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Commentary

I Is Another

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This research paper explores the themes of identity, embodiment, and difference. Drawing from personal experiences and philosophical insights, the author delves into the complexities of desire, sexual orientation, and suppressed gender identities. The works of Jean Genet are examined for their subversive nature and their portrayal of trans individuals. The paper also advocates for the practice of smuggling radical ideas into academia, challenging rigid systems. The limitations of logocentrism, identity politics, and hermeneutics are questioned, emphasizing the need for genuine appreciation of difference and an active practice of freedom. Philosophers such as Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre are referenced to provide theoretical insights. Ultimately, the paper concludes that embracing difference can lead to a deeper understanding of the self and the world.

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In a letter to his friend and former teacher Georges Izambard, written from his hometown of Charleville and dated 13 May 1871, a seventeen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud stated:

I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a *seer*: you won't understand this at all, and I hardly know how to explain it to you. The point is, to arrive at the unknown by a disordering of *all the senses*. The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, to be *born* a poet, and I have discovered I *am* a poet. It is not my fault at all. It is a mistake to say: I think. One ought to say: I am thought ...

He went on to say:

I is another. So much the worse for the wood if it finds itself a violin.^[1]

As a young man, I wrote a poem for Pier Paolo Pasolini, titled 'Death of a Poet', written after he was murdered on November 2nd, 1975. I blue-tacked the poem on the wall of my room in my family home with a tiny photo of the filmmaker, poet, and novelist cut out from a

newspaper. The poem was still there when comrades and friends came to visit me the day after my mother's death. How strange that the night of that day in March when she died, we all went to sleep. Her body lying inside the open coffin in the guest room, a room seldom used or lived in, the one with the untouched posh cutlery and tea service on display. *Tu eri la vita e le cose. È buio il mattino che passa senza la luce dei tuoi occhi.* You were life, and the myriad things. Dark is the morning that goes by without the light of your eyes. Hélène Cixous wrote:

I never ask myself 'who am I?' I ask myself 'Who *are* I? ... Who can say who I are, how many I are, which is the most I of my Is? Of course, we each have a solid social identity, ... At the same time, we are all the ages, those we have been, those we will be, those we will not be, we journey through ourselves ... as the child who goes snivelling to school and as the broken old man ... Without counting all the combinations with others, our exchanges between languages, between sexes – our exchanges which change us, tint us with others.^[2]

How foreign an Italian voice sounds to me at first when travelling on a bus, how unintelligible and distant. With a sense of familiarity slowly emerging, the shackles of language and grammar also arise, the movable Oedipal cage, *mamma, papà*, the price of things, of rents and mortgages spelled out in pound sterling. The different layers accidentally uncovered, becoming an orphan, or having lost forever the so-called secure base. A feeling of desolation sitting at St Pancras station munching on a sandwich while watching the passers-by. The feeling of elation of being free to feel the joy and sadness of not belonging. Lost companions in last night's dream, comrades and fellow travellers gone for good and forever lost. The evening bus gliding by like a ghost ship in the melancholy early darkness of a Friday night before Halloween.

Or, for instance, that fascination in my early twenties with transvestites and transsexuals. Was that fascination a form of erotic emotional tourism? I loved two of them in their bodies and their remoteness. Walking down the hill like an alley cat, the streets below bending, widening, tightening; a shuffling of shadows as I reach the lights of the city, past the railway. In a ghostly shop window at night, I is a pale ghost; I wants to forestall the night; I craves victory against a dusty mirror. Down towards the city, warm air and sounds, then a room, a mouth, love sliding silently by on the ceiling.

Much later, I found a correlation in Jean Genet, who described trans as angels. Was my fascination *mere* fascination? Did I love in their gestures and dramatic femininity my own deeply buried homosexual longings? Doesn't the choice of one sexual orientation over another always imply the loss of another, a loss that is never mourned because it has been not merely repressed but efficiently foreclosed? One could ask: 'What would need to occur in psychotherapy culture for an ethos to emerge that encourages clients/patients to mourn the loss of their suppressed gender identities?'

From Freud, we learn that unresolved mourning brings on melancholia. And what is melancholia if not being in love with dead objects? Having erased my own homosexual self, I remained in love with dead objects, the verse of a famous tune, *Walk on the Wild Side*, on my mobile's ringtone. Is this why my phone is constantly on mute?

