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Staging Sexual Injury: *How I Learned to Drive*

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> Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.
>
> —William Faulkner, *Light in August*

> So by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction.
>
> —Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia"

Disclosure and Deferral

Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) opens with the lure of a secret: "Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson."[1] In substituting a lesson for a secret, the narrator, Li'l Bit, in some sense reverses her own story; she also shows herself to be as sly a teacher as her Uncle Peck, who promised to teach Li'l Bit how to drive. However, as we will discover, in place of this lesson, or maybe alongside it, Li'l Bit is given a secret whose unfolding drives the narrative forward and back again.

Li'l Bit's lesson plan—*Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson*—may not flatter the teachers among us. After all, her formulation effectively proposes pedagogy as a kind of knowledge deferred. Lured by a secret, the audience (and would-be pupil) finds itself in a curious kind of classroom with a charming, if somewhat unreliable, teacher. Call it the pedagogy of bait and switch or, if this sounds better, pedagogy's swerve.

Over the course of the roughly ninety-minute play, this narrative swerve undoes straightforward connections between event and representation, experience and understanding, past and present, injury and impression. The audience's access to what happened to Li'l Bit, to her "secret," comes through her narration of it. We never see the reality, but only its representation. In other words, we are watching a play. But it is not as if Li'l Bit has immediate access to her own experience either. Indeed, there are numerous moments in the play when Li'l Bit seems to withhold crucial information from us. Does this make her an unreliable narrator? Perhaps. But it also suggests the unreliability of memory itself. That is, what if the secret Li'l Bit will not or cannot tell is unknown to her?

To be sure, what is past can never be returned, nor returned to, in its original form. When memory retrieves, it does so with a difference; it remembers. However, the cut between memory and event is attenuated to the point of fracture in the case of trauma. Trauma has a particularly vexed relation to time and knowledge. As Cathy Caruth suggests in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, a book that has helped to

reinvigorate trauma theory, in psychoanalytic terms trauma is a wound that is experienced too soon to be known or narrated.[2]

In describing trauma as an injury ahead of its time (ahead of *it's* time?), Caruth is building on Freud's discussion of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this study, composed in the aftermath of World War I, Freud puzzles over the striking fact that traumatic illness is far more likely to arise in cases where there was no apparent physical injury.[3] A wound to the body, he seems to suggest, provides a brake against trauma by absorbing the blow *and* by offering undeniable evidence of what has happened. But, evidence to whom and of what? What happens when the severity or even the reality of physical injury is contested by others, as can happen in cases of sexual violence? In courts of law, though not only there, a victim's claims of sexual assault or abuse often hinge on whether or not her (or his) injuries are visible to others, whether because the bruises are still fresh or they photographed well. It may even be that, for some victims of sexual violence, trauma results not from the initial violating event, but from the refusal or inability of others to recognize the wound or blow to the body. In yet other cases, the trauma of sexual violence may have very little or nothing to do with the violation of sexualized bodily zones, but may rather lie elsewhere, in a somewhere or something else that cannot be named or recognized. I will come back to this suggestion later in my discussion of melancholia's holding power. For now, I simply want to flag the uneasy place of the body in Freud's account of trauma.

In a passage he himself calls "far-fetched speculation,"[4] Freud paints a striking picture of a "living vesicle" that both reaches out into the world and is affected, touched, by it.[5] He tells us that "this little fragment of living substance" would be overwhelmed and even killed but for the presence of a "protective shield."[6] He goes on to describe this protective shield as being built up, like so many layers of dead skin, out of the residue of formerly organic materials. Although Freud does not say this exactly, it seems to me that what he is describing is the precarious suspension, or in-betweenness, of the embodied subject. For the bodily envelope offers multiple points of contact and crossing (skin, eyes, mouth, nose, ears, genitals, anus) even as it also marks the space of difference between one self and another, between inner and outer worlds. Ordinarily, this protective shield is strong enough to manage and reduce the energies that bombard embodied consciousness. However, some external stimuli are so strong that they break through the protective shield. Trauma thus involves a violent breaking through or rupture in consciousness.

