The Body 'Prefers Not To':

Nietzsche on Ethereal Run in Melville and Acker

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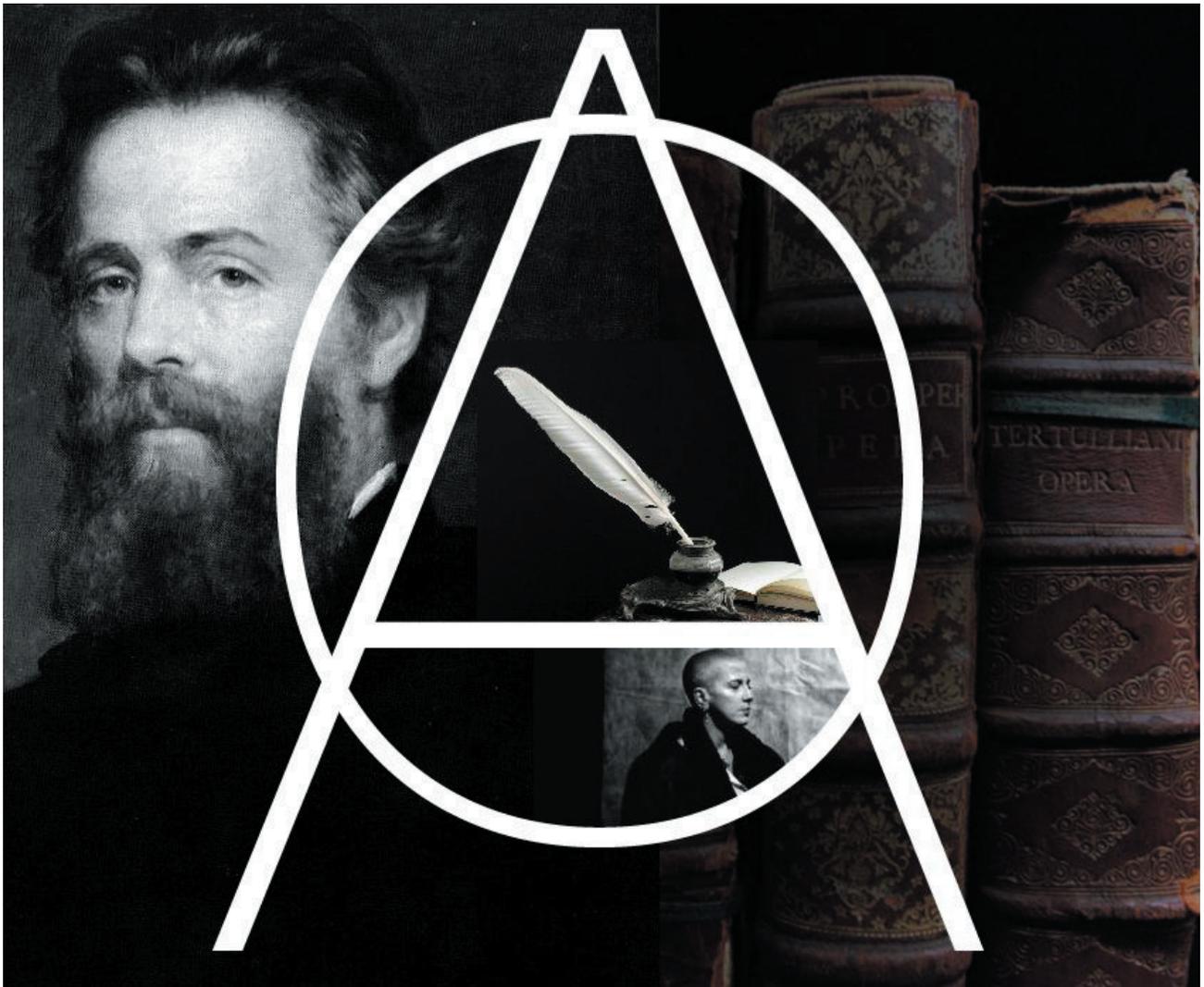# The Body 'Prefers Not To'