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Jean Genet's subversive and poetic writings have often been framed and even canonized within the confines of gay experience and literature: I am thinking of Edmund White's astonishing biography^[3] and of Sartre's

masterly doorstopper, *Saint Genet*.^[4] Recent re-interpretations of Genet's work^[5] justifiably claim a place for him within the trans culture and transgender studies scholarship, asserting the value of smuggling as a methodology of embodied critique, giving precedence to lines of flight over seemingly compact power structures, and giving meaning through elaborate tangles of connectivity.^[6] Academia is traditionally allergic to the very word 'smuggling', let alone the practice, as I have learned when submitting papers to psychology journals. But smuggling is a necessary act. It stems from the understanding that the knowledge inherited by the tradition does not contain the complexities of living, nor does it provide a framework for practices of freedom. Irit Rogoff explains:

The term 'smuggling' ... extends far beyond a series of adventurous gambits. It reflects the search for a practice that goes beyond conjunctives such as those that bring together 'art and politics' or 'theory and practice' or 'analysis and action'. In such a practice, we aspire to experience the relations between the two as a form of embodiment which cannot be separated into their independent components.^[7]

Smuggling is necessary if we are to champion radical, subversive notions and practices within the stultified environs of neoliberal psychology and psychotherapy training. Genet's is a fitting example and guide, given that some of his early writing in prison was created against prison rules and later smuggled out for publication. Smuggling allows emancipatory practices and knowledge to slide through tightly built borders and boundaries and respond to the needs of the present. In particular, it may potentially present an adequate and fierce response to the way hatred and prejudice have travelled and continue to travel through the decades: from misogyny to homophobia to transphobia.

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We were revolutionaries with a difference in our 20s. From feminism, we'd learned the painful limitations of the macho man model. From Pasolini – novelist, filmmaker, poet, essayist – we learned the sexual tenderness and transgression, the virgin terrain to be explored. And so, we slept in the same bed, me and she and he, and when she fell asleep after making love, me and him exchanged tender kisses and fondled each other, the melancholy yellow streetlight weaving warm patterns on the wall and on the poster of Pier Paolo Pasolini, his fierce compassion sending shivers through the best hearts and minds of my

generation. Am I a murderer who has killed off homosexual desire?

Hey Ninetto, do you remember that dream we had so many times?

This time you are mistaken/ I am a farmer in the city/dark brown houses against the sky/every night I must wonder why.^[8]

Helene Cixous writes:

I ask of writing what I ask of desire: that I have no relation to the logic which puts desire on the side of possession, of acquisition, even of that consumption-consummation which, when pushed to its limits ... links (false) consciousness with death.^[9]

I guess I am talking about bisexuality. But what is bisexuality? Cixous distinguished two kinds:

1. Bisexuality as a fantasy of a complete being, which replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference insofar as this is perceived as the mark of a mystical separation ...
2. Bisexuality [as] the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes ... the non-exclusion of difference ... a bisexuality [where] every subject who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogocentric Performing Theatre, sets up his or her erotic universe.^[10]

What do I fear as a man – whenever I identify as a man? Do I fear being possessed? For a masculine imaginary, being possessed is undesirable because it is associated with stereotypical feminine passivity. For a man, particularly a heterosexual man such as myself, being possessed may be an essential experience. It may be crucial to be penetrated, entered, to experience a so-called passivity without which he is a foolish sad clown standing erect like his penis in a field under the pouring rain. And equally crucial for a human is the experience of sexuality divorced from the imperative of evolution. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips express something similar in relation to barebacking. The latter unveils for them one truth about sexuality; it no longer hides from ourselves the fact that we are going nowhere, that we are going in the direction of death and annihilation, whether or not we have children. It reveals to us that “the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology devoid of telos. In a direct, immediate way, “barebacking shows us that sex is a dead end”.

^[11] Reproductive sexuality also shows us that by having children “we are making more deaths” and it is this very knowledge, whether we know it or not, “that makes human sexuality possible”.^[12]

Being possessed may hint at the fact that there is something else to human relations than “the collusion of ego-identities”.^[13]

In short: Why do we find it so hard to embrace the ecstasy inherent to the self’s loss of power?

