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Human 2.0? Life-Writing in the Digital Age

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In October 2000 Philippe Lejeune, who since the early 1980s has pioneered the scholarly research on diaries, reported back from a year spent sampling online diaries, or ‘blogs’. *‘Cher écran . . .’: Journal personnel, ordinateur, internet* took the unusual form of a journal, and what this form allowed Lejeune to do was tell the story of his gradual conversion from dismissal to approval. ‘When you’ve been working on real personal diaries, everything in blogs feels like a caricature or prostitution’, go the opening remarks: ‘it all seems to ring hollow’.¹ At first he could not grasp how a diary, that most intimate of autobiographical forms, could be written for the gaze of strangers. The online environment is surely, he felt, ‘the total opposite of the conditions that led to the development of the personal diary, which is based on a different notion of time (delay, maturation, and assimilation), and of communication (deferred or exclusive, that is, based on secrecy)’ (p. 301). But gradually he started to be drawn to it as a venue for the diary. He began to find individual bloggers whose skills of narrative control and self-exploration compared favourably to book diarists. Then he found more

¹ Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, trans. Katherine Durnin (Manoa: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 299 (henceforth cited in the text by page numbers).

positive ways of interpreting the impulse to make the intimate public. Blogging isn't like the vanity press market in the book world, 'with its naivety and pretentiousness', but more like 'self-publishing, which is active and responsible' (p. 314). Bloggers don't want artificial glory, only 'a response', much the same as when you show your diary to a trusted friend. Moreover, he concluded, writing for others might even create a new idiom that is 'looser', closer to 'a spoken style', and which contrasts favourably with the over-literary obsession with "style" and "depth" in book diaries. Online life-writing, he even-handedly concluded, has 'constraints and resources that are just beginning to be explored. It is a new frontier' (p. 316).

This was in 2000, and when Lejeune republished parts of *'Cher écran ...'* in English translation in 2009 he noted that the online environment had changed so fast that his research was now of purely 'archaeological value' (p. 299). The intervening period had witnessed not only exponential growth in the uptake of the Internet, but the emergence of a range of different channels for digital life-writing, such as social networking sites (Facebook, Google+), play and gaming sites (Second Life, World of Warcraft), and user-generated content (YouTube, Flickr), a development that has become cumulatively known as 'Web 2.0'.² As José van Dijck puts it, 'online services shifted from offering channels for networked communication', such as the blogs Lejeune researched, 'to becoming interactive, two-way vehicles for networked sociality'.³

Most obviously, Web 2.0 has made it very easy to write online. Whereas Lejeune's Web 1.0 bloggers needed at least some basic familiarity with internet programming to set up their sites and begin posting, Facebook enables anyone with a mouse and keyboard to set up their own slickly produced magazine-style webpage for free in a matter of minutes. And as this much more accessible interface took off, for many groups of people online life-writing ceased to be a wholly optional part of life, as it was for Lejeune's bloggers. Teenagers increasingly found they had to have a Facebook presence, and a well-maintained one at that, just to be socially included. Certain jobs, especially sales and public relations, increasingly

² According to Jaron Lanier, the phrase was coined by Tim O'Reilly, founder of O'Reilly Media, and a leading supporter of the open source movement. See Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 65.

³ José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

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required employees to be on Facebook and Twitter, with the intimate and the corporate becoming increasingly blurred together.⁴ Simultaneous with the rise of Web 2.0 was the development of the ‘smartphone’, a mobile internet device that further increased the uptake of social networking, and also the amount of time spent online. You could now write your life while you actually lived it. Parents started to text while pushing their children on the swings in the local playground; smartphones started to be placed on the table at dinner parties.

The benefits of these new developments have been rather self-servingly trumpeted by the corporations who own the social networking sites. In *The New Digital Age* (2013), Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google, and Jared Cohen, Director of ‘Google Ideas’, made great claims for the democratic value of Web 2.0 in its empowerment of ordinary people to find an online voice. But intellectuals have passed a mainly negative judgement on the quality of that online voice, and when Lejeune’s optimistic account of blogging appeared in English in 2009 it was out of step with the dominant mood. In a 2010 article for the *New York Review of Books*, Zadie Smith revealed that she had sampled Facebook for two months (compare Lejeune’s whole year on blogs) before quitting for good, and advising her readers to do likewise. Web 2.0, she claimed, creates ‘People 2.0’, a reduced and banalized kind of human being, obsessed with connection for connection’s sake.⁵ Jonathan Franzen has recently started to issue regular pronouncements on the power of the Internet to banalize and distract, which have earned him the rather amusing ‘#Franzenhates’ Twitter stream in response.⁶ More substantially, though, over the last couple of years a string of very notable books have been published in which prominent intellectuals, mainly from the social sciences, but also from within the technology industry, have publically revised their earlier enthusiasm for digital life-writing.⁷

The foremost of these intellectuals is Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, and a social psychologist

⁴ Dave Eggers’ dystopian novel, *The Circle* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), explores the ramifications of the commercial appropriation of the intimate sphere: the novel is set on the so-called ‘campus’ of a company that bears many similarities to Google.

⁵ Zadie Smith, ‘Generation Why?’, *New York Review of Books*, 25 November 2010.

⁶ See especially Jonathan Franzen, ‘What’s Wrong with the Modern World’, *Guardian*, 13 September 2013.

⁷ These include Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget*, and Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (London: Atlantic, 2010).

by training. In *Life on the Screen* (1995), a study of blogging and early virtual reality applications, Turkle claimed that she found herself in a ‘liminal moment’ in which it was an open question as to whether the virtual would enhance or degrade the real. While she voiced concerns about the potential for ‘social alienation’ in people spending increasing amounts of time online, she tended to celebrate the potential for experiment and self-discovery in what were then known as multi-user domains (MUDs), in which fictional or real identities could be composed by participants for purposes of chat, storytelling, and gaming. But in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), the title says it all. For Turkle, the liminal moment of the mid-1990s has turned into a contemporary dystopia in which the new forms of digital media are now actively deforming human relationships and depleting our most intimate experiences.