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One of the main ideas in cultural studies, which takes into account the transformative processes in society and which has the potential to reconfigure humans, relies on the notion that individuals acquire agency only when they are narrated. It is thus through extension, through the agency of an other's body and language, and through networking that a sense of identity emerges. In other words, we are what we are because we are supplemented. This law of the supplement in poststructuralist discourse opposes traditional thinking, which holds the notion that transformations come from within. The body as a container for thought poses several contradictions. First, insofar as thinking depends on the ability to make distinctions through language, the assumption that thought arises uncontaminated and in pure form rests on fallacious ground. What characterizes language and its arbitrary relations is not a unitary form framed by the singularity of one thought, but a fragmentary relation of dependency between language and the body. It is through our bodies that we articulate whatever conventions we follow, and hence a second contradiction arises. If thinking materializes as it sometimes does (one hopes), it is not because it finds itself in an immanent relation to the body, but because it transcends the body on its own terms—the body's, that is. The materialization of thought occurs only insofar as the body desecrates it through arbitrary articulation. Hence, one can concur that the relation between thought and the body as mediated through language is bound to situate itself in the inscrutable, and the incalculable. This irreverential relation may be said to rely on opportunity rather than calculation, which means that the language of the body, if it chooses to articulate, is unpredictable. In this relation, if thought is capable of and hence retains any kind of singular manifestation, it will be a thought of the body's ability to express a desire for immortality. According to cyber critics, this desire alone marks our entrance and ultimate belonging to the realm of the cyborg.

A(h)nnunciation

One of the philosophers who have anticipated the modern discourse on immortality in a most interesting way is Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's desire to act as a "physician of culture," he makes a most remarkable statement, which I suggest links the idea of immortality with immortality's recurrent return as grammar. In his *Twilight of the Idols* he thus states: "I am afraid we are not rid of God, because we still have faith in grammar" (Nietzsche, 1984c: 483), indicating the paradox of God's ethereal yet continual domination over the body through the materialization of language. Nietzsche

writes by fragments when he posits the hermeneutic idea that affirming one singular part of one's life means affirming it as a whole, in its entirety. How the part becomes a whole, and how the part bestows singularity over the whole is seen particularly in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1888/1979). In the paratextual subtitle of this autobiography, "How one becomes what one is," we find Nietzsche's attempt at translating description into an imperative that has the affirmation of a singular experience at stake: "become what you are." As critics have already noted, there is a stringent correlation between the idea of immortality and the ability of an individual to create a 'singular' space in society that can be called his or her own and that can be ensured to be his or her own even after the person's death. Daniel Ahern, in his *Nietzsche as Cultural Physician* (1995), juxtaposes Nietzsche's concern with exhaustion, decadence, sickness and health—all constitutive of a "physiological dynamics"—with immortality and eternal recurrence—constitutive of what I would call "ethereal dynamics." I suggest that what informs both these dynamics is an attempt at formulating a singularity of presence through affirmation. As Bert Olivier also observes in his "Nietzsche, immortality, singularity and eternal recurrence":

> " What makes a true or 'singular' individual, for Nietzsche, is precisely the ability to overcome the tendency towards a kind of disintegration of the self into incompatible components, reneging on the (admittedly formidable) effort to refuse and conquer this tendency. Such a refusal manifests itself in harnessing all the divergent traits and characteristics that comprise a personality, artfully coordinating their differences towards the goal of being an integrated, self-creating, self-created person. (Olivier, 2007: 77)

