



Ostranenie  
On Shame and Knowing

M.H. Bowker



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dead letter office

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for Julie, toujours



## Ostranenie

M.H. Bowker

When mom<sup>1</sup> collapsed

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<sup>1</sup> Paradoxical is that absurdity makes things strange as it makes them known. It defamiliarizes. *De + familiaris. Ostranenie.*

Born of the rift between what we want and what we may have, absurdity gives to ordinary things an alienation effect, *Verfremdungseffekt*, to use Brecht's term, such as when the audience wants to understand what is happening on stage but cannot. Or when we cry out—*Help!*—to someone who is not there.

The opposite of alienation is familiarity, *habitus*, which includes saying, thinking, or doing things so regularly that we no longer comprehend them. What is familiar is unknown, unknowable, until it is defamiliarized. What is estranged, divorced, is understood.

Do we not seek, often unaware, to defamiliarize ourselves, to get outside of life, to mirror ourselves in self-alienation? Otherwise, we are every inch of our selves. Our hands know the edges that surround us. Of such prisoners it should be said not that



on the kitchen floor<sup>2</sup>  
 from an aortic dissection,  
 and my benumbed sister  
 drank,<sup>3</sup>

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knowledge is withheld, but that we are so profoundly familiar with ourselves that, perhaps enviably, we live out embarrassingly intimate experiences of which, perhaps mercifully, we shall never be meaningfully conscious.

<sup>2</sup> Whose body  
 supplicated  
 when I lay at your feet?

<sup>3</sup> We mourn *à peine* because we have lost, among other things, the constellation of illusions needed to mourn. Stalin's wasn't the only revolutionary hope; Hitler's wasn't the only total fantasy, but after Auschwitz we revolt at poetry (Adorno 1983, 34) about Providence (Levi 1996, 157–158).

Now we persist in our impairment, hesitating to rectify life's tragedies because all rectifying illusions except the tragic have been ruined. If we are understandably melancholy about that (melancholy *because of* that), internalizing guilt for illusion's excesses (expressed in compulsive reproaches for all that intrudes upon, slights, or comprehends the Other) will not recapture what is lost.

That we can resuscitate lost victims of illusion in penance, sacrifice, and vigilant circumspection is, itself, a wild illusion, and so, we make minor progress. Yet it is a melancholy illusion, requiring that we interrupt ourselves at the very moment we find consolation, for fear that if we do not interrupt

and my emaciated father  
 wouldn't eat,<sup>4</sup>  
 and my aunt from Arkansas  
 showed up demanding bologna sandwiches  
 with butter on the bread,  
 and said to pose for pictures,<sup>5</sup>

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ourselves, of true consolation we will never be  
 worthy.

<sup>4</sup> How the *Samuel Beckett Theatre Company* breaks for  
 lunch:

Director: All right, everyone. Let's take an hour  
 for lunch.

Everyone: Okay.

[*They do not move.*]

<sup>5</sup> In her lifetime, my mother published a single short  
 story, entitled "Fantasia," which appeared in the  
 collection *Prize College Stories of 1963*, edited by  
 Hallie and Whit Burnett. Although she went on to  
 the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins, the  
 University of Chicago, and to a few faculty positions  
 teaching English, to my knowledge she never wrote  
 or published anything else. For reasons that remain  
 unclear to me, "Fantasia" was kept a secret for over  
 thirty years; only to be discovered after an old friend  
 made a casual remark about my mother's one-time  
 literary promise. That was about ten years ago, less  
 than two years before my mother died.

"Fantasia" is about a seven-year-old girl, named  
 Beverly, and a concert pianist turned neighborhood

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music teacher, named Richard. The story opens with a description of the loud piano music Beverly hears while being fitted for an uncomfortable wool coat. First the notes “cascaded . . . in chromatic waterfalls,” then they “galloped the length of the keyboard, stopped and wheeled, and pounded back like a tournament in octaves.” The reader can only assume Richard is playing Bach’s *Fantasia*, the Toccata and Fugue in D minor. The music is powerful, chromatic, rhythmically free, and unusually dissonant. The performance is arresting, even to a girl of seven.

Although Beverly is stricken by Richard’s playing, Marge, her mother, and Annie, the local seamstress and Richard’s wife, disinterestedly discuss the name and composer of the piece. These two women are not treated kindly in the story. Beverly’s mother is referred to as “the plump woman” several times. She taps a yardstick “with no particular rhythm” and “gazes absently” at Beverly’s shoes, reminding herself to make Beverly polish them when she gets home. She speaks in an “almost malicious tone” about a local boy taking piano lessons from Richard. After reveling in the boy’s inevitable musical failure, Marge “chuckles, satisfied.”

Annie, the seamstress, is no better. A nag and a boor, she has persuaded her virtuoso husband to give piano lessons to children rather than to rehearse for performances. Annie even complains about all the time and money Richard spent studying (at Juilliard) and rehearsing for the single concert he has given: “When I think of all the lessons he had and all the practicing he did,” she moans, “it makes me sick.” According to Annie, everyone is

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much happier now that Richard has given up any thought of “being somebody and getting somewhere.”

After the hem of Beverly’s coat is set, she is released to the kitchen to get a piece of cake. Here, Beverly meets Richard for the first time. Richard is a tall, thin man with disproportionately large hands and a romantically disheveled appearance accentuated by an unbuttoned vest and sloppily-rolled-up cuffs. It is clear at once that he differs from his wife, the busy-body with the short, “close-cropped hair . . . combed flat.” Richard’s first words to Beverly are “gruff and unfriendly,” but are a welcomed contrast to the superficially pleasant but “almost malicious” gossiping of the women. He stares at her and stands silently in the center of the kitchen. He plays at being cross with her, then banter with her, all the while commanding Beverly’s respect and attention. Beverly clearly finds his unapologetic presence, his impertinence, and his forceful manner mysteriously attractive.

