming “God help him so” (Synge 111), she is acting under and as an extension of the redoubled force of the prohibitive colonizer now made into that very “God” she implores to aid the one she punishes. In an attempt to prevent a signifier which too closely approximates the transgressive object of desire from demonstrating that signification itself inhibits the attainment of the object signified, Pegeen and the others enact the authority of that

very law which the transgressive object would destroy.

This framework for reading *Playboy* intersects with critical controversy concerning the political potential of the play. Edward Hirsch states that “Synge’s claims to linguistic and ethnographic fidelity created expectations (the audience after all had its own pastoral vision of the western world) which were then exploded by the violent and unrealistic mode of *Playboy*.” (“The Gallois Story” 91). The play contains an essential ambivalence: it is to be read as representative of the structure of desire intrinsic to life under imperial rule, while its characters, far from naturalistic representations of “real” Irish peasants, function as farcical metaphors for nationalist constructions of narratives of originality. Benedict Anderson describes nationalism as “a project for coming home from exile, for the resolution of hybridity, for a positive printed from a negative in the dark-room of political struggle,” but in which “home as it emerged was less experienced than imagined” (319). If colonial law in the *Playboy* is an ever-present reminder of that which is decidedly non-Irish– and is a force which puts many formerly dominant figures from the village into exile– then the desire for the destruction of colonial authority is a desire for “coming home from exile” in one’s own country. The signifiers of transgression which the villagers create are a resistance against that cultural hybridity which is so apparent in an exile-like state: the imagination of a home is achieved by the filling of a space with constructed

signifiers that represent the possibility of a destructive event which would eliminate colonial authority. That the villagers' chain of desire replicates a nationalist impulse to construct an identity in response to a lack runs up against Kiberd's claim that *Playboy* represents the condition of a dying peasant culture, in which Synge "knows that that condition cannot last and so it has, therefore, the added charm of an exquisite, dying thing" (172). The villagers in *Playboy* do not act as if they were themselves a mythical, authentic people, but rather they act as mythologizers themselves, those who seek to construct an authentic culture, to turn back to their past. As Hirsch notes, "the Middle-class Catholics of Dublin formed a ready audience for the Irish theater movement because the idealization of the peasant instilled a sense of pride in the native culture and fit in well with their social and economic aspirations" ("The Imaginary Irish Peasant," 1125). *Playboy* does not represent the peasant as the preserved, originary "native culture" which the Dublin audience would have expected, but rather integrates the ideal image of the "peasant" with the desires of those who idealized it— manifesting a critique of nationalist cultural constructions by farcically representing nationalists as their own constructions.

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tionalist, liberated and hybridized framework for understanding and living through Irish culture. The chief evidence for an optimistic, revolutionary vision of the future lies in Christy's sudden declaration that he will depart with Old Mahon, but only "like a gallant captain with his heathen slave," to which Mahon exclaims "with a broad smile" that "I am crazy again!" (Synge 111). While Kiberd reads this exchange as emblematic of "a revolutionary community" in which "the old take their cue from the young (rather than the other way round): so the stage directions emphasize Old Mahon's delight at this new assertiveness of his offspring" (175), the "broad smile" does not necessarily signify delight at mere "assertiveness." Only a couple lines earlier Christy had been "kicking and screaming" before "scrambling on his knees face to face with OLD MAHON" (111); Christy's sudden construction of himself as "master of all fights from now" is not for a moment stabilized as a believable identity. Rather it inhabits the Third Space, "the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 55). And yet, Kiberd is right to note "Old Mahon's delight": a new pleasure emerges as the unstable signifier plays in the space of enunciation— a pleasure of the rapid construction and deconstruction which prompts a glimpse toward the excess of difference which cannot be contained

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Christy and Old Mahon neither retreat into "social exclusion" (Murphy 136), nor do they constitute merely another construction in which "the old man is now happily tractable to the son's future designs" (Kiberd 187)— rather, they point toward the potential for those who are called Irish to "elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (Bhabha 56), the potential for the affirmation of difference as such. Christy has brought Old Mahon— the embodiment of that authority whose destruction the villagers so desire— into an in-between space, where father and son are not bound within a merely differential opposition, where identities can be adopted and discarded without the threat of traumatic collapse. In this, the play hopefully proposes the further potential for a rearticulation of the terms of the colonizer-colonized relation, wherein liberation can be achieved without the (impossible) destruction of the father, but