What interests me here is the link between singularity, immortality and the belief in grammar. In Nietzsche's work this link is formulated either as a demand, an imperative, or an apostrophe. When he exclaims in *The Gay Science*, beginning with an affirmation of a necessity: "One thing is needful. 'Giving style' to one's character—a great and rare art!" (290; 1984b: 98-99), he indicates, by making a proto poststructuralist gesture, that we are already 'other' the moment singularity institutes itself in parenthesis, paratext, and ellipsis, or one could also say, at the margins of grammar. Olivier provides a good definition of singularity (as opposed to the fleeting nature of particularity) by way of quoting Joan Copjec: "This notion of singularity, which is tied to the act of a subject, is defined as modern because it depends on the denigration of any notion of a prior or superior instance that might prescribe or guarantee

the act. *Soul*, *eternity*, *absolute* or *patriarchal power*, all these notions have to be destroyed before an act can be viewed as unique and as capable of stamping itself with its own necessity. One calls *singular* that which, 'once it has come into being, bears the strange hallmark of something that must be,' and therefore cannot die..." (Copjec, 2002: 23-24 in Olivier, 2007: 79).

One way in which one's character acquires style is at the moment when "faith in grammar" gets to be articulated while there is also an attempt at escaping the constricting rules of grammar. If style in its more archaic form means a reduction of things to the bare essential, to gesture, grammar in its most reductive form is manifested through interjections; a mouth gesture (speech) rather than a hand gesture (writing) is bound to have different value stylistically. Interjections have no real grammatical value, and are known as "hesitation devices." It may be that Nietzsche, being well acquainted with rigorous philological approaches to language, was aware of the value of hesitation when he peppered his works, especially the aphoristic kind, with such interjections as 'Ah!' and 'Oh!' These interjections usually have no connection to the grammatical sentence which transmits a thought. Such examples of interjective and interruptive yet supplemental kind, one might add, are nowhere clearer articulated than in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I will engage no further with this work, but let it ghost other examples of writing in which the faith in grammar, once it has come into being, cannot therefore die. Insofar as it can be postulated that Nietzsche was engaged in ghostwriting for Zarathustra, he was interested in the mechanisms of expressing himself in the margins of Zarathustra's eloquence through interjective interposition. In other words, he explored the possibility of expressing himself through contingency on the must be (Ah!) as a preference for *not dying* (Oh!).

In his book *TechnoLogics: ghosts, the incalculable and the suspension of animation*, Gray Kochhar-Lindgren advances the argument that the ancient dream of immortality is now realized through cloning, genetic research, and artificial intelligence. As he puts it:

> Ghosts. Machines. Cyborgs. All are figures that have crossed over, and that assist us in thinking the crossing of the old lines between the living and the dead. All are outlaws, renegades from the proper, going back and forth by day and night, sometimes in disguise, even though the border patrols are everywhere (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2005: 30).

What I find interesting in the growing body of literature and film engaging with both ghosts and cyborgs is the idea that immortality, while implicitly

expressing a right to never die, also takes refuge from itself in the guise of an ethereal body. Immortality is on the run, a refugee, as it were, materialized in the language of the body that would "prefer not to" die. As a departure from Nietzsche, but not in spirit, I want to look here at such different texts as Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and Kathy Acker's "The language of the body" and make the claim that the body, in its attempt to achieve immortality by ghosting either being, writing, or machine, violates its own right to remain in a state of becoming, or crossing over. Melville's protagonist, a law-copyist, by repeatedly informing his employer that he prefers not to do any of the tasks imposed on him, institutes a crisis that has consequences for his body: he ends up starving to death in a prison, a situation induced by the state of never either refusing or accepting to eat. Acker's text posits a similar situation in which the language of the body is translated into rendering an absence. By having an abortion, the protagonist neither refuses nor accepts the potential of the extra body (the baby) to cross over into life. Here I want to suggest that the suspension of animation is contingent on the ethereal body as manifested in the figure of a ghost or a cyborg.