To intellectuals such as Turkle, Web 2.0 seems ever less like an exciting new frontier for life-writing. But this discourse of concern, powerful though it is, does not tell the whole story. A range of contemporary novelists who, unlike Smith and Franzen, work in more experimental literary traditions, have found much to admire in the new forms of self-presentation the Internet has made available. In *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), Gary Shteyngart draws attention to the vitality of the more shallow and demotic diaristic voice promoted by social networking sites; in *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), Ben Lerner takes inspiration from the fractured self-expression of instant messaging; in *The Sluts* (2004), Denis Cooper explores the new kinds of pornographic writing created by the fantastical confessions left on anonymous message boards. In much of the leading scholarship on digital life-writing the view from literature, especially from more experimental literature, has not yet found a voice. My aim in this chapter is to place Turkle’s concerns as a social psychologist, which I will explore in detail, in dialogue with the possibilities that imaginative writers have found in the newer kinds of online writing. Of course I cannot tell the whole story: a longer essay would go on to explore, among other things, the realm of virtual reality gaming, a rich field of life-writing which has attracted some interesting literary responses.⁸ Instead I will offer three snapshots,

⁸ See especially Jonathan Lethem, *Chronic City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), which draws upon Philip K. Dick’s exploration of the virtual; also Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (London: Century, 2012).

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each focusing on a different idiom, starting with social networking in general, then moving into some more specific reflections on instant messaging and the online confession.

One of the reasons Lejeune found himself able to warm to audience-oriented internet diaries was because his own ideas about the book diary actually tended to emphasize a chatty and dialogic trajectory for the genre. Against those who regard the modern book diary as a secular version of the spiritual diary, with its assumption of earnest self-exploration, Lejeune argued instead that it descends from, and is inflected by, the record-keeping practices of the family account book, and, above all, by the letter. The addressee in 'Dear Diary' evolves out of an imagined address to a real friend, a 'friend to whom you can tell everything, who will not judge you, who will understand you and say nothing'.⁹ Even if the identity of the online confidant is unknown at the time of posting, the Web 1.0 blog can nonetheless, he claimed, take on the atmosphere congenial to intimate disclosure. In 'Growing Up Tethered', the most disturbing chapter of *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle argues that this congenial atmosphere changes on social networking websites such as Facebook. Traditionally, she argues, adolescents have needed 'time to discover themselves, time to think', and above all time to reflect upon their feelings—all needs that were well served by the book diary. Social networking sites, combined with mobile technology, do nothing to encourage this kind of development, and instead promote a very different kind of self, which she refers to as 'hyper-other-directedness'.¹⁰

With 'other-directedness' Turkle has a specific sociological theory in mind. The concept was first developed by David Riesman, also a social psychologist, in his now-classic analysis of the impact of consumerism on American identity, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950). Riesman's argument was that as the post-war American economy began to reach a distinctively 'post-industrial' phase, there was taking place a correlative shift in the 'social character' of Americans, led in particular by the influence of mass media. He borrowed the concept of social character

⁹ See especially the chapter titled 'Oh My Paper!', in Lejeune, *On Diary*, 93–102.

¹⁰ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 177 (henceforth cited within the text by page numbers).

from Erich Fromm: ‘In order that any society may function well’, Fromm had argued, ‘its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them *want* to act in the way they *have* to act as members of the society . . . They have to *desire* what objectively is necessary for them to do.’¹¹ The rapidly expanding industrial economy of the nineteenth century had tended to create what Riesman called an ‘inner-directed’ character type, defined by strong inner values derived from powerful relationships with authority figures such as parents, and from the forms of self-reflection cultivated in solitude. But the consumer society, Riesman argued, is driven by new economic needs: to create an expanding domestic market of eager consumers, and for a workforce more attuned to working in concert with other people in large and complex bureaucratic corporations. Thus emerges the new, ‘other-directed’ self. ‘What is common to all other-directeds’, Riesman claimed, ‘is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. This source is of course “internalised” in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early.’¹² While Riesman tried not to pass judgement on the other-directed self, it is hard not to read his book as the diagnosis of a cultural catastrophe in the making. In their constant attunement to the signals of acceptability and desirability produced by the mass media and their peers, other-directed people become unusually prone to anxiety; as compulsive consumers they are more prone to fads and fashions; they are a ‘lonely crowd’, always together but alone together, with little independent capacity to reflect on themselves.

There are three main reasons why Turkle thinks that the kind of life-writing found on social networking sites takes ‘other-directedness . . . to a higher power’ (p. 176), as she puts it. She argues that it tends to promote a form of life-writing that is not contemplative but brief and attention-grabbing; not soul-searching, but conventional, seeking to ‘fit in’; not reflective but written immediately, for immediate consumption by others.

¹¹ Fromm was a social psychologist affiliated to the Frankfurt School. The quotation is from *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychopathology of Ethics* (1947), italics in original; quoted in David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study in the Changing American Character* (New Haven, CT, and London: Princeton University Press, 1950), 5.

¹² Riesman, Glazer, and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd*, 22.

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By way of illustration she discusses the case study of 'Brad', one of a number of teenagers and young adults she interviewed for *Alone Together*.