At one point, Beverly hiccups and Richard asks her, “Do you suppose it’s something psychological? Maybe it’s connected with a traumatic experience of some sort.” To this unusual comment, Beverly merely shakes her head, “abashed.” Richard asks why she is embarrassed, and Beverly replies that people always act awkwardly when she hiccups: they either laugh at her or hit her on the back or just ignore her, which is “the worst.” As the two continue talking, Beverly mentions that she must decide what type of buttons to get for her new coat. She asks Richard if he thinks gold buttons are impractical. Richard then launches into a long and saccharin speech about her

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right to ask for gold buttons, even though they may be the most impractical things in the world. Upon hearing Richard's heartfelt defense of self-indulgence, Beverly "beams at him, wide eyed." Finally, the two move to the piano and Beverly asks him to reprise *Fantasia*. As the story ends, Richard's large fingers once again "pour over the keyboard," making music that "spills out" and "flows" around the room in "pounding waves that did not break on any shore of pause but fell and rose without relief."

The first few times I read my mother's story I understood it to be about a fantasized parent. After all, the story is called "Fantasia" and Richard is a fantastical older male figure. As opposed to her "plump," uncomprehending, and cruel mother, Beverly seems to dream of having a father like Richard who engages her creatively, who both validates her desire and envelops her in desire, who encourages her to make decisions that will bring her joy. Since there is no mention of Beverly's father in the story, and since my mother's own father died when she was quite young, Richard's odd comment about "psychological trauma" and Beverly's claim that being ignored after hiccupping is "the worst" suggest that Richard is a perfect parent-substitute, rescuing my mother from her parental loss.

A hiccup is an involuntary physical act. For it to be ignored and for that neglect to cause pain to a girl of seven imply that Beverly's mother, and whatever other adults may be around, do not support Beverly's capacity to exist for herself, securely, in her own body, as something more than a mannequin at a coat-fitting. At the same time, Richard's gift of self-indulgence is kind, but it is attached to his own

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personal qualities in a way that reminds us of its precariousness. That is, Beverly finds immediate but temporary fulfillment in her connection to this older stranger and his music. His overflow of talent and self-assurance momentarily fill up her relatively empty, ignored, “abashed” self, a self depleted by a preoccupied mother and a missing father. In fact, throughout the story, there is a running joke about *which* Bach composed the piece Richard plays: J.S. or “the other one.” Of course, since the composer is J.S. Bach, the father, and not his son, C.P.E. Bach, this seemingly innocuous joke serves to underscore the image of the father as the center of creativity, as the master and charmer of the wary self. Like *Father* Bach’s music, Richard’s commanding musical and conversational performances are strong enough to fill the silence of Beverly’s self in ways that neither Beverly nor Beverly’s mother can.

My mother would already take offense at this interpretation of her story. She would be embarrassed by the loosely psychoanalytic explanation being offered. In what can only be regarded as a sweeping dismissal, she used to say, “Psychology all boils down to toilet training.” Lately, I have begun to wonder whether my mother’s disdain for psychology was related to her embarrassment about “Fantasia,” about her writing career in general, and about the real subject of the story: desire and shame. Having hidden all evidence of the story for decades, she was not happy to discuss it once it had been uncovered.

When I first discovered the story, I imagined that my mother’s aversion to discussing it with me was related to my place in her life, that my birth may have been unwanted, or may have ended her creative

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work by forcing upon her a more pragmatic, suburban, “toilet-training”-oriented existence. But inquiries with family members and friends revealed that my mother had given up writing several years before I was born, because, as she said, she just “lost the need to write.”

It is equally possible that the short story and its psycho-sexual implications were what embarrassed my mother enough to keep it a secret, for Beverly’s brief encounter with Richard is not only an encounter with a father figure, but an emancipation from the repression of her desire and a sort of seduction by an older man. Seen from this vantage-point, the sexual oppressiveness of Annie and Marge is remarkable from the beginning of the story: Beverly is being “hemmed in” to a heavy, uncomfortable, wool coat, during which time she is forbidden to move, even to relieve an itch on her leg. The women show little substantive interest in Richard’s music and are thereby portrayed as coarse and unfeeling. There is a castrating quality to the women’s gossip about Richard’s “wasted” years of study, their celebration of his foreclosed future, and their glee about his hapless student who will surely fail to mature as a musician. At the same time, Richard seems immune to the women’s stultifying influence. His immense physical presence, his willful and confident manner, his unkempt appearance, and even his name evoke *richness*, freedom, and abundance. Yet perhaps none of Richard’s qualities more strongly suggests his vital masculine sexuality than the words my mother chose to convey the power of his music, which “spills,” “flows,” and “pounds” like waves that rise and fall “without relief.”

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Among other things, my mother was a traditional, church-going woman raised by strict, working-class, Finnish immigrants, so if she felt ashamed about this story's indulgence even in veiled sexual fantasy, it would not be a surprise. Nevertheless, focusing exclusively on either the parental or the sexual undertones of the story would be to miss its full meaning, for "Fantasia" is also a rather straight-forward depiction of the battle between desire and shame. The pivotal moment of the story is when Beverly asks Richard what kind of buttons she should request for her coat. Here, Beverly wants to know whether it is acceptable to desire gold buttons or whether her desire is shameful, unacceptable, out of place. Of course, just asking Richard to weigh in on the question of the buttons is a dangerous indulgence for Beverly, for in doing so she gives a small portion of herself to this attractive, unfamiliar man, a man who, for a time at least, gave reign to his own ostensibly irrational musical aspirations.