O(h)ntology

One of the trajectories that the logic of the technological takes is to consider the separation of the living from the dead. This separation is often seen in cyber criticism as a relation based on annihilation: as bodies narrate their existence through language, they at the same time undermine that very existence through perpetual violations of language. Where bodies are concerned, language functions as a mechanical supplement subject to change, transformation, and improvement. In computer science, language is already seen as a machine which can be coded and programmed according to an object-oriented ontology, which is to say that desire is brought into the machine as a means to operate with the differential and binary character of language. As Aden Evans puts it: "The result is a fold in the code, which extends outside of its plane toward another dimension, to rub against the human world" (Evans, 2006: 90). This rubbing against each other of man and machine engages creativity that does not rely on a transcendental subject. This latter idea is traced back to Walter Benjamin by critics such as Warwick Mules, for whom Benjamin's search for a fold in language that would embody experience as unmediated by form is an expression of materiality and plasticity. Benjamin's thoughts, claims Mules, are furthermore "a reflection on the singularity of experience itself, bereft of the certainty of formal knowledge, dangerous and ruined [...] Creativity is the release of singularity captured in form. To write this sentence as I have just done (but who is this "I"; at what time does this "I" write?) is to make a case for creativity" (Mules, 2006: 75).

Some of the implications of considering subjectivity which is caught between

experience and the body are seen by Kochhar-Lindgren through an ethical prism which filters an essential question: in the face of technology, to what extent can we talk about human nature? The logic of the technological is to compress existing definitions of human nature, which situate human nature in context à la Jose Ortega y Gasset: "Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is history" (Ortega y Gasset, 2002: 217) with definitions that state that human nature somewhat has to do with the ways in which we define our fears. One could give an example that goes back to Cartesian thinking. "I think therefore I am" can be said to basically formulate all our fears of not having our thoughts embody our bodies—or our bodies embody our thoughts. This dialectical thinking is what prevents us from considering possibilities of crossing various thresholds and developing a cognitive awareness of a pseudo-identity. If we go back to Nietzsche, however, we see a re-valuation of all values through the plastic figurations of the pseudo-self. This self is a-historical insofar as its constitution is not contingent on the dynamics of historical change but on the dynamics of crossing thresholds. Says Nietzsche: "Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives" (Nietzsche, 1966: 51). For Nietzsche, the profound spirit, otherwise aiming to be free, follows a historical trajectory when it masquerades fear into knowledge.

Kochhar-Lindgren, who follows closely in Nietzsche's footsteps, puts it this way:

> "There is a profound fear, in transepochal culture, of becoming incorporated into the Borg or of being attacked by the monsters spawned by technics, but, on the other hand, this is a moment of opportunity, for as Guattari argues, "A machine assemblage, through its diverse components, extracts its consistency by crossing ontological thresholds, non-linear thresholds of irreversibility, and creative thresholds of heterogenesis and autopoeisis." We *are* the aliens, we are *already* other, and the work of the *hetero-* and the *auto-* must be enacted, with as much panache as we can muster, keeping in mind that the logic of such a move must deal not with an imitation of the human form, much less an ideal Platonic form, but with a technologics of production that wills the perfection of nature along certain of its axes. (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2005: 127-128; author's emphasis)

If we pause to ponder some of the words in this passage, written by means of borrowing "ontological thresholds, non-linear thresholds of irreversibility,

and creative thresholds of heterogenesis and autopoeisis," we may conclude that some prevalent ideas passed down to us from the German Romantics are clearly obsolete. In spite of the Romantics' effort to elude the traps of dualism, when Herder for instance, declares in 1774 that "The body is the symbol, the phenomenon [the real manifestation] of the soul in contact with the universe," he presupposes that there is no threshold to be crossed, and thus finds himself caught in another master's house. This house is however haunted by the notion that symbolism must sacrifice expression in the name of interiority. I suggest that what Kochhar-Lindgren is positing in his demand for the enactment of the 'already'—"we are already other through the workings of *hetero-* and *auto-* which must be enacted"—is the idea that in cyberspace there is only exteriority and singularity mediated by the dissolution of (symbolic) form. Hegel, for instance, in the first volume of his *Aesthetics*, defined the *symbol* as "an external existent given or immediately present to contemplation, which yet is to be understood not simply as it confronts us immediately on its own account, but in a wider and more universal sense. Thus at once, there are two distinctions to make in the symbol: (i) the meaning and (ii) the expression" (Hegel, 1975: 303-304). For cultural theorists such as Kochhar-Lindgren, cybernetics offers a third element that supplements Hegel's dialectics: the idea that "we are all temps." A symbol in cyberspace, especially the ghost, consists of meaning, the expression, and the untimely (Kochhar-Lindgren, 171). Even chronologically, it takes time to get from the Ah! of existence to the Oh! of death.