Brad is a particularly articulate informant, with a highly developed aversion to Facebook. On the one hand, he complains about the 'preferences' section of the site, which fills the left-hand side of the screen with images of favourite music and books: 'You get reduced to a list of favourite things. "List your favourite music"—that gives you no liberty at all about how to say it.' These choices, he claims, tend to breed anxiety: 'What does it matter to anyone that I prefer the band Spoon over State Radio? Or State Radio over Cake? But things like Facebook . . . make you think that it really does matter' (p. 185). He also complains about having to write in a shallow, attention-grabbing way, and a glance at the Facebook interface suggests why this is so. Blogs in Web 1.0, in contrast, would typically fill long stretches of the screen with continuous prose.¹³ The most sustained form of writing Facebook allows is on the 'wall', where you post an update about yourself for all to see within an extendable box in the middle of the screen. On either side of this box (which can also be posted on by others, displacing the centrality of your own text) there are numerous other attractions, such as your photos, your other contacts, and a 'bar' featuring adverts. These are all rather tempting to click on, so—mindful of your readers—the tendency is for relatively short and attention-grabbing entries, often combined with photos, just as a teen magazine, full of colour and loud headlines, tends to feature only short articles about hot topics. As Brad points out, this format delimits 'permissible' topics, and further reduces the self into conventional shapes: 'in a conversation, it might be interesting that on a trip to Europe with my parents, I got interested in the political mural art in Belfast. But on a Facebook page, this is too much information. It would be the kiss of death. Too much, too soon, too weird' (p. 185). Above all, the other-directed qualities of the site create in Brad what Turkle calls 'presentation anxiety' (p. 182). Instead of Lejeune's model of freewheeling intimate disclosure, Brad is preoccupied by an other-directed concern that his writing doesn't sound right, or isn't having the right effect—in short, that he is falling short of the right standards of adolescent 'cool'. 'I write for effect', he admits. 'I sit down and ask, 'If I say this, will it make me sound like I'm too

¹³ Lejeune disliked blogs with too much extra presentation, which he described as 'the sort of window-dressing you might see at a fancy pastry-shop' (p. 304).

uptight? But if I say this, will it make me sound like I don't care about anything?' (p. 273). He feels that Facebook 'perverts' efforts at truthful disclosure because such revelations should be to 'another person who cares', rather than to the lonely crowd.

As well as posting on your Facebook wall, you can also interact with a particular individual via the instant messaging box, through which you can communicate in real time. Here, Turkle argues, there is an even stronger tendency to brevity because the exchanges take place in real time, which encourages a phone-style idiom of chat. Messaging (or its precursor, texting) encourages a particular quality of high-speed unreflectiveness, in which writing can emerge from within the very middle of an emotional response, even during a quarrel or a breakup. Turkle illustrates the effects of this through a study of 'Julia', who 'turns texting into a kind of polling':

If I'm upset, right as I feel upset, I text a couple of my friends . . . just because I know that they'll be there and they can comfort me. If something exciting happens, I know that they'll be there to be excited with me, and stuff like that. So I definitely feel emotions when I'm texting, as I'm texting . . . Even before I get upset and I know that I have that feeling that I'm gonna start crying, yeah, I'll pull up my friend . . . uh, my phone . . . and say like . . . I'll tell them what I'm feeling. (p.175)

Julia's smartphone closes the gap between feeling and writing: 'What is not being cultivated here', Turkle points out, 'is the ability to be alone and reflect upon one's emotions in private. On the contrary, teenagers report discomfort when they are without their cell phones. They need to be connected in order to feel like themselves.' Julia's messaging is 'close to being a generational style' (p. 176), Turkle claims, and the consequence of this anxious other-directedness is to bring the kind of conventionality and shallowness Brad described into the innermost realm of the emotions. 'Technology does not cause but encourages a sensibility in which the validation of a feeling becomes part of establishing it', Turkle argues, 'even part of the feeling itself' (p. 177).

One can feel compassion for Julia's anxiety, and for Brad's resentment, while also observing that there is a conspicuous absence, in *Alone Together*, of any respondents who actually enjoy writing in this mode. Focusing on resenters like Brad (he returns in no fewer than three chapters) leads Turkle to ignore the aesthetic dimension of this idiom, by which I mean simply the extent to which the particular qualities it enables, however

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humanly limited these might be, can nonetheless be well or badly performed.

This point is made by the anthropologist Daniel Miller in *Tales from Facebook* (2011), a study of digital behaviour in Trinidad. Rejecting Turkle's attempt to establish a general framework for evaluating social networking, he argues that Facebook can only be understood as 'the aggregate of its regional and particular usage'.¹⁴ Much of the book is taken up with case studies emphasizing the cultural specificity of the Trinidadian appropriation of Facebook, and it echoes Michel de Certeau's emphasis on the way in which powerful technologies and institutions are always apt to be appropriated, and in all kinds of ways subverted, by ordinary users.¹⁵ But what Miller also sees is that a form that requires an ability to compose at speed in the middle of one's feelings, using high levels of conventionality and mindfulness of one or more interlocutors, is an adolescent ritual that can by all means be done badly (as with Brad), or mawkishly (as with Julia), but can also be done very well indeed, creating a sense of power and accomplishment rather than anxiety. He presents the case study of 'Aaron', a Trinidadian teenager who spends six hours a day (when he can) posting, messaging, and responding. In contrast to Brad's resentment at a form he has struggled to master, Aaron is gleefully learning to be 'articulate and savvy' within what Miller calls 'the aesthetic of Trini posting'. He manages his interactions with his friends adroitly, expertly timing 'the incredibly complex weave between being sufficiently funny, sufficiently interesting, sufficiently concerned with other people, quick in banter, and learning how to hint just the right amount so that he doesn't lose face when the other fails to respond' (p. 86). As Miller emphasizes, there is a very determinate utility to all this, as Aaron is acquiring, in an other-directed culture, 'key social skills that could make the difference between a happy life and an unhappy one'. But he is also delighting in his growing power.

Aaron's fun takes place in the baffling jargon of Trinidad youth-speak, which Miller, perhaps out of politeness, leaves untranslated. Consider, instead, a wholly impolite example taken from Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad*

¹⁴ Daniel Miller, *Tales from Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 163 (henceforth cited within the text by page numbers).

¹⁵ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984).