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Kilmurvey Beach
Ink over ink wash on
paper
Lulu M. Fleming-Benite (BC '25)

■ Wonderful Ambivalence: An Interview with **Jhumpa Lahiri**

Meg Young
& Campbell
Campbell

*CJLC editors Meg Young and Campbell Campbell interview Jhumpa Lahiri on her forthcoming essay collection, *Translating Myself and Others*, composed of introductions and afterwords from her translations of Domenico Starnone's novels, as well as new pieces on everything from the myth of Echo and Narcissus to Gramsci's letters. While drawing from her background in classics, Lahiri contemplates translation as an ever-changing and open form.*

*Jhumpa Lahiri's debut story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. Her novel *The Lowland* was named a finalist for the Man Booker prize and the National Book Award in fiction, and she has also received the John Florio Prize for Italian Translation, the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Vallombrosa Von Rezzori Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a National Humanities Medal, among others. Lahiri writes and publishes in both English and Italian, and has translated her own work as well as three of Domenico Starnone's novels. *The Penguin Classics Book of Italian Short Stories*, edited and introduced by Lahiri with selected translations, was published in March 2019.*

*This inter-
view has
been edited
for clarity
and brevity.*

*March 26,
2022. 2pm.*



Meg Young: We wanted to start with how, in *Translating Myself and Others*, you discuss not feeling tied down to a singular language and that being a source of freedom for you, and what inspired your learning Italian. But for our readers, I want to dive deeper into why you were inspired and began learning Italian. Could you tell us more about why you started thinking about Italian in the first place, and when in that learning process you realized you wanted to take it further?

Jhumpa Lahiri: Well it was a slow revelation, I would say, because I had studied Latin in college and then I learned Italian for my doctoral dissertation, which had in part to do with Italy and Italian. I was looking at questions of cultural and architectural translation: the transmission of Italy's aesthetics, particularly architectural aesthetics, onto the English stage, so I was looking at a lot of images. In any case, I needed to have some reading knowledge of Italian, and so I started a couple of years of it in graduate school. And I originally felt some sort of affinity for the language, but it didn't really go anywhere. I just learned a little bit of it, but then I started going to Italy. I made my first trip when I was a doctoral student, to Florence. I described that experience

in *In Other Words*, of being surrounded by the language for the first time and feeling a sort of mysterious pull toward it. That left a grain of desire to know the language better, and it really just went from there, you know? I mean, I was, what, 24 years old or something like that. And it really was a 20-year-long, slow, not very consistent, unfolding and intensifying of learning the language, and eventually of relearning how to write in it.

Campbell Campbell: We normally ask translators if they've developed a translation philosophy over their career and when they transitioned from being a student to an expert in translation. You discuss your translation philosophy in the book, but I was really excited by how you staged the process of being constantly curious and open to new meanings in the language. In other words, you staged that the translator must constantly be a student and constantly be learning new things about the language, because the language is living and shifting. Could you describe your translation philosophy, especially your metaphor of the story of Echo and Narcissus, for our readers who haven't read the book? And how have you either maintained or revised this philosophy over your career?



JL: I keep turning back to Ovid, really. And all sorts of myths in Ovid, not just Echo and Narcissus, though that really gave me a window into the double metaphor, if you will, of how to translate, how to think about translation alongside writing, and how interchangeable those acts really are in the end, especially for someone who is a writer and a translator. But there are so many interesting episodes in the *Metamorphoses* in particular, which are all about radical states of transformation, after all. There's so much language in that poem about silence and about people losing their voices and gaining voices or having different kinds of voices. So the *Metamorphoses*, which now has really become a central repository for me to keep thinking about what happens when language — when a text — is transforming, is itself shifting, as I translate it, from one language to another. I'm so curious about how other people approach translation, reading about other people's philosophies, ideas, techniques, and I think that also shifts from project to project and in my case, from language to language. So translating the *Metamorphoses* now out of Latin is a very different process from translating, say, Domenico Starnone out of Italian. And



that is a very different process from, say, the Bengali translation work I did back when I was a graduate student and translated the work of Ashapura Devi with my mother's help.