But before I move on, I should, ah, mention that in Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, the grey zone occupied by the ghost is circular. His book is paratextually 'signed' by Nietzsche who autographs the beginning singularly and the end by proxy: Thus spoke 'Nietzsche' in the epigraph to the introduction: "The most concerned ask today: 'How is the human to be preserved?' But Zarathustra is the first and only one to ask: 'How is the human to be overcome?'" And thus spoke 'Zarathustra' in the epigraph to the conclusion: "Higher than love of the neighbor is love of the farthest and the future; higher yet than the love of human beings I esteem the love of things and ghosts. This ghost that runs after you, my brothers and sisters, is more beautiful than you; why do you not give him your flesh and bones?" Oh, between Nietzsche and Zarathustra it is all Gray.

Another

Quite a considerable amount of literature has been written on Melville's story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853). However, only few writings are dedicated to considering the relation between the character Bartleby and a cyborg. (I am thinking here of Klaus Benesch: *Romantic Cyborgs: Authorship and Technology in the American Renaissance* (2002).

Benesch discusses however Melville's "Dollars Damn Me" rather than Bartleby). In Donna Haraway's definition, a cyborg is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 1991: 149). While the idea of cyborgs populating the American Renaissance exhibiting transcendental and Romantic concerns may seem far fetched, the truth of the matter is that authors such as Melville have been preoccupied, not to say obsessed, by the dialectic between nature and technology. However, if the Romantics considered the link between organicity and mechanization they did so by means of still looking for the sublime. This latter concept has undergone significant changes, and in the current age of the posthuman, the sublime has more ontological rather than symbolic implications. For a cyborg the sublime is a manifestation of a beatific state embodied by extensions such as prostheses that mediate between the desire brought into the machine and the singular experience that this desire yields (see for instance the work of Cypriot cyborg performance artist Sterlarc). As Klaus Benesch also puts it, the link between "cybernetic images" of man-machine in early nineteenth-century literature enters "more of a symbolic than an ontological lineage with their postmodern, posthuman relatives" (Benesch 2002: 27).

The reason why Bartleby is an interesting figure in this relation is because he embodies several contradictory states. Each of these states violates the other. After having acted as a automaton (which represents the first level of embodiment)—copying the same type of legal documents again and again—he discharges himself of his duty, not by refusing to work as such, but by assuming a position of enunciating a preference based on contingency. When the narrator of the story, who is also Bartleby's employer, asks him whether he *will* not continue with his work, Bartleby always delivers the same automated answer: "I *prefer* not." Though Bartleby speaks in the name of his preference, which in turn bespeaks him, the subject who speaks (I prefer not to) and the subject who is spoken of ("I" as the body that prefers not to) are never identical.

Cultural theorists such as Mules and Kochhar-Lindgren would identify Bartleby's predicament as that of a subject who has already joined the Borg by positioning himself in the context of the already Other, the already Alien enacted by heterogenesis and autopoiesis. The more Bartleby articulates "I prefer not to," the more the body becomes inert. This inertia can be seen as a moment of crossing over into ethereal immortality, which Bartleby experiences by becoming a ghost by proxy, an extension of the already Other language embodied in the phrase "I prefer not to." In his essay "Bartleby, or on Contingency" (*Potentialities*, 1999) Giorgio Agamben advances the convincing claim that the grammatical value of this sentence (a negative plus an infinitive), which traces and marks incompleteness, creates a space called "potentiality" and enables Bartleby to transcend both existence and

nothingness. In Agamben's scheme, a potentiality is not just a potentiality but also a potentiality for the opposite. Bartleby thus actualizes and realizes at the same time Nietzsche's project of overcoming faith in grammar.