When Richard affirms Beverly's impractical interest in gold buttons, she is granted permission to possess a desire—regardless of whether this desire is fulfilled—that would otherwise cause her only shame. The story suggests that, by setting out his indulgent and aesthetic morality, Richard temporarily liberates Beverly from the "hemmed in," joyless world of Marge and Annie, introducing her instead to a world of freedom, music, and ecstasy, closely linked here with the self-esteem that derives from knowing and respecting one's own desires. Thus, the fantasy in "Fantasia" is not merely parental and not merely sexual: it is a fantasy about



having a different relationship to oneself, a relationship in which the liberating music of Richard overwhelms the constraining voice of shame.

The most tragic aspect of this story for me is that the creative and cooperative overcoming of shame celebrated in “Fantasia” somehow failed to find a lasting home in my mother. Rather, the author of this story about defeating shame was apparently so ashamed of it that she hid it from her own family for decades. Perhaps equally surprising, the woman my mother became was not impertinent and playful like Richard, but rather domineering and restrained, like Marge and Annie. It is true that she encouraged and even demanded the development of artistic talent in her children, but she would never have suggested to her children that they indulge their desires. It was typically my sister’s and my desires, and our frustrations over failures to fulfill our desires, that provoked her angriest epithets (“horrible, rotten child”).

Perhaps shame can be an expression of a precarious love that requires the object of love to be perfect, so that the one who loves does not have to feel shame for loving. Perhaps it is difficult to avoid feelings of vicarious shame at a child who is full of desire and who, for a time, does not know how to be ashamed of it. While my mother insisted upon a standard of perfection in her life that I thought admirable, I cannot help but feel that this perfection was a substitute for a self-indulgence that eluded her. She sought to win the right to experience her own desire by being perfect. Of course, as an adult there was no one there to grant her wish, no Richard to rescue her with ecstatic music, no one to accept

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her perfect offering and give her a reward, except, perhaps, me. Lacanians say that the first desire is the desire to be the object of the mother's desire, to be "the Thing" that fulfills her. One eventually gives up this fantasy and accepts the compensations of symbols, language, culture. This is probably correct, although things become complicated if the mother desires the child to be a master of symbols, language, and culture, to fulfill her by liberating her from shameful desire. Here, the *non/nom du père* becomes the *oui/ we de la mère*.

My father recently told me that my mother "always worshipped" me, which was precisely my deepest desire. Nevertheless, I laughed, for I felt she disapproved of me, while it was I who always worshipped her. That we may have secretly worshipped each other while sharing excruciating shame suggests that we may have worshipped each other's secret shame, each other's capacity for superlative (and superlatively concealed) shame. This reminds me of what may be the most important passage in all of Nietzsche (1966, 50–51), of whom mom disapproved:

There are occurrences of such a delicate nature that one does well to cover them up with some rudeness to conceal them; there are actions of love and extravagant generosity after which nothing is more advisable than to take a stick and give any eyewitness a sound thrashing: that would muddle his memory. Some know how to muddle and abuse their own memory in order to have their revenge at least against this only witness: shame is inventive . . . . A man whose

and to smile in the pictures,<sup>6</sup>

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sense of shame has some profundity encounters his destinies and delicate decisions, too, on paths which few ever reach and of whose mere existence his closest intimates must not know: his mortal danger is concealed from their eyes, and so is his regained sureness of life. (Nietzsche 1966, 50–51)

Sometimes I imagine a more honest epilogue to the story in which it is revealed that Beverly is unable to give herself over to Richard and all that Richard represents, even though she desperately wishes she could. In this ending, Beverly sits on the piano bench, trying to let Richard possess her, but when his music stops and she returns home with her unfeeling mother, she no longer has the strength to ask for the gold buttons she desires, and is once again full of fear and shame. Regardless of how the story ends, I wonder if not only “Fantasia” but also my attempt to comment on it are impossible overtures in which children make desperate appeals for the very permission to desire. Without such permission, one lives only conditionally, only momentarily, only when swept up in the shameless passions of another.

<sup>6</sup> My first ‘client’ had an extensive file, which was unusual for a young man. He had even received psychoanalytic psychotherapy and Rorschach testing, which was even stranger. Low-income ‘clients’ at the Denver mental health clinic where I worked were not typically spoken to nor heard to this degree. Psychologists did not spend hours pondering their

since she hadn't seen us in a while,  
my sister and I complied,<sup>7</sup>

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words and gestures and dreams. Rather, such patients got meds and then more meds to manage the side-effects of their meds; they got certifications for treatment and 72-hour psychiatric holds. Anyway, if you ever want to be given a careful look by a mental health professional, as I suspect he did, then say what he said when presented with the first ink blot: "That is a picture of a boy who has finally learned his lesson."

<sup>7</sup> The ghastly project of Texas football coaches, shared by modern armies and other unhappy associations, is to break young people, in this case boys, by subjecting them to repeated emasculation, leaving them no choice but to prove their potency. The boys' efforts to guarantee their psychic survival are then directed toward the maintenance of the same organization(s) that ravaged their egos. The victims' attempts to rebuild their shattered selves, however, are futile, because they have been coerced to collaborate with their tormentors, to identify with the aggressor, as Anna Freud would have it.