So I don't think there's one way, and I think that there are so many forms of translation as well, whether it's going to be closer to the text or more of an interpretation. I try to think of each project in its own moment and with its own needs and my own impulses toward that text in any given moment. But certainly the Echo and Narcissus myth opened up a lot for me because it was a way to read translation as the more dynamic and long-lasting of the forms.

CC: I'm excited to hear you say that you're interested in more modern translation philosophies and classic literature, because I was surprised by your use of classic literature rather than contemporary translation philosophy. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about why that specifically inspired you. For example, was it because that was so integral to your undergraduate and graduate studies? I'm also wondering if you think contemporary translation philosophy is expanding the conversation to include things that maybe

classic literature can't consider in translations. I'm thinking of John Keane's essay on translating Blackness across different countries — it seems to me that that might not be something that is really explored in classic literature.

JL: It's certainly where I really began to translate — literally — because you can't read ancient literature without translating it. So the reading becomes translation immediately, though they were incredibly rudimentary and scholastic translations back then. The point was to demonstrate one's understanding of the grammar and the syntax. But even back then, reading Ovid for the first time as an undergraduate, I looked at the Latin text and the translations that would emerge in my homework assignments as opposed to other translations. That was already quite revelatory to me, to see the range of interpretation, the range of possibility.

I think that at this point, there's been a great circular gesture in my life in that I started out, as a college student, very excited about working closely with language. The study of classics grew out of my interest in renaissance literature and medieval literature (that was very much my focus as an English major at Barnard). Reading authors from those periods pushed me to read Greek and Latin. Now, while translating Ovid, it strikes me that maybe I've been working all this time

to get back to working with an ancient text, and Ovid's text in particular.

Now that I am translating Ovid with Yelena Baraz, a classicist and Latinist here at Princeton who's really guiding me through the Latin, I'm heavily leaning on my knowledge of Italian in order to translate the poem into English. So I think that's probably the most interesting aspect, or the most surprising aspect, of my return to Latin. I no longer am reading Latin with the brain I had when I was 20 years old — I'm reading Latin with a completely different brain, where Italian has now taken root. It's impossible to read Latin without seeing it through that Italian filter.

MY: This is a slight pivot, but I also wanted to ask about your translation of Domenico Starnone's novels. You've now translated three of his novels from Italian into English: *Ties*, *Trick*, and *Trust*. For our readers, can you tell us a bit more about how you and Starnone began to collaborate?

JL: We met a few months after I moved to Rome in 2012, and we met just as friends, there was no literary occasion or anything. He was the brother-in-law of our neighbors in our apartment building in Rome, and we met at a Christmas lunch the first year we lived there. We became friends, and I was curious about him as a writer. He had read some of my

work and taught some of my work in translation in Italy, and then I read some of his work. In the beginning, my Italian was not really at the level of reading him well, because his Italian is so formidable. I mean, he's really an extraordinary writer in Italian, his language is incredible. So it took a while for me to get to that place. But then he wrote *Lacci*, which later became *Ties*, and I was still living in Italy when he published it. I remember reading it in Italian and calling him and saying, "If I were to translate something out of Italian, it would be this book." And so the first official translation project of my life was to translate that novel. He's very prolific, so then he wrote two other novels in relatively quick succession, and I just felt inspired to accompany him as a translator. Translating *Domenico*, I think, has played a crucial role in my own development as a writer in Italian.

MY: One of the components of Starnone's writing that you talk about in your afterword to *Trust* is how highly skilled he is at calibrating fictional time. I was really struck by how you describe time as this craft, something that can be sculpted and woven and bent. In your translation of *Trust*, *Ties*, and Starnone's other novels, how did you go about translating such a specific and nimbly composed kind of time?

Did you find that fictional time functions differently between English and Italian?

JL: Well, there are different tenses that don't match up between the two languages. What will sound cumbersome in English doesn't necessarily in Italian — Italian has to play by certain rules, and English plays by different rules. So I tried to layer the English version as best as I could to sort of move back and forth in the way that *Domenico* does. All of his novels are constantly oscillating temporally.