The phrase "I prefer not to" had already become a ghost, haunting Bartleby's colleagues who had started using it themselves quite unconsciously. While Bartleby finally dies from a violently slow death induced by inanition, insofar as he prefers not to eat, his "I" as the subject that kept enunciating itself in a potential state of becoming manages to transcend the limits of finitude. As Bartleby's singular statement stands out from the beginning, it nevertheless proliferates within multiplicity—it haunts all the others. This turns Bartleby's death into a secondary experience: his death is not an absolute death but what remains in experience after Bartleby has abandoned Being. Insofar as Bartleby's death is mediated by the creative language machine, which in its folds is capable of making space for potential states rather than their actualization, it becomes a platform for other events to take place, such as becoming ethereally immortal. It is to this state that Bartleby's narrator makes an anticipated reference when he contemplates doing something for him: "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him. It was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." The difference between Bartleby and the narrator here is that, unlike Bartleby, the narrator is unable to cross a creative threshold and imagine on his own what Bartleby's motives for his behavior are.

Warwick Mules states: "Creativity [...] begins from the contingent, the specific—wherever one begins. It takes as its starting point the medium of expression in which objects are made apparent in their singular 'givenness' to perception" (Mules, 2006: 77). Melville ends his story with the narrator's double exclamation: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" adding to the feeling not only that Bartleby has gone to meet his maker—himself, that is—in that space of autogenesis and autopoiesis—but that in the process he has also turned himself into an object apparent in its singular givenness to the perception of a virtual world, which the narrator cannot see. Or prefers not to.

Other

Kathy Acker's story thematizes some of the same concerns with subjectivity, a body which refuses to embody subjectivity, and a desire for ethereal immortality. A female, yet unnamed, narrator begins to narrate a moment in her life associated with the inevitable pain following an abortion. This pain is however suspended insofar as the event takes place in a dream.

> " I got married when I was very young. I did not know my husband...
>
> The day after our wedding, I had a dream about the world:
>
> At the entrance to the world, I was about to have an abortion.
>
> I had had abortions before this.
>
> I had to decide whether or not I wanted an anaesthetic. I guess that the doctor had asked me, but I don't remember that anyone was there. Thinking, I asked how much the abortion was going to hurt me. The doctor replied, "Oh, there'll be pain..." in a voice that was trying to dismiss such pain. Since I knew that that type of voice meant that there would be a lot of pain, I chickened out. The blanket that was lying on top of me was yellow. I hate pain. I decided on anaesthetic.
>
> All through the abortion, I was kind of conscious. While I was in this consciousness, a pillow, which was around my ass, inflated and I floated three feet up above the cot.
>
> After the abortion, my body was OK, so I left the hospital.
>
> This was the scene of my marriage. (Acker, 1992: URL)

This passage sets the tone for the way in which the narrator shifts between narrative moments. One is tempted to say here: thus spoke Nietzsche:—pain is the true metaphysical reality—insofar as Acker can be said to subversively re-interpret Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. If pain, for Nietzsche, is the most powerful aid to mnemonics, as well as the main condition of all forms of creation, for Acker, pain is the experience of a metaphysical dream. If, for Nietzsche, pain reflects the burden of biological existence, for Acker pain is linked to the annihilation of existence, to death. In dreams, our metaphysical reality is transformed into metaphysical illusion, a form of death that is not final but delayed by the presence of ghosts. In Acker's first dream—which specifies moments of which the narrator is conscious and hence can relate in a coherent way—we also find other dreams recounted either as they occur, simultaneous with the moment of telling, or as they are retold in hindsight. The simultaneity of narration at this second level is marked through direct speech and dialogue (usually between the narrator and her husband, Steven). The dialogue in turn launches other dreams, which are then retold. These dreams follow both conscious and unconscious patterns and are the expression of fragmented feelings. What the narrator is interested in is the extent to which she can formulate what the body feels independent of cognitive subjectivity.