*

I am a peasant boy, a terrone from the poorest region of la Bella Italia. Wikipedia describes terrone (plural terroni, feminine terrona) as an Italian term to designate, in an often-pejorative manner, people who dwell in Southern Italy or are of Southern Italian descent. The term comes from an agent noun formed from the word terra (Italian for ‘land’).

I am a terrone even though my dad pulled himself up from the low ranks through hard study and Franciscan discipline. I am a flamethrower, and I am pretty certain none among you civilized readers has known the ecstasy of smashing up a venue frequented by fascists nor the joy of seeing an empty police van go up in flames in response to police brutality.

I walk through the snow and leave no footprints, and how to tell others the next day? Will they understand? How could they possibly understand?

I am a whole world that will be buried and forgotten when this body will flounder and perish, when this bodying will be free and ready for sister death and lover death. Death will come and will have your eyes, this death escorting us from morning til dusk like an old regret, an absurd vice.

*

I am a rock musician part-exchanging guitars after selling my black Gibson Les Paul and going on to the Jazzmaster and to a semi-acoustic. I form a band called Daedalo, after the Italian word for labyrinth, after Daedalus, father of Icarus, for who says that you must live fast and die young and foolishly burn your manmade wings of wax flying too close to the sun when you can live fast and die old like Daedalus, architect father of Icarus. But also, Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s Ulysses.

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I play with death aged 23, trying heroin three times and at night sitting outside a semi-abandoned country workhouse playing for my friends the Velvet Underground’s song Heroin. And I feel just like Jesus’ son. I try smack three times, the first time is heaven – lemon drop, vulva, joy of the morning air, every gesture exults, burned by the

proximity of death; the second time is purgatory – waiting for a blissful state that never comes; the third and last time it's hell, and sickness, and the vertigo of nothingness.

I veer towards more acceptable substances, shortcuts to false awakenings, and nowadays San Pellegrino sparkling water and the odd glass of Malbec.

*

I train as a therapist and learn the lingo and manners of the white English middle class with its values of boundaries and property. I learn to sing Property, all my thoughts have turned to property. Oh, I believe in property, to the tune of the Beatles' Yesterday.

What is 'difference'? Is it the so-called championing of bland diversity we find in the dominant ideology of our time, or is it about different colours made of tears?

Strands of humanistic and existential psychology have historically been inclined to universalise subjective identity. But can subjective identity become a prison, particularly when it sings along to the blinkered tunes of nationalism? Or when it fails to be open to societal and political challenges? In the public arena, this has resulted in the championing of identity politics at the expense of soulful solidarity. Writing about racial discrimination, investigative journalist Asad Haider defines identity politics as the offset of movements against racial oppression, reflecting the substitution of a mass movement with a bland multiculturalism. What once constituted a unitary front against the commodification and exploitation of human life in the name of profit for the few has now splintered into subgroups that cannot see past their own experience. While it was once natural for a marginalised group to feel solidarity with another equally marginalised group, thus creating a united front of women, gays, blacks, the poor, and the disenfranchised, it is now customary to think and breathe within the confines of one's own group. To be a subject has come to mean to be subjugated to an existing order that defines my identity before I can begin to define myself. Identity is only partly what I choose. For the most part, it is assigned to and imposed on me by the Powers.

*

I is a mystic child in India, writing devotional songs in the early 1980s and whirling like a dervish and sitting in silent contemplation and having lots of sex and crying a lot and laughing and realizing after 5 years of studying existential philosophy that I have a body, pardon me, that I am a body.

*

I finds zen, realizing with a shock in 1996 in a barn in Suffolk that this ancient tradition is alive and kicking and

not reducible to cute little quotes for middle-class mindfulness yogis and yoginis, but it has a beating heart and the jaws of a tiger who is going to eat you alive before you eat your last strawberry and draw your last breath of thanks for this life.