Since it would be better to die a man (or a boy) on any field of battle than to accept what we have been told about ourselves, we who have survived to become men hardly recognize the perversity of the fact that the same people who expected us to have courage and manly character were the ones who insisted each day that we were pathetic and weak. Chaim Shatan (1977, 600–602) writes of US Marine recruits:

while my father slipped away  
into the hot, dark garage<sup>8</sup>

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Combined pressures—total exhaustion, physical maltreatment, individual subjection, and personal degradation—drive most of the men to view their superiors with an infantile dread, an uncanny awe—and great expectations. The loss of ego boundaries produced by this total assault enhances the possibility of future regressions side by side with dependency on the omnipotent officer . . . .

Halfway through boot camp, there is a subtle transformation. The recruit's resistance lessens and he begins to feel motivated to help his 'instructors' achieve the set goals . . . . During the remainder of basic combat training, the recruit gets rewards and acceptance, 'but only for the attributes he acquired in training, and not for anything he brought from his previous environment' . . . .

The approval and esteem of authority leads to the easing of deprivations and penalties. This is the first reward. More complex are the rewards of surrender—of submerging oneself in a vast host, an unseen, encircling presence, 'compelled and controlled as though by invisible threads'; of submitting to a mighty, almighty Corps and partaking of its limitless power, its corporate strength.

<sup>8</sup> It is strange to read, in a relatively recent book, the casual description of a place that seems so distant, a place the author has no intention of glorifying, but a place that you know instantly to be wonderful and

to smoke a couple  
 low-tar cigarettes.<sup>9</sup>  
 And when I left for a hotel  
 because the house was dirty,<sup>10</sup>

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enviable and entirely lost. Jean Grenier (2005, 32) describes a small, Algerian cemetery he disliked as a child:

Set against a hill, facing a horizon on valley and sea, its black yew trees set it off distinctly from the green sky, prairie, and sea . . . Chestnut and chrysanthemum dealers crowded the entrance . . . The priest went directly to a large granite cross (a leftover from mission days) bearing on its pedestal the inscription *ave crux spes unica* [*hail to the cross, sole hope*].

It does not matter whether such places exist somewhere in the world or not. Somehow you ache at the realization that such places no longer exist for you. There are no mission cemeteries on hills facing seas, no chestnut dealers, no black yew trees. In fact, your uncertainty that such places ever actually existed is tantamount to your certainty that such places exist in an impossible bodily memory, where they are needed.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps what is truly incredible is *not* human beings' capacity for cruelty, but our willingness to suffer in search of innocence, although such willingness, it must be admitted, is often indistinguishable from cruelty.

and black ants were sneaking through the  
 walls,<sup>11</sup>  
 and there was so much cat fur and dust<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Watching a PBS documentary on Saint Peter, the terrible priest/narrator says something like, “We are all sinners, and our sins are most evident in the presence of the light of God. It is like driving into the sun, when you see every spot on your windshield. When you drive away from the light, on the other hand, your windshield seems clear.” As I mentally vomit in horror at the vulgarity of this analogy, I admit to having thought, for the briefest moment, “Perhaps the fact that this program (and everything else) appears to me covered in shit means that I, too, am near unto the light.”

<sup>11</sup> B asks A to borrow a pen at the morning meeting. A gives a pen to B. When B returns it, the top is chewed and wet with saliva. A says, “You keep it.”

B sticks the pen in his pocket, pulls it out later to sign his check at the bank, almost leaves the pen on the counter, but the bank teller says, “Your pen.”

B fingers it throughout the afternoon and, at bedtime, leaves it on the night table. B wakes periodically and looks at it. B howls.

B dreams that he will use the pen to scrape the ink off his shoes, to wipe the ink from his legs, from his chest, from his hair, from the walls of his house, from the seams in the windows and the corners of the ceiling from which it never ceases to drip. But the bank teller tells him, “No.”

<sup>12</sup> Asa (*a young grocery cashier*): Hello, sir. Did you find everything you needed today?

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Me: Sure did. How are you?

Asa: I'm thinking about Shōgun.

Me: Sorry?

Asa: Shōgun.

Me: Sorghum?

Asa: Shōgun.

Me: Shōgun?

Asa: Yeah.

*At this moment, I suspect Asa has penetrated my soul and ripped out the ancient memory of my mother's little library in the solarium, the indomitable Texas sun burning the wooden windowsills, the agonized potted plants, the cats leaving pillows of hair on the carpet, the burnt orange 1970s cabinets, the piles of books topped for years by a hardbound edition of James Clavell's 1975 novel, Shōgun.*

Me: [*nervously*] Oh. What—um—what about Shōgun?

Asa: Nothing. Just like it.

Me: Oh you mean that Hibachi place on Maple?

Asa: Yeah.



that I choked on the air,  
 it was not the first time I thought  
 what a fucked up  
 family I have,<sup>13</sup>

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Me: [*relieved*] I haven't been there. Did you—did you come from dinner?

Asa: No, I just like it.

Me: Oh—All right—Yeah.

Asa: Damn, man. Now you've got me thinking about Shōgun.

<sup>13</sup> That we are gratuitous, *de trop* in Sartre's language (1964), has traditionally been taken as an insult, but perhaps—like the vast deserts Thomas Merton describes as the perfect gift from God because they cannot be exploited (1956), or like the refusal of Melville's Bartleby who prefers not to—our uselessness is a riveting gift.