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True Love Story, a dystopian novel set in an America of the near future, which, in a zany elaboration upon Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*, is on the verge of being taken over by media corporations. The Internet has migrated onto a ubiquitous hand-held device with the rather sinister name of 'äppärät', a next-generation smartphone which holds credit data and continually updates your ratings, on such criteria as 'Personality' and 'Fuckability':

She actually came up to me PHYSICALLY and VERBALLED me like 'Oh, I thought you were a lez cause you went to Elderbird, I didn't know you were a feminazi too' and I was like 'Yeah, but even if I was the biggest lez in America I wouldn't thresh you with a fucking combine' and then guess where she ended up by the end of the party? In the bathtub getting ass-reamed and face-pissed by Pat Alvarez and three of his friends who taped everything and then put it on GlobalTeens the next day. GUESS how high her ratings went up? Personality 764 and Fuckability 800+. What is WRONG with people!¹⁶

The quoted text is sent over the äppärät by a young woman with the webname of 'Grillbitch' to 'Euni-Tard' (aka Eunice, the heroine of the novel) via 'GlobalTeens', which has taken over from Facebook as the standard platform for social networking. Here Grillbitch is explaining what happened when she texted a warning to the girl who appeared to be making a move on 'Gopher', her erstwhile boyfriend.

It is evident that Grillbitch's writing makes little attempt to reflect on the scene, other than to call for approval at the end of the passage. The emotions themselves are simple (rage, grim satisfaction), and are vented, rather than explored, in a barely punctuated flow. The language is highly conventional ('I was like . . .', 'biggest lez'); it is brief, and gives the impression of having been written at high speed—indeed, Grillbitch and Euni-Tard often refer to the various other activities they are doing while writing (usually shopping). In short, it is highly other-directed, picking up every bit of slang possible, oriented wholly to the interlocutor, trying to be 'cool'. But 'trying' is the wrong word: Grillbitch is not anxiously trying to be cool; like Aaron she pulls it off. To read her is to behold her power, a power that derives from the dexterity with which she can handle conventional language at speed. She redoubles the other girl's insult, crisply closing it with

¹⁶ Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (London: Granta, 2010), 27 (henceforth cited within the text by page numbers).

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that hard ‘c’ on ‘combine’, accenting the GUESS and WRONG to capture the irate passion of a speaking voice. She is adroit with the technical language of slang: ‘ass-reamed’ and ‘face-pissed’ nail the humiliation of her rival with all the visceral energy of the gutter. Shteyngart has acknowledged Philip Roth as an influence on his work, and passages like this resonate with Roth’s interest, in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) and elsewhere, in gaining access to the vitality to be found in forms of speech and writing perceived to be crude and shallow, such as (for him) Jewish street-corner comedy and sports banter.¹⁷ As with the gamut of vulgar voices in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Grillbitch puts on a bravura display: unlike Brad she isn’t just learning how to fit in, she is learning how to shine, taking pleasure in the capacity of this form for verbal hijinks.

My suggestion, then, is that by ignoring the qualitative differences between different performances of social networking Turkle is led towards an over-normative assessment of its risks, even if attention is confined to the vulnerable group of teenagers and young adults that concern her. But she is more right than Daniel Miller suggests in her wider claim that there is a shaping power within the form itself. When he argues that the adolescent socialization rituals it embodies are ‘an intrinsic condition of social life, irrespective of the technologies so employed’ (p. 217), Miller simply dismisses Turkle’s fears about the psychological consequences of networked life-writing. But in doing so he pushes his argument too far. No small part of the cleverness of Shteyngart’s novel lies in the way he avoids Miller’s rather blandly uncritical stance, and the way he does so takes another kind of inspiration from Philip Roth.

There are many similarities between *Super Sad True Love Story* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Alexander Portnoy is the highly literate, very dutiful only son of Jewish immigrants from Poland; Lenny Abramov, the hero of Shteyngart’s novel, is the highly literate, very dutiful only son of Jewish immigrants from Russia. These good Jewish sons are both fascinated and appalled by Shiksa women from mainstream consumerist America who seem to promise release from the oppressive earnestness of their upbringing. More important than this homage, though, is the critical stance that Shteyngart takes from Roth’s novel. Roth had himself been strongly influenced by

¹⁷ Shteyngart has discussed Roth in ‘Hello, Columbus’, *New York Times Book Review*, 4 December 2005.

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David Riesman's analysis of the other-directed self, and while he came to distrust Riesman's over-homogenizing assumptions, in no sense did he seek merely to exchange the concerns of *The Lonely Crowd* for a role as cheerleader of the consumer culture. Instead, through the figure of Portnoy, Roth set up a series of ironies around a man whose strenuous efforts to acquire a lower and more shallow life are repeatedly undone by his seemingly unshakable high-mindedness. The way Shteyngart adapts this doubly ironic mode is by structuring his narrative around a running contrast between the GlobalTeens exchanges on social media, and a written journal kept in a book by Lenny.

Lenny's diary entries are long, narrative in form, and rich in self-irony. They are written at a reflective distance from the action and emotions described, and for himself only—not for publication. He makes great claim to be a lover of books, alluding throughout to figures such as Tolstoy, Chekhov, Nabokov, and Musil. His writing is 'a tribute to literature as it once was' (p. 325), and he looks nostalgically back to 'Lionel Trilling and those guys', an earlier generation of Jewish intellectuals who 'came from poor, hardy families' and who 'were realistic about dying' (p. 214). This is from the end of his first entry, where he is describing falling in love with Eunice:

I touched my expertly brushed teeth and petted the flurry of grey hairs sticking out from beneath my shirt collar, which she had thoroughly examined in the morning's weak early light. 'Cute,' she had said. And then, with a child's sense of wonder: 'You're old, Len.'

Oh, dear diary. My youth has passed, but the wisdom of age hardly beckons. Why is it so hard to be a grown-up man in this world? (p. 24)

The slow pace of Lenny's book diary, together with its distance from the immediacy of events, allows for a complex reflection on the beauty and folly of his love for young Eunice. It does indeed resonate with 'Trilling and those guys', pulling back from the moment to make a studied reflection on death, its pathos, and the need for wisdom before it. Quite unlike the absorption in emotional immediacy found in Grillbitch, a light irony plays over his self-exploration: like Nabokov's Humbert, one of his models as a diarist, there is a nice *frisson* of self-parody in his self-regard.