In her gloss on Freud, Caruth points out that the traumatic kernel of trauma is not the precipitating event itself nor even the force with which stimuli storm and overwhelm consciousness; trauma rather emerges at the juncture of destructive event and its survival.[7] Something awful has happened, but what exactly, and to whom? Where am "I"—where is the "I"—in relation to the concussive event? In trauma, what is outside has come inside, been internalized, without being hypercathected or bound.[8]

The subject of trauma thus suffers from an inability to narrate and in some profound sense even know her own experience as her experience.

In other words, there is a profound disconnect between what is experienced and what is apprehended or assimilated. This gap in knowledge is the crisis or, in Caruth's terms, the "enigma of survival."[9] This epistemic gap also opens up the question of referentiality, frustrating simple models of experience and reference, event and representation. At first glance, this might seem to end the possibility of history. However, Caruth proposes that, in fact, "it is here, in the . . . bewildering encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it—that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential."[10] Coming to terms with trauma and the disturbance it poses to correspondence theories of truth "permit[s]," in her words, "*history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not."[11]

Where the story of trauma is concerned, then, narrative gets out ahead of both audience and narrator. And yet, telling trauma's story becomes the working condition of coming to know it. This is the "behindsight" of traumatic knowledge,[12] its deferred action, or *Nachträglichkeit*, in the language of psychoanalysis. The French translation of *Nachträglichkeit* is still more evocative: *après-coup*, or, literally, "afterblow." Of course, part of the problem with trauma is precisely its resistance to the literal, to the thing itself, and it may be this resistance to the literal that also makes the literary and, yes, the theatrical such resonant sites through which to think trauma anew.

But, for now, back to behindsight: The very backwardness of this relation between representation and traumatic event upends conventional ways of thinking about truth and the evidence of experience. For we are confronted not simply with deferred action, but with deferred *revision*. How do you tell a story whose founding events you have not, on some very basic level, yet experienced? Where telling precedes knowing, what is the status of the truth that is told? What's more, can the important feminist project of bringing sexual violence (feminism's privileged injury) into the light of day survive this severing of representation from "the real"? In the context of trauma, the metaphor of survival is a loaded one. Thus, to pose the question as I just have—as a matter of the *survival of feminist politics*—is to link the future of feminism, its revitalization, to a different way of thinking about and encountering feminism's own past.

Disordered Time, Feminist Revisions

Certainly, *How I Learned to Drive* stages Li'l Bit's encounter with her own past, but it does so out of time, in at least two ways. If we conceive of trauma as a break in the mind's experience of time, then the piecemeal quality of Li'l Bit's narration reiterates trauma as its symptom. And yet, this very piecemeal quality also gets at the restlessness of memory and psychic life. In a sense, all memory, and not just traumatic memory, performs a kind of "deferred action" on the self. Li'l Bit's narrative, then,

brings us to see not simply the belatedness of trauma, but the revision that just is memory. We travel with Li'l Bit backward and forward in time, viewing snapshots, out of sequence, out of time, as Li'l Bit's story comes together, and falls apart, in pieces.

An antichronology: launched in an indeterminate present, the play jumps back to 1969, shifts forward ever so slightly to 1970, when Li'l Bit is kicked out of college: "Some say I got caught with a man in my room. Some say as a kid on scholarship I fooled around with a rich man's daughter. I'm not talking. But the real truth is I had a constant companion in my dorm room—who was less than discrete. Canadian V.O. A fifth a day" (21). The narrative falls further back, into 1968 and a drunken dinner celebrating Li'l Bit's driver's license, leaps ahead to 1979, before reversing course to 1967, 1966, 1965; and then it's Christmas 1964 (when Li'l Bit assigns herself the task of rescuing Uncle Peck from himself); from there, a stutter step to 1969 and Li'l Bit's eighteenth birthday, a fall backward to 1962, and, then, finally, move forward again—or is it back?—to an indeterminate present.