To use others and to be used by others are great gifts: Winnicott says, "O! to be a cog" (1986, 50). But they are gifts of a different kind: less terrifying, more meaningful, more human, less divine. In the pursuit of "projects," writes Georges Bataille (1988, 51–52), one "falls . . . into flight, like an animal into an endless trap; on one day or another, one dies an idiot," whereas

the path of non-knowledge is the emptiest of nonsense . . . In point of fact, I give myself to non-knowledge (this is communication), and as there is communication with the darkened

and what a fuck up  
 I am,<sup>14</sup>  
 and what a fucked up  
 life my mother had,

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world, rendered unfathomable by non-knowledge, dare I say God: and it is thus that there is once again (mystical) knowledge, but I can't stop (I can't—but I must regain my breath): 'God if he knew.' And further on, always further on. God as the lamb substituted for Isaac. This is no longer sacrifice. Further on there is naked sacrifice, without Isaac. The sacrifice is madness, the renunciation of all knowledge, the fall into the void, and nothing, neither in the fall nor in the void, is revealed, for the revelation of the void is but a means of falling further into absence.

<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare teaches us that before a word is spoken, it must be dead in our hearts. To render something in language requires that it be pinned to the table for inspection and analysis. Thus, every act of speech contains contempt, as Nietzsche would have it, and a lie, in a special sense.

We may wonder why everything we touch with our minds dies, yet, even as we wonder, we instinctively move on to the next vital thing, never realizing the nature of our deadly addiction.

If we render Shakespeare's observation in a more active mode, it is equally true that speaking of something is the act which *kills* it in our hearts, often mercifully, often therapeutically. Upon this truth rests communication, art, culture, psychoanalysis.

but at that moment,  
 although I was still afraid of her,<sup>15</sup>  
 wondering if she  
 liked me in the end,<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> At five years, I hear words and need to know how to write them. Mom says: “Be quiet.”

I try “quiet” on my small blackboard: “k . . . o . . . ?” No. “c . . . u . . . ?” No. I ask her to tell me. No.

Pleading loudly, mom is upset at my pleading. She emphatically refuses. My body is cracking and snapping. I must take a bath.

Naked in the bath, I ask politely. I try each letter until I get to “q”. I succeed only to be lost again.

I beg. Upon the final refusal, I panic and lose myself, violently smacking the bathwater and shouting until she leaves the room in silence.

<sup>16</sup> Childhood is immensely political. In childhood a developing person is physically and legally enthralled to his parent or custodian. It is not entirely distinct from enslavement. Of course, this fact is readily denied by children and adults since we prefer not to think of it as such and since most of us have not experienced it as such. Indeed, many may recall the opposite, the parents' facilitation of the child's desire, that is, lordship. Moreover, some parents are able to dominate the child in a way that does not make the child *aware* of his domination or, concomitantly, his freedom, which is most often a slavish freedom: the freedom of irresponsibility. Nevertheless, it is foolish to imagine that children do not work to produce ‘goods’ in the household economy: the labor of study and chores, the labor of obedience, of pleasing parents and siblings in good

the resplendent recognition  
of how grotesque everything was<sup>17</sup>

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behavior and appropriate performances, the pursuit of activities ranging from courtesy to athletics to music which carry psychic rewards for parents, the regular appearance at family functions as representatives and advertisements for the family's happiness, the affective labor of being a contented child in the shopping mall, an 'A' student, a willing helper in the evenings, a peaceful sleeper at bedtime. This condition is a primary and fundamental political experience of all human beings.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Miller thought France a comfortable place because there was no hope. He compared this hopeless comfort to American life in which everyone aspires to be great: a Senator, a movie star, a quarterback. In America there is such pervasive hope that, in the end, there is no hope. Nothing is good enough. Each failure is unique and each is privately culpable for his own failure to become Elvis or the President.

Of course, Henry Miller probably didn't believe all of what he wrote, since he must have desperately wanted to be something great and since he did become a very great writer and a very great sleaze. It must be difficult to be that self-conscious and that sleazy at the same time. It is not difficult to like Miller for his sleaziness, but it is difficult not to dislike the character who appears in his books. You have to wonder how such a man does not end up hating himself.

Miller gives the impression that his sleaziness is part of an enlightened morality, which is a dangerous

united us,<sup>18</sup>  
 so I wrote something earnest for the funeral  
 about how she was my teacher,<sup>19</sup>

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idea. It is as if he calculated the pros and cons of acting horribly and chose his path because it seemed somehow more lucid and decent in the end, making his semi-autobiographical selfishness and cruelty a kind of noble sacrifice. And yet he insists that all noble sacrifice is ignoble cowardice.

It is easy to miss the point of Henry Miller. The miracle of Miller is that he is actually happy.

<sup>18</sup> *Look for me now,*  
 he thought,  
 as he slid beneath the trestle,  
 and felt its webbed shadow,  
 and thought,

*I am like this,*  
*hiding by the way,*  
*and inconspicuous*  
*in my particular quality.*

He bristled at the thought  
 that the feel of the trestle  
 was the feel of his thought.  
 Nevertheless, he thought,  
*Look for me now.*

<sup>19</sup> It is overwhelming: the sheer volume of things to think and know, even in relatively small domains of academic work. There is too much. So much that I have a feeling of drowning, of being caught in clinging vines, of being surrounded by armed forces.

which was very true,  
 and I stayed up all night  
 making a tasteful portrait collage  
 as she would have wanted,<sup>20</sup>  
 and the fat pastor who didn't know her  
 said cheap things with  
 smarmy church inflections,<sup>21</sup>

---

Not that knowledge is hostile. The surrounding soldiers have their backs turned. The clinging vines are ancient, and indifferent.