The complex literariness of Lenny's book diary shows up the shallowness of Grillbitch's online diary—the conventionality of her feelings, her immersion in her own crude immediacy. But by bringing the inner and

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other-directed diaries together, Shteyngart's larger irony also cuts against the conventionality of Lenny's bookish writing. His prose has a rather dead quality to it when placed against Grillbitch's speedy prose: 'hardly beckons' isn't quite an archaism, but it exudes stuffiness; his closing complaint, 'Why is it so hard . . .', strains at the sonorous, but sounds a duff note against Grillbitch's 'What is WRONG with people?' Moreover, while Turkle defined the other-directed self as afflicted by the need to perform rather than explore the self, there is surely more than a little of the performance in the stagey melancholy of Lenny's prose. Was it really with a 'child's sense of wonder' that Eunice told him he looks old? Hard to imagine so from the next page, where Eunice messages Grillbitch: 'Respect yourself, hoo-kah!' While it may be reassuring for someone educated in the culture of the book to read Lenny's diary, the troublingly ironic structure of *Super Sad True Love Story* suggests that there is every bit as much potential for inauthenticity, imitativeness, and self-deception in the supposedly inner-directed book diary as in its more overtly other-directed online counterpart.

To reflect upon the performed qualities of online life-writing is therefore to complicate, not to reject, Turkle's claims about this new idiom. The same is true of a more specific argument she makes about mobile instant messaging technology. The mobile Internet, she argues, has a tendency to distract from the felt immediacy of experience itself: people who are 'always on', messaging and texting, cannot simultaneously be giving full attention to their children, or to their friends. One of Turkle's core claims, as a social psychologist, is that children who struggle to get attention from parents who are 'tantalisingly [close], but mentally elsewhere' (p. 267), preoccupied with their smartphones, tend to become insecure and resort to increased use of social networking for reassurance. Heightening the other-directed cycle, 'these same children', she argues, 'are insecure about having each other's attention' (p. 268).

It is hard to disagree with Turkle on this level, and she goes on to make telling claims about the way in which instant messaging is used, particularly by anxious 'lonely crowd' teenagers, to insulate the self from those more complex and unpredictable emotional exchanges that can take place over the phone or face to face. As her informant 'Audrey' puts it, 'texting offers protection': 'When you instant-message you can cross things out, edit what you say, block a person, or sign off. A phone conversation is a lot of

pressure. You're always expected to uphold it, to keep it going, and that's too much pressure.' Audrey prefers texting to calling because in texting 'there is a lot less *boundness* to a person', by which she means that in a call she could learn too much or say too much, and things could get emotionally 'out of control' (p. 190).

But while Turkle gives a disturbing account of the power of mobile messaging technology to distract and to deplete human relationships, she also has a more questionable tendency to define genuine immediacy in physical terms, bound up with voice and facial expression. In fact it is Brad (again) who makes this point for her: 'Brad sums up his discontents with an old-fashioned word: online life inhibits "authenticity". He wants to experience people directly' (p. 273). This tendency to connect authenticity with physical presence or voice, rather than with text, comes through most strongly in the case study of 'Meredith', who tells of how she learned about the death of a friend on her instant messaging service. According to Turkle, Meredith was glad the news came to her this way, rather than through a phone call, because it protected her from losing control of her emotions in front of someone else. For a day after the news, Meredith only communicated with friends via instant messaging: 'Just about the fact of it. Conversations like, "Oh, have you heard?" "Yeah, I heard." And that's it' (p. 205). Turkle reads Meredith in the same way she read Audrey—as an other-directed individual using instant messaging to stage-manage real human contact. The mediacy of language enables her to avoid the reality of the experience, and thereby avoid genuine emotions. 'I see a vulnerability in this generation', she warns. 'Under stress, they seek composure above all. But they do not find equanimity. When they meet and lose composure, they find a new way to flee: often they take their phones out to text each other and friends not in the room . . . They keep themselves at a distance from their feelings' (p. 206).¹⁸

This idea that the immediacy of an experience can only really be disclosed by voice, or (preferably) face to face, is challenged in an interesting way by Ben Lerner in *Leaving the Atocha Station*. This novel turns on two quite

¹⁸ Turkle's phonocentrism compares to Zadie Smith's in *NW* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011). This novel, which is also influenced by ideas about the other-directed self, ends with a scene in which a character who has become disastrously addicted to social networking sites decides, in a redemptive moment, to pick up the phone rather than send an email.

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different experiences of death: the Madrid train bombings of 2004, which the protagonist Adam Gordon witnesses while in Spain on a research fellowship; and his friend's account, delivered over instant messaging, of witnessing a young woman drown while on holiday in Mexico. As a rebuff to over-facile ideas about voice and immediacy, when Adam later tries to convey the terror of this death face to face to a Spanish friend, he finds his own description bedevilled by the empty conventionality of spoken language, and is met by an equally empty conventional response. 'My God', his interlocutor dutifully replies, and takes his hand, before starting to talk about something else.¹⁹

Not least among the many reasons why Lerner distrusts the idea that embodied experience necessarily has greater immediacy than textual experience, is because he follows through on the implications of David Riesman's claims about the power of culture and economics to shape the self in a more rigorous way than Turkle does herself. 'That *I* was a fraud had never been in question—who wasn't?' asks Adam. 'Who wasn't squatting in one of the handful of prefabricated subject positions offered by capital or whatever one wanted to call it, lying every time she said "I"; who wasn't a bit player in the looped infomercial for the damaged life?' (p. 101). If the self is always already a 'fraud', immersed in stock responses and stock perceptions, felt immediacy is as mediated as anything else. Instead of distrusting instant messaging, Lerner explores a special way of valuing its expressive powers, and in doing so he takes inspiration from the poetry of John Ashbery.