One of the other great metaphors for me comes also from the ancient world vis-à-vis translation, and that is the figure of Janus, the two-headed god of transition. I think as a translator, one has to be facing forward into the language of translation and constantly be looking at the text as well; in some sense, I feel like that is so representative of the translator's state of mind and attitude. It's interesting because it's kind of the opposite of *Narcissus*, who's looking at himself while the image of himself is looking back at him, whereas Janus is looking in both directions at the same time. And Janus, of course, is really interesting in terms of tense because he is literally looking at the past and the future at once.

So that imagery, that sense, that iconography which one finds

everywhere in a city like Rome, comes up when I'm teaching translation, and I'll talk about the imagery of someone like Janus to start thinking about what we have to do.

CC: That's super interesting. You discuss the responsibility of the translator in relation to conveying the original work and writer to a new language community, in your case Italian works into the English language, and it seems to me that there would be even greater pressure when one translates into a hegemonic language and into a more dominant publishing market. I'm wondering, what responsibility did you feel when you translated Starnone's novels, and how did you overcome that pressure?

JL: Thinking about translating for a public readership or a foreign market, one has to recreate the work. One has to rewrite the work in the new language, adhering to very specific constraints. So one is not inventing specific elements of any given work, but one is reinventing the text in the new language. I believe it is a rebirth of that work, a recreation of that work, or a transformation of that work, whatever language we want to bring to it. It is dynamic, it is active, it is creative. It has to be creative. There are so many points at which you have to figure out solutions for things that just won't work otherwise in the new language.

Either that, or you write it in a very flat or literal or stony way that doesn't speak to the reader. So creativity is a crucial, crucial element.

For example, I'm teaching a workshop right now at Princeton on Italian women in translation. We're working with Italian women translators and writers and their approaches and theories, and it's a lot of fun. The other day we were looking at a sentence by the writer Anna Maria Ortese, who writes this extraordinary, heavily clause-laden prose. And someone said, "Can we interrupt the sentence? Can we put a period in there somewhere?" And I said "Yes, I think we are just going to have to," because we're following the way Italian syntax loves to work and to play, that parasyntactical grand architecture of so much Italian prose. Domenico loves to do this. You also see it in epic poetry, even with my translation of Ovid. There are passages where it's just: and, and, and, and, clause, clause, clause, clause... We have to at least consider breaking things up, reordering, and losing so much of the fun and games in the original text, but perhaps creating new fun and games in the new text. I think the point is to be aware of the fun and games that are happening in any given text, and to try to exchange in some sense the greatness and specific nuances of the work with whatever the language you're translating

into can provide. That's very important. In some sense, I teach the myth of Narcissus and Echo with a caveat: we can't think of translation as a mirroring, because it's not one. And even a mirroring isn't really the same thing inside of the mirror, right? It's a reproduction and it's an image, and it's often a distortion.

CC: I'm wondering how the difficulty in translating Starnone's novels compares to the difficulty in translating your own writing. What new difficulties arise when translating your own writing?

JL: At the end of the day, I feel much more responsible for another writer. So I care more in some sense about making sure that I've done justice in the re-creation of Domenico's work, or any other person's work, because it's such an enormous responsibility to speak for another person. It's hard to feel responsible toward oneself in the same way, you know? If we're going to move into the self-translation subject, I mean, that's a very different process. And again, there's no one way to go about it. Having now come to know and converse with various people who have done this, it's clear that there's the road of essentially rewriting and having another go at everything — adding and subtracting and padding and shaving as you see fit, as you're

moving through the text. Or there's the road of saying, "This is the book I wrote, and this is the book I have to rewrite now in another language," adhering more to what is there. Even then, creative solutions have to save you, and I certainly discovered that when I was translating Dove mi Trovo into *Whereabouts*.

I think the hardest part for me of translating myself is having to re-engage with work that is no longer creatively alive inside of me, and that's what's a bit frustrating or even tedious about it. But it is also intellectually interesting, because there are points where I'm like, why did I do that? Or how can I say this? But I don't feel the same gratification that I would feel, say, translating somebody else's work. Also because, you know, I'm not a reader of my own work, I don't care about my own work in that way. I just make my work because I feel compelled to make my work, and then I forget about it. I don't go back and read it. I don't like it in the way I like the work of other authors; I don't admire it.