At the same time, there is so much knowledge that is none at all. So much that is nothing, that does not communicate. And yet those who say that there are only a few things worth knowing are ludicrous, for the presumption to know what is worth knowing entails the presumption of knowing more than is possible to know.

It is overwhelming that there is so much that I will never know, even if it is not of value, so much that no single person will ever know, making even the smartest among us hopelessly ignorant.

<sup>20</sup> The front cover of Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), his celebrated essay on the leveling of radical difference and the subsumption of all things by capitalist enterprise, proudly declares: "Over 300,000 copies sold."

<sup>21</sup> In classical Greek philosophy, thought and medicine were often analogized, right ideas being therapies for wrong-headedness. *Psyche* (ψυχή) meant not just mind but spirit or soul. For Plato, ideas were beyond us, yet, if we knew them, part of our *psyches*. If we got the right ones, in the right

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order, then our souls snapped into right order (*taxis kai kosmos*). If not, disorder.

Socrates practiced homeopathic idea therapy around town, pointing out the errors of less-thoughtful citizens and inducing them to throw up bad ideas for healthier ones. Of course, Plato's Socrates believed in the truth of his therapies and had little patience for the sophistries Protagoras and others fed to the masses for practical ends. Then again, the test of the truth of ideas for Plato was the evident goodness toward which they inclined us, so perhaps the difference is not so clear. Some even say Plato's philosophical career was idea therapy for himself, to cure an unrequited love for Socrates, his ideas of perfection a substitute for erotic love, his εἶδη (*eide*: forms) the meager compensations of philosophy.

The Hellenistic philosophers of the Greek and Roman world were the most candid idea therapists of all. The early Skeptics, Stoics, Cynics, and Epicureans were after a system of thought that would provide *ataraxia*, freedom from disturbance, like *tao* or the 'no wind' of *nirvana*. While their disagreements are widely known, all of these philosophies claimed that the way to achieve peace was to think differently, to know or not to know certain things. Epicurus, who is regularly misunderstood as a *gourmand* but who was the opposite, argued that the greatest good was the absence of pain, that the greatest pain was fear, and therefore that one must abolish notions of sin, hell, and God in order to live happily in truth.

In some Dharmic and Taoistic traditions, it is a central teaching that thinking certain thoughts can

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bring you peace, which is truth. In the West, as well, we might say the Reformation contained idea therapies for the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment for the problem of evil, classical liberalism for capitalism, postmodernism for the collective guilt of the twentieth century, and so on. Obviously, such speculations radically oversimplify.

Today, psychology is the leading idea therapy for the tragic experience of an everyday life that is not worth living. The therapeutic conversation aligns the patient's *psyche* with the therapist's. A less controversial way of speaking would be to say that the patient's *psyche* is made recognizable and tolerable to the patient. But recognition and tolerance are attributes of the therapist's *psyche* and are the fundamental norms of therapeutic training and practice. They are perhaps not *eide*, but *ideas*, and not particularly bad ones, transmitted as therapy.

Recently, books like *Plato not Prozac!* (Marinoff 2000) and *What Would Aristotle Do? Self-Control Through the Power of Reason* (Cohen 2003) have revived thought-as-therapy approaches to everyday problems. Societies for "philosophical counseling" and "institutes" for "philosophical practice" have sprung up around the country.

My students say: "Everyone has his or her own truth. But that doesn't stop me from believing that my truth is right. And your truth is right for you. And that's all right." These students unwittingly recall what Joseph Schumpeter claimed was the task of civilized people in the modern world: "To realise the relative validity of one's convictions, and yet stand for them unflinchingly" (qtd. in Berlin 1969, 172). But it is odd to pretend to absolutism while



acknowledging relativism. It would require us to act unflinchingly upon beliefs of which we are only relatively convinced. Perhaps we see in practice that this is impossible, for none of my students admits to being willing to die or kill for any ideal, no matter how deeply believed.

Richard Rorty (1989) asks why the claim that something does not exist is so often construed as a claim that something is relative to something else. That is, why do we say, 'Truth is relative,' when what we mean is, 'Truth doesn't exist'? The issue is related to philosophical pragmatism, the belief that truth is a function of how well an idea works. The more interesting matter is whether philosophical pragmatists *experience ideas* with the same intensity as 'true believers.'

Albert Camus calls the idea-therapeutic leap a "philosophical suicide" (1955, 28, 41). Of course, we may wonder if philosophical suicide coincides with *unphilosophical re-birth*. Perhaps the therapeutic value of the idea of truth is dependent upon just such an unphilosophical self-deception, a necessary mistake.

A teacher of mine once told me he was "a practicing non-believing Episcopalian." I didn't understand this for some time. The notion of idea therapy suggests a world in which we can both partake in magic and *not* believe in magic, which rescues us from the humiliation of belief which would, itself, preclude further belief. But, of course, if we can partake then we must partly believe.

This begins to sound like Slavoj Žižek's (2008, 300) joke about Nils Bohr and the horseshoe. Bohr's friend comes to visit and is surprised at seeing the

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superstitious object. He asks Bohr why he would keep a horseshoe over his door, since Bohr surely couldn't believe in its power to bring good luck. To his question, Bohr replies: "It also works if one does not believe in it."

If ideas only work when we believe in them, then ideas are like magic. If we believe (*viz.* Peter Pan), then we get the magic. If not, we are all grown up. Why don't the "stage sets collapse" more often (Camus 1955, 12)? It is a small miracle.