Prior to writing *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Lerner had published a long review essay of the new Library of America edition of Ashbery's poetry. Here he drew attention to the way in which Ashbery's poems flaunt their own process of fabrication rather than hide it, not only announcing their 'mediacy', but taking mediation as their theme, and revelling in the experience of mediation itself. 'Instead of making a bid for lyric immediacy', Lerner claimed, 'the poems always refer to its displacement, as if the poem we have describes a poem for which we've always arrived too late.'²⁰ In doing so, however, Ashbery paradoxically takes us—Lerner argues—closer to experience itself than a more naive rhetoric of presence would imagine

¹⁹ Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (London: Granta, 2012), 96 (henceforth cited within the text by page numbers).

²⁰ Ben Lerner, 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', *boundary* 2:37.1 (2010), 207.

possible. By focusing attention on the means by which experience is mediated, ‘Ashbery’s poems allow you to attend to your attention, to “experience your experience”, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence.’²¹

What Lerner values in instant messaging is precisely this capacity to break with the self’s immersion in the seemingly authentic immediacy of everyday expressions and emotions, and thereby generate ‘a strange kind of presence’ from the experience of mediacy itself. In particular, he is intrigued by the potential for time-delay effects that both accentuate the experience of mediacy, and create unpredictable imaginative effects in doing so. As you are composing and reading in an instant-message chain, your response can be inadvertently directed to a remark that your interlocutor has already moved beyond, if you happen to be slower at texting or typing. So within a form that gives a strong sensation of presence, there is simultaneously a high potential for misidentification and accidental meanings as the message chain unfolds. Consider the following passage from *Leaving the Atocha Station*, where Cyrus is explaining to Adam how the young woman who ends up drowning was first tempted into the fast-moving river:

Cyrus: So there I was opposite the girlfriend on the bank, both of us being pressured by the swimmers to join them. The girlfriend and I kept looking at each other with nervous smiles.

Me: if one of you got in the other would have to

Cyrus: I felt that

Me: a game of chicken. you two should have left the others and gone off and had

Cyrus: Or at least if she got in I would have to. But she probably could have remained on the bank

Me: a wonderful life together!

Me: right. she would not be emasculated. (pp. 70–1)

In their desire to keep up the typed exchange Adam and Cyrus keep breaking into each other’s sentences, accentuating the felt mediacy of the experience. But in attending to the act of attention, as Lerner puts it, a peculiarly intense experience of the event itself emerges from this otherwise

²¹ This quotation is taken from *Leaving the Atocha Station* (p. 91), though it echoes, with a significant modification, a passage from Lerner’s essay: ‘Ashbery’s poems allow us to attend to our attention, to “experience our experience”; they offer what we might call *lyric mediacy*.’ ‘The Future Continuous’ 209.

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rather flat prose. Consider the break on ‘had’ in Adam’s second remark. It is accidental, but it opens up a space for the sombre tone of Cyrus’ narrative to be disrupted in a way that is desecrating: ‘gone off and had . . .’ what? Is he making a very silly joke—does ‘had’ lead to ‘had sex’? It does not—it becomes ‘a wonderful life together’, a phrase that now stands on its own line. A desecration of the serious tone breaks out into a strangely resonant moment, in which the phrase made famous by the Frank Capra film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, a film that is almost the definition of kitsch, suddenly becomes haunting. The accidental juxtaposition of Cyrus’ image of the girl’s last moment of life on the bank breaks the cliché into a genuinely mournful exclamation.

The resonances within the passage just quoted could easily be skimmed over within a fast-moving exchange of messages. But compare the narration of the death itself:

Cyrus: she moved downriver where the current became pretty strong, and she was getting upset

Me: so someone went and helped her?

Cyrus: Things

Cyrus: things got very bad very fast. she went underwater for a second, and when she resurfaced, she was a little farther down and totally panicked

Me: jesus

Cyrus: She was screaming and water was

Me: jesus

Cyrus: getting in her mouth and she was struggling (pp. 71–2)

In this most desperate moment the consciousness of mediation is at its most acute, but the experience of textuality does not place emotions at a distance, it intensifies them by allowing us to ‘experience our experience’ on highly unconventional terms. The reduction of the young woman to a thing floating downriver finds a horrific echo in the fragmentation of the language, which invites us—accidentally—to reflect upon materiality itself: ‘Things’, as Cyrus’ second line puts it, in their awful inhuman thingness. This happens again with ‘water was’, which dangles at the end of Cyrus’ penultimate line, the disjointed phrase itself casting attention onto the non-meaning of sheer matter, which is exactly what the woman is confronting in her own death. The seemingly dehumanizing effects of this highly mediated exchange do indeed fracture the relationship between

writing and experience. But what emerges is not detachment, instead a ‘strange intensification of presence’ that takes us into the depths, not the shallows.

In placing Turkle’s concerns against Lerner’s Ashbery-inspired insights into the poetics of instant messaging, I am again not seeking simply to discount her claims about the power of this technology to distract and deplete, nor do I suggest that informants such as Audrey and Meredith are somehow deliberately misrepresenting their experience. What I am suggesting is that, as with the other-directed diary, Turkle’s tendency to overprivilege the fears and complaints of teenagers and young adults leads her to judge digital life-writing in an over-normative way.

These limitations are most evident in her response to online confessional writing. Focussing on the website PostSecret, where anonymous postcards featuring a confession of some kind are sent in and scanned, Turkle admits to being puzzled by the genre—of which there are many more examples, including MySecret, and message boards serving various kinds of interest groups. Online confessions often seem peculiarly exaggerated and lurid; they invite responses that often mock rather than give counsel and support, or themselves start to indulge in counterfantasies. When she examines the genre in *Alone Together* Turkle confronts the possibility that ‘these confessions are fiction’ (p. 230), written for an audience. In what sense could they then have value?