Translating somebody else's work is a completely different situation, because you're immersed for weeks and months and years with the poetry or the prose of somebody who is feeding you, who is giving you nourishment. At least, that's how I feel. Like it's giving me

nourishment as a writer, and as a reader. There's just a basic sense of gratitude and pleasure that is constantly part of that process. I don't feel that when I'm translating myself — there's no gratitude, there's no pleasure [laughs]. There's just more of me seeing if I can walk this tightrope.

CC: I want to pivot a little and discuss a theme I was really excited about in the book — I was struck by the theme of multiplicity in the essays, and loved the line: “The highly original work of Gramsci has spawned translations, not just ‘literal’ translations from one language to another but meaningful heuristic offshoots in the form of scholarly analysis, all of which underscores the fact that translation describes the process of one text that becomes many.” This theme continues as you use Niccolo Tommaseo's dictionary that has multiple English words and associations for each Italian word, and you even write in a way that leans toward multiplicity with lush descriptions and lists of what the implications are for each translation theory. I guess one question is, how do you toggle the line between translating and knowing that there's multiplicity in the original work, but still having to make that final decision of choosing a singular word? And my second question is, did you intend to convey the multiplicity

of your own thoughts as well? Or did that happen naturally?

JL: I mean, that's I think one of the hardest things about translation: in the end, you do have to choose one sentence. Often I think the hardest part for me is the one adjective, because we can just go in circles in terms of what shading we want to give a certain adjective. And because of the inherent, wonderful ambivalence of so many words, the original writer is aware of that ambivalence — that word is there for a reason. But another term in English might not have that double-sided, double-edged meaning. It's with adjectives that, if I go back and look at a translation, I still think, Well, was that the right one? There's often a little bit of wistful looking back and reconsidering. And of course, every translation can be reconsidered, which is one of the most exciting and destabilizing things about translation. I actually love that — I love that translation in and of itself is an inherently open form. Translation begets translation across time and even within very specific time periods. There can be a spate of Kafka translations, where everyone's translating *The Metamorphosis* for some reason, you know? And that happened! That happened a few years ago, and it was really interesting. So it is hard. It is hard to decide



in the moment that this is going to be the word order of the sentence, these are going to be the adjectives, these are going to be the verb tenses that I'll settle on and make my peace with. And then I'll sign off the galleys, you know, and just accept that. But I think what's really great about translation is that openness. For instance, I translated Domenico Starnone, but I really do hope someone will come along and re-translate those books and question what I've done and say, "Well, she didn't really get that. I think I can get this a little bit better." I like that. I like that there is no definitive translation, and I certainly don't claim, "Oh, well, this is it."



Then preferences come into the picture. Just the other day, my former advisor at Barnard, Timea Széll, said, "What is your favorite Dante translation?" I said, "Well, I mean, I really like Charles Singleton, but he's prose, so if you don't want to read a prose translation, maybe you want to go to so-and-so." Or, "Well, I really like [W.S.] Merwin's Purgatorio." And this goes into the multiplicity question, because you're multiplying the form of the text as well. Especially if we're thinking about a poetic text like Dante, or Ovid, we have to ask: are we going to

turn it into another type of poem? Is it going to deal with meter at all? Are the lines going to end in spondees or not? There's so many considerations, and I find translators' prefaces so fascinating for that reason because they'll say, "This is what I decided. This is how I decided to play this game." Because that's what I think translation is: it's a game, and you have to figure out a way to play it. I think that the point is to kind of get away with it, and to be more or less consistent in terms of what your approach is. If you're going to set out to recreate the *Metamorphoses* and use some kind of rhyme scheme or meter or whatever, you have to carry that through and you have to carry it off, you know? And to your second question, I don't know, I just think there are so many ways of looking at these questions and of understanding them. I am constantly considering and reconsidering how to look at things, so I'm not satisfied. For instance, I wrote the *Echo and Narcissus* essay [in *Translating Myself and Others*] several years ago, but I don't feel like that's it for me. I don't feel like I've arrived at the evidence, and that's just going to be the way to teach translation from now on. It's one way. In the intervening



years, I've translated so much more and I've read and thought so much more about translation, and I talk with so many more translators... So it keeps evolving just as language does, and it keeps complicating itself in interesting ways. It has to be reconsidered. I've never been interested in any one way of looking at anything.