I imagine a young woman who buys herself a card for her own birthday, knowing that no one else will have remembered. She writes it in the hand of an imaginary admirer. She leaves it in a special place, then pretends to be surprised by the gift. I recall, as a boy, throwing myself into snowbanks and scraping my face with ice every day for a week in order to gain sympathy from my mother and to feel sorry for myself, pretending to be the victim of a non-existent bully. Is it the case that I really tricked myself, that I forgot what I had done? Certainly not. Does the woman really believe she has received a thoughtful gift from someone who admires her? No, but for a time, perhaps she can pretend. Perhaps one can enjoy one's own self-deception as a gift to oneself, a gift that validates desire even as it circumvents it. Perhaps we ought to rejoice constantly that we can conjure up this kind of nonsense.

When my mother died, my father did not sleep or eat for days. His back tightened up. He fell ill. He had two thoughts in his head that tormented him. One was the horrible image of my mother, full of tubes and catheters, in a hospital gown, dying in a small bed. The other was that he hadn't said he loved

and I listened to dozens of people<sup>22</sup>

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her enough. One afternoon, sitting on the couch with him, I reassured him with the same words I had used in every conversation for a week, but this time, for some reason, or for no reason at all, his expression changed. He sank back into the cushions, the blood returned to his face, and he exhaled with relief.

<sup>22</sup> The following is the transcript of a conversation created by typing lines from Act II of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* (1956) into a web-based artificial intelligence communication program (a.k.a. "Chat Bot") whose lexicon and conversational strategies have been developed solely by interacting with other human internet users:

Samuel Beckett: All the dead voices.

Chat Bot: ha ha your mom is dead

Samuel Beckett: They make a noise like wings.

Chat Bot: i love you \*sticks it in farther\*

Samuel Beckett: Like leaves.

Chat Bot: ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Samuel Beckett: Like ashes.

Chat Bot: adasdadasdasdas r u a vergin

Samuel Beckett: They all speak at once.

Chat Bot: u have been called the brody jenner of congress

Samuel Beckett: Rather they whisper.

Chat Bot: \*moans\* your pussys so tight

Samuel Beckett: They rustle.

Chat Bot: did u like our cum

Samuel Beckett: They murmur.

Chat Bot: \*grabs your neck\* suck it!

Samuel Beckett: They rustle.

Chat Bot: im pregnant with twins theyre his

Samuel Beckett: What do they say?

Chat Bot: hello my name is haku im a girl

Samuel Beckett: They talk about their lives.

Chat Bot: i hope you burn there

Samuel Beckett: To have lived is not enough for them.

Chat Bot: you live in her boobs

Samuel Beckett: They have to talk about it.

from her grueling low-wage temp job  
tell me how loving and motherly she was,<sup>23</sup>

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Chat Bot: fondle my boobs

Samuel Beckett: To be dead is not enough for them.

Chat Bot: \*gets a boner\*

Samuel Beckett: It is not sufficient.

Chat Bot: are you a female

Samuel Beckett: They make a noise like feathers.

Chat Bot: ill teabag you

Samuel Beckett: Like leaves.

Chat Bot: \*kills you\*

<sup>23</sup> Psychoanalysis teaches that the mother must be real and illusory. She must be real so that the infant can create the illusion of her when necessary. If she is not really there at all, he will be unable to create an illusion of her when she is not there sometimes. It is of tremendous importance that the infant have an illusory mother when she is not really there sometimes. In an unusual sense, the illusion is more important than the reality, since the loss of an unloved child's self derives from his need to do anything, be anything, sacrifice anything to sustain the illusion. Of course, if the infant is hungry or

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frightened or lonely and neither a real nor illusory mother can be found, he is obliterated.

The infant who has experienced being cared for is not aware that he has been attended to by a perceptive and generous parent. Instead, he believes for some time that he has created a mother, indeed a whole world, that responds to his desires: a healthy omnipotent illusion to have. It is on the basis of this illusion of absolute power and creativity that a later, more mature, and more limited sense of power and creativity depend.

If a child is able to be creative when facing frustration, he may accept not that he is the master of the whole universe but, more modestly, that his existence is at least not an affront to reality, that the universe can be reconciled with him. Because he exists, because his feelings and body exist, he knows them and is assured that he and they deserve some recognition. This is called ontological security.

Without the creative illusions that begin in infancy a person lives without the certainty of existing, without knowing what he feels and thinks, always on the brink of psychic obliteration, always fearing the next confrontation with an intransigent reality that will throw him over the edge into nothingness. He develops defenses to prevent himself from being thrown over the edge, and other defenses to protect him from his pervasive anxieties about being thrown over the edge. These defenses may include regularly throwing himself over the edge, so that he will not have to wonder when it will happen at the hand of another. They may also include extreme rigidity, self-protection, nightmares

and to my surprise,  
 my only request<sup>24</sup>  
 was that I retrieve<sup>25</sup>

---

of persecution, or fantasies of goodness and innocence.

<sup>24</sup> There is no adequate historical example of a will-less person. This may be due to a tendency to include willing or wanting as the central ingredient in human life. Indeed, we often use the metaphors of willing or wanting for all matter, even the elements: "Water persists until it shears the hardest stone."

There are so many suppressed artifacts of psychological life that ought to challenge this way of thinking. What is it not to know what one wants? Most of the time, I do not know. Why should this appear as the exception and not the rule? Sometimes, I would prefer to have the opposite of what I want, but either I am incapable of knowing this in the moment or I cannot admit it to myself.