Her suggestion is that the value of these probably fictitious online confessional performances lies in their therapeutic possibilities, an argument she had previously made about the psychological function of fictional identities in virtual reality gaming in her earlier book *Life on the Screen*. ‘Perhaps online confessions are a new genre altogether’, she speculates. ‘When people create avatars [in virtual reality], they are not themselves but express important truths about themselves. Online confession, another internet performance zone, also occupies an intermediate space. Here, statements may not be true, but true enough for writers to feel unburdened and for readers to feel part of a community’ (p. 230). Yet Turkle now has little enthusiasm for this argument, and tends instead to regard the practice of anonymous unburdening as a simple decline from the real confession. In her study of ‘Sheryl’, who confesses online to illicit affairs, and to spending her parents’ retirement money on holidays, Turkle points out that

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confessing leads to no change of behaviour: ‘Sheryl’s online confessions do not lead her to talk to those she has wronged or to try to make amends. She goes online to feel better, not to make things right. She thinks that most people use confessional sites this way’ (p. 233). Online spaces, she concludes, ‘offer themselves as “cheap” alternatives to confronting other people’, both because they avoid an unruly confrontation with another voice (as with Audrey’s use of instant messaging) and because they avoid the challenge of making an apology. The online confession is thus more symptom than cure, ‘a shot of feeling good that can divert attention from what a person really needs’ (p. 234).

In one sense, Turkle is surely right. When measured by the moralistic assumptions of confessional discourse, in which the aim is to discover the truth of the self through dialogue, and which, as Peter Brooks has argued, descends in its modern form from the disciplinary procedures of Church and State, the anonymous online confession falls woefully short.²² But the limits of this way of responding to online confession are evident even if we confine ourselves to Turkle’s informants. There is an interesting moment in which she presents a case study to clinch the argument that confessional sites are bad therapy:

One high school senior tells me that she visits online confessional sites at least twice a week. Most recently, she has been writing descriptions of sleeping with her best friend’s boyfriend. When I ask her what she does after she writes her confessions, she says that she stays alone in her room, smoking. She thinks that she has unburdened herself and now wants to be alone. Or perhaps the confession has left her depleted. (p. 237)

Turkle’s reading may be correct, but it may also be a touch naive. This ‘high-school senior’ might be a rather different character to the emotionally defensive Audrey, or the overcautious Meredith, let alone the resentful Brad. Hard to know, but perhaps her confession is itself a form of sexual arousal, possibly fantasized (note the ‘writing descriptions of’), in which case the cigarette, which Turkle seems to read only as a sign of depletion, might be a virtual-post-coital pleasure, to be consumed once the self is thus ‘unburdened’. Or perhaps it is even the girl’s way of accessing a fantasy of being discovered in the act of betrayal: she sits there after writing, smoking

²² Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 35–64.

and looking at a text that could take her best friendship into very strange territory indeed. In short, it may be the case that what online confession creates is a space in which the intimate idiom of confession is being appropriated by users for aesthetic aims, bound up with the imaginative transformation of experience, rather than for therapy or self-knowledge.

This aspect of the online confession is explored by Denis Cooper in *The Sluts*, a novel that reproduces, among other things, a fictional gay sado-masochistic message board, where men post descriptions of sex with an escort named 'Brad', complete with their ratings of his 'fuckability'. The message board rapidly turns into a full-blown confessional site, in which Brad's clients start to confess to an ever-escalating series of crimes, including rape, arson, and murder. As with the confessional sites Turkle reviewed, it is wholly anonymous, and one of the chief pleasures of the novel lies in its play with the fictional potential of internet anonymity. All Cooper gives us are the postings, without any narrative commentary: we follow X's confession, which is then contradicted by Y's, only for Z to confess, pages later, that he was posting for both X and Y; followed by A's confession that really he was Z, and so on. As the novel progresses, it becomes ever more difficult to establish whether anyone is telling the truth, or if Brad even exists.

Cooper's inspiration for the novel was twofold. The figure of Brad, he claimed in an interview, is a 'fantasy figure' designed to explore the way in which internet message boards create a space in which sexual fantasy can flourish, and *The Sluts* resonates with the online cult of Peter Azur, a gay Czech porn star from the 1990s who spawned an extraordinary variety of admiring message boards and chatrooms.²³ What interests Cooper in these virtual spaces is the way they create a mode of pornographic writing in which, protected by anonymity, men can collaboratively, or competitively, fantasize through the idiom of an erotic confessional. As with Grillbitch's messages to Euni-Tard, this is not fine writing. It is what Cooper calls 'horny everyman rhetoric', an altogether 'blabbier writing' than you would normally find in a novel.²⁴ Here is an example:

The hatred I feel when I rape and humiliate and torture and beat and dismember their beautiful young faces and bodies is as close as I can get to the fury of love I felt

²³ See <<http://denniscooper.blogspot.co.uk/2006/01/floppy-haired-czech-porn-star-peter.html>>.

²⁴ 'It's blabbier writing', Cooper remarks, 'but the blab is as tight as I could get it.' <http://www.dennis-cooper.net/sluts_interview.htm>.

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for Brad. The thing about Brad is that he was right—killing a boy who wants to die is an experience beyond any other in the world.²⁵

This is from a message left by ‘Brian’, whose conventional name belies his self-presentation as a Byronic overreacher. While his actions go beyond the human norms in a frenzied way, reaching for ‘the fury of love’, he is ultimately just an ‘everyman’ with a gift for fantasy and a rather flat prose. While ‘the fury of love’ could be Byron, the tumbling bathos in ‘the fury of love I felt for Brad’ most certainly could not.