I think about someone like Gramsci, whose letters I've read, and I sort of traced his interest in translation, the theme of translation in some of the letters. I mean, look at what he does: he writes the notebooks and then reconsiders things in the letters or vice versa. It's all very interesting because there's a lot of internal translation happening in Gramsci's body of work as well, even if we set aside the actual translation activity that he engaged in and that he thought about very carefully. If one is to read a writer like Gramsci, one sees that he in some sense is also self-translating on his multiple platforms.

MY: I love that you're talking about translation as a game to play, especially because "Play" is our theme for this year's issue of the journal, so it's very topical. But continuing on this line of

celebrating multiplicity, I was interested in how you talk about certain critiques of your work that label it as "unsettling" or even "wanting." When you talk about those critiques, you suggest that total assimilation into a new language, similar to total assimilation into a new country or culture, is not your aim as a translator.

That notion made me think about Cathy Park Hong's essay, "Bad English," in which she talks about incorporating East Asian mistranslations of English into her poetry. She envisions mistranslation as a way of "hijacking" English and resisting its imperial histories. Do you see any parallels or fissures between this vision and your disinterest in assimilating through translation?

JL: I've constantly had to push back, and certainly in Italian. Even now, I have to push back. People will say, "You can't say this," or "One wouldn't say this," or "One shouldn't say this." I mean, for any writer, even when writing just in one language, isn't that the aim in some sense? To transform the language, or transform our understanding of language? I am very aware of this sort of tension in terms of what



I'm "allowed" to do or not in Italian. But I have a feeling that if I were a native Italian speaker, born and raised in Italy, some of the liberties I might take with the language wouldn't be questioned in the same way. Now it's kind of too late, because I've laid bare my entire process and my ignorance, moving from a state of complete ignorance into some form of partial knowledge. In *In Other Words* and even in *Translating Myself and Others*, I make clear that Italian is not my first language by any means and that there are all sorts of gaps and fissures.



To go back to the game — that's part of the game for me, and that's part of what keeps me engaged in this game. It's that I don't have full knowledge, even as the knowledge grows, even as the sense of familiarity with the game grows. But it is still a very dangerous game, a very risky game. So that is my way of pushing back, in terms of what I'm doing right now in Italian. I think that has to continue, because there is an ongoing sense from native speakers that you can't possibly know my language better than I do. And then that opens up the really big complex questions of who "owns" language, and who has the right to tell another person how to speak any given language. It just hits such a nerve because we all learn language

through imitation, and we learn to speak the way people around us are speaking. Essentially, I learned how to speak Italian from being around people and trying to speak as they were speaking.

But I think it's very important to keep the question of who owns language and what makes something "my" language as opposed to "not my" language, at the very center of the conversation. In the strange linguistic journey that I've put myself on, I've insisted on that place and that position of the person who is crossing the border, of the migrant who's entering in and and trying to survive in some sense. And not just to survive, but to change the landscape. We have so many examples of writers who come into English from other languages — and that opens up a whole other topic we don't have time for — but even at Princeton I work with two writers, Yiyun Li and Aleksandar Hemon, who have migrated from other languages into English. I think it's interesting that English, for all of its imperialist qualities, has generally looked upon writers who migrate into it as a really enriching and wonderful thing. I don't know if this happens as commonly in a language like Italian. In fact, I know it doesn't; it's a smaller world. Even though I've had incredible support for what I've been

doing in Italian and I wouldn't have been able to continue without that kind of support and guidance, I still find myself constantly bumping up against that idea of checkpoints and what is possible and what is not possible. It's not a very comfortable sensation, and it's not a very pleasant sensation. But it keeps me very aware of larger questions of identity and migration that have always been part of my consciousness and my understanding of the world.

Translating Myself and Others will be available from Princeton University Press on May 17, 2022.

Portrait by Brigitte Lacombe.



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