What is it to wish for the opposite of what I wish for, or to wish for contradictory opposites at the same time? What is the nature of the wish to have an epiphany so that I should never again have to struggle with wishing? Or the complementary wish that something great would grant me permission to do whatever I secretly want and so, in a sense, make all choices for me? What is the experience of liberation one finds when spending a night in jail, or when snowed in under dangerous conditions? What is the experience of guilt that one ought to wish for more than one does?

the one picture I owned  
of my mother with me

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<sup>25</sup> To know one's own evil: preparation to hear the calling of scholarship. I am intimate with evil, even that which is not real. It doesn't matter whether evil is real. To make contact with evil, imagined or real, is more traumatic than we know. I am bound to it. I am this evil, and its traces are never shed. It is all I am permitted to possess.

Such is the bargain: hope for redemption in exchange for accepting the premise that one is ruined unless life is lived according to a code of secret self-effacement, abnegation, the heart-rending recognition of oneself as evil. Without such extraordinary torments, one is merely corruption and weakness. Yet the promised transformation never comes. One cannot stop bargaining, even as the bargain becomes farce. In the end, it is all one knows.

I know how to elevate myself above myself, above all that is not good enough, above that which inspires terror. It requires a god and orthodoxy (*orthos doxein*). My supplication is to be approvable.

Culture is as much: redemption from shame. Shame is sham, obscuring the source of shame while disguising its own ineffectuality. Of course, sham and shame are cognate, from *kem*, 'to cover.'

I got out, out of Plano, out of a mediocrity that does not know its mediocrity and into a mediocrity that recognizes itself. What would have become of me if you had not demanded this? The thought is repulsive. Without your teaching, without bargaining, I fear there would be nothing. Perhaps this, too, is only endless shame and bargaining.



when I was a newborn  
 in which she lay next to me  
 across a small bed<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Today I am stuck on a slow-moving commuter train, packed to capacity, with a sleeping young couple to my left and a dull-looking man in a white linen Bahama blazer to my right. A mother is humming to a sleeping infant behind me, next to a college girl with a bad cough. I am aware of myself on this train, writing these words on a yellow legal pad. Even through the din, I hear the pen scraping the paper, like my childhood fits of sensory-overload, when the sound of my pulse in my ear grew ever louder, when the sound of my finger brushing the pillowcase shattered the silence like the sharpening of a kitchen knife. In such moments I would run to my parents and explain: “Everything is loud.” But today’s awareness is less fearful.

When the college girl coughs, I instinctively flinch as her wet breath hits the back of my neck. I am happy that she sees me wince, since she should take more care to protect others. I worry about the mother and baby sitting next to this girl, and am awed by the mother’s simple act of humming to protect her child from the reality that he is on a loud, hot, uncomfortable train. She persuades him to dream, enveloping him in song to keep the world away. She deludes (*ludere*, to play) him for his own good.

When the young couple wakes from an entwined slumber, and the man’s elbow twitches and hits mine, I make an effort not to move, just to look straight ahead, so as not to embarrass him. Instead, I fix my attention on the man in the Bahama blazer,

and looked down  
 carefully,  
 and rested her hand on my belly  
 as if everything would turn out alright.<sup>27</sup>

---

imagining that he must be a professor. Even with his eyes closed, he has a stupefied look on his face. Over what area of knowledge does he claim dominion?

I begin to suspect that I am engaged in what Emmanuel Levinas warned against. Am I not transforming these people into characters of my own internal drama? I am, and yet I am not hurting them. But neither am I seeing them or serving them or using them. Their realities, the actualities of their selves and their lives, do not enter into it, for if they did they would be loud, and loudness on this train would be unacceptable. The inner drama is quiet.

<sup>27</sup> It is possible to consistently misunderstand the desire to find certain things as a desire to know about their absences.

It is sometimes as if we were in great pain and communicated our desire for the pain to cease by exclaiming: "I wish to know more about pain!"

It is sometimes as if we longed to feel simultaneously alive and safe, but pursued this desire in performances of theology, philosophy, poetry.

To say it another way, we fear the intractability of pain more than that of ignorance.



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W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of thinker-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of a thought-army, a thought-pack, which would storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament. He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-outsiders. What distances would shine in their eyes!

~Lars Iyer

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“ . . . in chromatic waterfalls

. . . like a tournament in octaves.”

# Ostranenie

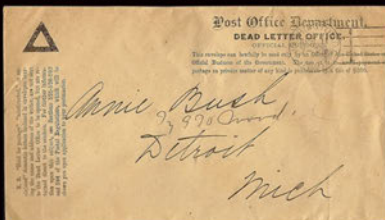
by M.H. Bowker

*Ostranenie*, the term for defamiliarization introduced by Russian writer Victor Shklovsky, means, among other things, to see in strangeness, to participate in an illusion that is more real than real. It may be achieved by (re)presenting the surface as the substance, the play as the thing, or by examining what is present before one's eyes. Ultimately, *ostranenie* means confessing one's complicity in making known what is known.

This little book is a meditation upon the moment of a mother's death: a moment of defamiliarization in several senses. The body of the work consists of footnotes which elaborate, by exegesis, by parataxis, and sometimes by surprise, the intimate and often hidden relationships between parent and child, illusion and knowledge, shame and loss. These elaborations raise questions about the power of the familiar, the limitations of discursive thought, and the paradoxical nature of the interpersonal, political, and spiritual bargains we make for the sake of security and freedom. In a candidly unsettled examination of this relationship and its influence upon the reflections and concerns of the author, the reader is invited to experience a family, a disintegration, a psyche, and its defamiliarization, from the perspectives of both an adult and a child.

Cover Image: detail from M.H. Bowker, *A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream, After Wallace Stevens* (acrylic on canvas)

## Dead Letter Office





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