As the "I" of the narrator deliberately situates itself outside reality—events take place in a virtual space—what the "I" embodies—the dream—becomes an object subjected to an autonomous sphere of knowledge. In other words, when, what, how, and if the body knows, the narrator will tell. This structure is followed by a "Masturbation Journal" in which the narrator provides entries for three days. So, the dreams are not only about telling and retelling stories, but also about writing. Just before the journal entries the narrator assesses her own position in relation to the stories told and in relation to her husband, who always wants to know how they end. Writing is thus anticipated by a call on the language of the body to disclose its secrets. Writes Acker:

> I've begun a journey to make sex live, to find the relation between language and the body rather than this sexuality that's presented by society as diseased.
>
> My body seems to reject ordinary language.
>
> If I can find the language of the body, I can find where sex is lying.
>
> While I masturbate, I'll try to hear the language that's there. (URL)

The narrator's approach to searching for the language of the body so that she can locate sex points to the necessity of channeling experience through a singular moment that dissolves form (or rather the faith in grammar). This can be seen in the way in which the journal entries are put together, both at the level of form and content. The entry for "Day 1" begins with a sentence in parenthesis: "(This might not make any sense)" and is followed by a couple of other lines emphasizing movement and expectation. These lines have a performative character insofar as they lead straight into another sentence which can be read as a comment on movement and expectation: "there is nothing: it is here that language enters." "Day 2" begins with this line: "It starts with bodily irritation, but then one has to forget the body, leave the body, leave the body until the body quivers uncontrollably." While the body is here rendered incalculable, it is also seen as a space with levels, but no dialectic. In its singular existence, the body does not belong to the text; rather it belongs to a textual multiplicity. In cyberspace the body is all about networking and regeneration, rather than system and reproduction (Haraway). This interconnectedness is what enables the narrator to offer descriptive images of some levels of the body. Likening the body to a room, she states:

> In this room, everything hangs out: nipples scrape against air; buttocks thrust out so that the asshole is open, and all that was inside is now outside
>
> now it starts. it: actual touching. This is the beginning of feeling. (URL)

The beginning of feeling is also marked by multiple choices. This is illustrated in one of the lines in the journal entry for "Day 3," which states: "While crossing the threshold, language is forbidden; having crossed, it's possible to have language." The threshold here can be seen as Félix Guattari's threshold of irreversibility. Guattari plays in an interesting way with some of the signifieds of the signifier threshold in his *Chaosmosis* (1995): liminality (limen = threshold), but also margin, outskirt, here in the sense of being cut off by interruption. One could say that precepts and affects are outside the notion of having "faith in grammar" insofar as they are not bound up with any preconceived subjective content or objective form. They are characterized by a singularly liminal quality, insofar as they are able to cross thresholds and map potentialities of both, death and existence. Says Guattari: "There is an ethical choice in favour of the richness of the possible, an ethics and politics of the virtual that decorporealizes and deterritorializes contingency, linear causality, and the pressure of circumstances and significations which besiege us. It is a choice for processuality, irreversibility and resingularization" (Guattari, 1995: 29). Once the crossing over is done, what is left behind is only the essence of the articulating/or silent body. Whichever we prefer.

One of the passages in Acker's text that more clearly takes the question of ethereal immortality into account is the dream in which the narrator, her husband and two other women, one of them a countess, discuss the other two Hungarian countesses: Klara and her niece Ezebeth Bathory. These two 16th century historical figures have entered our cultural consciousness alongside characters such as Dracula and other vampires.