Cooper stands in a line of pornographic writing that descends from de Sade through Georges Bataille, and the particular value he discovers in the ‘horny everyman rhetoric’ generated by online erotic confessionals can best be appreciated if *The Sluts* is compared to *The Story of the Eye* (1928), Bataille’s first pornographic novel, and Cooper’s other main source of inspiration. What Cooper shares with Bataille is an interest in using the idiom of pornography to violate the normal ways in which the self is immersed in cultural values. As the young male narrator of *The Story of the Eye* puts it, ‘decent people have gelded eyes’: their perceptions are ‘gelded’ by moral taboos that have become so ingrained they barely notice their own confinement.²⁶ Bataille’s attempt to ‘ungeld’ the eye depended upon a highly wrought style that drew inspiration from Surrealism. He created a disorienting form of writing that, as Roland Barthes put it in his essay on the novel, ‘transforms all experience into language that is *askew* (*devoyé*)... demolishing the usual contiguities between objects and substituting fresh encounters.’²⁷ Bataille rendered language ‘askew’ by setting up complex chains of metaphor connected with the eyes, and with liquidity, and by pushing these metaphors into ever more disorienting combinations as the erotic story progressed. In one scene, the eye becomes ‘sucked like a breast’; in another the narrator finds his lover Simone ‘drinking my left eye between her lips’; in further scenes the eye metamorphoses into an egg crushed into a woman’s anus, into bull’s testicles, and so on. Through these surreal combinations Bataille’s writing creates a special transgressive charge: ‘The world becomes *blurred*’, Barthes argues, ‘properties are no longer

²⁵ Denis Cooper, *The Sluts* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 140.

²⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 1979), 42.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’, trans. J.A. Underwood, in Bataille, *The Story of the Eye*, 127 (henceforth cited within the text by page numbers).

separate' (p. 125). What Cooper finds in 'horny everyman rhetoric' is a surrealism of the everyday that circumvents Bataille's rather stagey play with metaphor.

As just one example, consider the following passage from *The Sluts*, which was posted by Brad himself. Brad is (allegedly) sixteen years old and mentally ill. Here he describes the aftermath of an erotic encounter with a man known only by his webname, 'builtlikeatruck', an encounter that culminated in his attempt to burn down his client's business:

I'm sorry about what I did to him but he kind of played with my head if you know what I mean. He told me he really liked me and it wasn't about sex and I believed him like the stupid fucker I am, but then he turns around and rapes me when I needed a friend. He should be so fucking grateful that I didn't say anything about that to my lawyer. I'm a nice person. (p. 121)

This is not only leaden prose, it is brilliantly askew, from the 'I'm a nice person' at the end to the flatfooted threat in the penultimate sentence, and the self-exposing 'stupid fucker I am'. In particular, though, note the awful comedy of 'rapes me when I needed a friend', the audacity of which lies in the way it jostles against something like the everyday 'avoided me when I needed a friend'. Cooper has spoken of the 'weird' mix of the comic and horrific in his prose: in this passage, as the very serious slips into bathos, our conventional emotional responses are thrown out of joint.²⁸ For an instant, within what might be called the emotional surrealism of Brad's prose, rape becomes normalized within the range of perfectly ordinary human actions, and we find ourselves in a space where, as Barthes put it, 'the world becomes *blurred*'. Through the bathos of the writing the concept of rape blurs into the everyday, suddenly losing its moral and emotional charge.

This desecration of the morally prudent register for discussing rape is of course due to the fact that Brad is mentally ill, and drugged to numb his hysteria. But a few pages later a man with the webname 'likeemyoung' confesses that it was in fact he who posted the above message, not 'Brad'. Why? The answer is complex, but it was at least in part for the sheer exhilaration of imagining rape and arson not in a well-judged and

²⁸ 'It's weird: some people who've read it think it's a comedy, but others don't see the comedy at all. But then that's always happened with my books. For some people, the intensity of the content erases the tone.' <http://www.dennis-cooper.net/sluts_interview.htm>.

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responsible way, but for seeing how it feels when projected through the disoriented idiom of a mentally ill teenage rent boy. The fiction of Brad gives likeemyoung (and participants in such message boards in general) a space for ungendering their eyes. As we move through the manifold erotic confessions and counter-confessions of the novel, descending ever further into a space where the boundary between the fictional and the real is undecidable, we enter into a weirdly ecstatic realm, where the ordinary controls on what can be felt cease to hold.

Back in 2000, Philippe Lejeune described online life-writing as a 'new frontier' that has 'constraints and resources that are just beginning to be explored' (*On Diary* p.316). He was of course speaking as an early frontiersman who had reached, say, the plains of Ohio, but was as yet unaware of the heights of Colorado, let alone the bewildering California that was to come.

Following this admittedly very partial review of the territory as it now stands, my own inclination is to intensify both sides of Lejeune's even-handed remark. On the one hand, with the rise of a pervasive and invasive 'always on' mobile social networking technology, 'constraints' now seems too mild. It doesn't capture the genuine concerns raised by social psychologists such as Sherry Turkle, and 'dangers' might be a better word for today's digital environment. Imagine, for example, your teenage son or daughter getting lost in one of Cooper's pornographic message boards; or (worse?) imagine them *only* acquiring Grillbitch's capacity for self-reflection after all that time at secondary school. But on the other hand, 'possibilities' is also too restrained. In the hands of writers such as Shteyngart, Lerner and Cooper, the Internet emerges as the new Wild West of life-writing, rich in imaginative energies, a sublime space in which experience can be pushed to its outer limits. These writers speak to the enthusiasm that Kevin Kelly, former editor of *Wired* magazine, feels for life on the screen:

At times I've entered the web just to get lost. In that lovely surrender, the web swallows my certitude and delivers the unknown. Despite the purposeful design of its human creators, the web is a wilderness. Its boundaries are unknown, unknowable, its mysteries uncountable. The bramble of intertwined ideas, links, documents, and images create an otherness as thick as a jungle. The web smells like life.²⁹

²⁹ Kevin Kelly, 'Technophilia', *The Technium*, 9 June 2009 <<http://kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2009/06/technophilia.php>>.

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Kelly's metaphor of the jungle is perhaps even more apt than Lejeune's 'frontier'. Social psychologists such as Turkle, focused on developmental norms, are surely right to see it as an uncivilized space full of hazards and risks that have the potential to make you very small indeed. But seen through the lens provided by some of the more experimental directions in contemporary fiction, it also emerges as a place for exploring, regressing, fantasizing, and pleasurably losing yourself.