*

I is married at 24 and separated at 27, and from women I learned and still learns an awful lot, and from men too, and whoever you think you are, don't apologize, darling, please, and don't wait for the state and the government to rubber-stamp your difference. It is better, methinks, to practice the freedom you talk about. It's not just me saying this but Michel Foucault in person: the practice of freedom. Foucault sees the ethic of the concern for the self as a practice of freedom. Even though the individual is unable to entirely exit power relations, which produce her own self, she can take part in the self-making. In that sense, freedom can be understood as participation in the process of defining oneself and the meaning of freedom.

*

I is a dancer at heart, trapped within this face, trapped in a zoom screen pretending to give a talk to an audience of algorithmic ghosts, all of us not dancing but trapped within the confines of a living room, all of us lonely and putting the kettle on after the end of the conference.

*

An enemy of difference is *logocentrism*. What is *logocentrism*? On a basic level, it refers to the widespread belief that language translates reality faithfully and effectively. This is because the dominant view considers *logos* – variously translated as discourse, speech, the principle of reason, and judgement – to be a superior way of building a theory of knowledge. But this does not take into account the multiplicities of language and speech.

Logocentrism is almost inevitable ... This is partly because *logocentrism* is inextricably linked to what many of us take as indisputable: a metaphysical notion of presence and the principle of self-identity. Conversely, *differentialism* questions the notion that I am I and that whatever is, is. Another enemy of difference is 'Being' with a capital 'B'. Genuine appreciation of difference implies an active forgetting of 'Being' in the name of the concrete 'being' sitting opposite in the therapy room. Another enemy of difference is *hermeneutics*, the illusion that any particular 'being' or situation or event is legible, interpretable, translatable. What is forgotten in this process is that any process of translation implies repression and the positing of an *a-priori*: for instance,

habitus in Husserl^[14] (2013, pp. 66–67) and *Vor-struktur* in Heidegger.^[15]

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I is tolerated by the existential therapy world, by the person-centred world, by the world of psychotherapy in general, because I refuses to wear the T-shirt with the face of Rogers or Heidegger printed on it. Also, because I doesn't buy this third-rate ideology that we are free individuals given that everything turns into pound sterling given that our so-called existential freedom is the freedom to be a consumer.

*

In relation to difference and embodiment, Simone de Beauvoir had some useful and still very interesting things to say from within the existential tradition. But her approach to the phenomenology of the body is far less reliant on either Sartre or Heidegger than is commonly believed, and more congruently aligned with the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.^[16] And when it comes to discussing women's experience, she is less interested in clarifying their subordinate position in a male world or in championing their rights than in the reality called *woman*. Her link with Husserl is straightforward. Husserl gives a set of phenomenological problems for future study: he discusses death and birth, unconsciousness, historicity, and social life. And then, moving on to what he calls the problem of the sexes, he states that the phenomenologist's project is to investigate the meaning of these phenomena, their formation as different types of realities and objectives, i.e., entities, events, facts, etc. Questions about death are not, for instance, What is death? How does it happen? Sara Heinämaa explains:

How does it happen that we experience death as an occurrence (*Vorkommnis*)? Similarly, we can ask, why is the sexual relation experienced as a difference and opposition? Is this necessary? Can the experience have some other structure?^[17]

It is within the above frame that De Beauvoir poses her questions and in so doing progresses phenomenological enquiry along *differential* rather than universalistic and essentialist lines. This becomes very clear when she gives Levinas, the champion of otherness, a run for his money. Levinas had suggested that otherness reaches its full expression in the feminine, which he describes as being on the same level as consciousness but with an opposite meaning.^[18] De

Beauvoir's objection is that woman too is a consciousness of herself. She attacks his analysis as deliberately taking a man's point of view, disregarding mutuality and the fact that feminine and masculine bodies are variations of embodiment, reinventing in their unique ways the ambiguity of human existence.

To tell the truth, man, like woman, is flesh, and therefore a passivity – and she, like him, in the midst of her carnal fever, is a consenting, a voluntary gift, an activity; they live in their different ways the strange ambiguity of existence made body.^[19]

Seen in this way, femininity is a musical theme, Sara Heinämaa remarks. Undetermined by earlier experiences, it lives and becomes anew every step of the way.

Hélène Cixous writes:

Sometimes one has to go very far. Sometimes the right distance is extreme remoteness. Sometimes it is in extreme proximity that it breathes.^[20]

So: Who are I? *Je est un autre*. I is someone else. I is another.

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