> "Klara Bathory had married four husbands in succession. She had murdered the first two. Afterwards, she took a lover who was much younger than her..."
>
> Steven returned.
>
> "She smothered the boy in castles. Then, a pasha captured him; while the former was skewering and roasting him on a spit, the entire garrison raped Klara. They cut through the throat of the woman who was still living.

"It is a violent society."

"Klara's niece was Ezebeth Bathory, more well known as The Scarlet Witch."

"She murdered almost 610 young women," her secretary added.

"Yes, she kidnapped young girls in order to get their blood."

"No."

"She hung them up by their wrists, then whipped them until their tortured flesh was torn to shreds." My husband spoke for the first time.

He, the Countess, and her friend were sitting together on a small sofa. I was perching on an armchair.

"Oh yes, and she clipped their fingers off with shears,"—the Countess.

"Pierced their nipples with needles, yes, then tore out the tips with silver pincers," my husband.

"Because human blood is an elixir,"—the Countess.

"...she bit them everywhere and pushed red hot pokers right into their faces..."—my husband.

"No!"

"And with the curses of witches...," said the young girl,

"And with the curses of witches, especially the sorceress Darvulia Anna, cut off pieces of their flesh, grilled them, then made them eat parts of their own bodies,"

"Go on go on go on."—the girl.

"Kissed their veins with rusty nails,"—the woman whom I had desired.

"Go on go on go on,"—her lover

"...and when the young girls parted their lips in order to screech, she plunged the flaming rod into the caverns of the throats..." my husband began taking over..."

"No!"

> "Your wife is very much in love with you, isn't she?" the
> countess asked him.
>
> "How does the story end?" my husband replied. (URL)

While the narrator takes active part in the telling of this story based on the practice of Ezebeth Bathory who bathed in the blood of young virgins so that she could stay young and alive (a practice which Acker only alludes to), she also indicates at the end of the story that she feels this and other stories are all being talked to death. By exclaiming that she doesn't want sexuality, she articulates a preference for precisely that stage where the body enters a relation with what it prefers not: to be vampirized by language. In a parallel that recalls Nietzsche, it is interesting to note that in the 1962 film *The Slaughter of the Vampires* (directed by Roberto Mauri) the role of Bram Stoker's protagonist Professor van Helsing is here replaced by a Professor Nietzsche. This suggests a catachrestic relation between annihilating the vampire's eternal recurrence by using a hammer and the real Nietzsche's notion of philosophizing with the same weapon; for the latter the vampire even has a name, Spinoza, as we are informed in *The Gay Science* (372). In a cultural studies context we can further observe that Nietzsche's proclamation: "God is dead" is often echoed in pronouncements such as "Dracula is dead" (*The Brides of Dracula*, 1960), thus suggesting the irony in having the immortal overcome by the mortal.

As Acker's story ends with someone named Rodney waiting for her "beyond a door marked by a black O,"[1] which is also the last line in her story, it is clear that what the body prefers not to is also to continue being a body in any real sense. If we were to paraphrase one of Nietzsche's most condensed and charged maxims: "Man is something to be overcome," we could say that the body, in both Melville and Acker is also something to be Overcome. What is further suggested in Acker's story is that in order for Rodney to be able to wait, the narrator would have to hold a promise that potentially she will cross over through the hole, suggested by the letter O. This roundness which we also find in Bartleby, when the narrator makes a consideration of his former employer's name, John Jacob Astor,[2] is the name Acker gives to her objective: to become immortal by placing her body in care of the ghost in the dream machine. The "Ah" in Melville and the "O" in Acker each constitute moments of singular expressions that eradicate language structures by undoing the NO, or O. (Nietzsche nods).

[1] This may be a reference to *Histoire d'O,* which was a controversial erotic novel published in 1954 about sadomasochism by Anne Desclos under the pen name Pauline Réage. The novel has been accused of representing women in an ultimately objectified position.

[2] "The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion" (URL).

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