Throughout, *How I Learned to Drive* wonderfully captures the work of memory as it recomposes a life but not necessarily in the self-same order. The play of memory that is Li'l Bit's self-narration refuses the tidy linearity—and pious teleology—of even a reverse chronology. The play thus depathologizes the life lived in pieces. This is one of the play's richest feats: by telling Li'l Bit's life in pieces, but out of order (a li'l bit at a time?), *How I Learned to Drive* perpetually defers the future, but in the cause of reopening its possibilities. Let me try that again, put it another way: Out of this disordered time, we catch sight of another way to live it. *How I Learned to Drive* refuses a conception of identity as an always already, a story that could only have one ending and one beginning; indeed, a story whose ending is foretold in—scripted by—the beginning.

This notion of the determining impact of an event in the past is a holy grail of much of the therapeutic and popular discourse on trauma, especially sexual trauma. But even if we allow that traumatic events have psychical effects (and this seems a crucial allowance), this does not mean that the effects are fully determined—as if a life lived in the wake of trauma could only unfold one way: *very badly*. To be sure, *How I Learned to Drive* does not shrink from showing Li'l Bit's woundedness, but, no less significantly, it neither assigns her wounding to any one event nor makes injury the whole of her story, the hole in her self. Instead, the play helps us to see something of the contingency of identity, the accidents of identification, desire, and loss that trace the body's edges. This other way of seeing affords a glimpse, however fleeting and fractured, of new ways of telling and living a life. This play, this life, could be told differently, we learn, with different endings, surprising detours, and suspended beginnings.[13]

This is not the only one of Vogel's plays that circles back on itself to disorganize principles of cause and effect, before and after.[14] But this formal device works especially well in a play whose concerns include incest and its afterlife. And yet, *How I Learned to Drive* is hardly reducible to a

story about the trauma of incest; in fact, the play rebukes precisely this kind of reduction.

This rebuke, along with the pressure the play puts on positivist accounts of history and truth, runs headfirst into some cherished and hard-fought feminist claims about sexual injury, especially the particular injury identified as childhood sexual abuse. In a cultural and political context in which girl's and women's accounts of sexual violence are still greeted with skepticism, the suggestion that women do not have unmediated access to what really happened is bound to produce alarm. But, as theater studies scholar David Savran has pointed out, for Vogel, "feminism means being politically incorrect. It means avoiding the easy answer—that isn't really an answer at all—in favor of posing the question in the right way. It means refusing to construct an exemplary feminist hero."[15] Vogel's brand of incorrect feminism takes dead but loving aim at received ideas, and she does not spare even her "own," that is, feminist, gay, and lesbian communities.

Feminists—both clinicians and nonspecialists—fought to expand the category of trauma and "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) from its focus on "masculine" injuries like shellshock or war trauma to include such "feminine" injuries as incest and rape. This victory has not come without cost, however. On the one hand, as Ann Cvetkovich also notes, the broadening of PTSD to include rape, domestic violence, and other kinds of sexual violence may give victims access to medical care, including mental health care, otherwise denied to them.[16] The diagnostic category PTSD, after all, is not just the specialized language of therapists and clinicians; since its inclusion in the 1980 edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual,* PTSD has also been used by insurance companies to determine what is and is not covered (for those lucky enough to have health care coverage in the first place). PTSD also performs a legitimating function that resounds beyond the office walls of therapists and HMOs. For a culture in love with science, diagnosis makes it real. By contrast, the one who suffers in silence from something without name does not suffer at all. (This is Betty Friedan's "feminine mystique" three decades on, and counting.) And the one who *loudly* suffers from nothing at all? She is a hysteric.[17]

On the other hand, the medicalization of sexual violence risks depoliticizing it. A therapeutic focus on the victim and on the dynamics of her individual family effectively brackets the social; larger intersubjective—and sociopolitical—components of trauma are thereby lost to analysis. This inward turn is, unfortunately, in keeping with larger trends in a commodified feminism, a "therapeutically absorbed feminism," in Pamela Haag's stinging words.[18]

Somewhat paradoxically, the diagnostic category PTSD simultaneously individualizes and normalizes, or homogenizes. Janice Haaken, herself a feminist therapist, yet one of the most outspoken critics of dominant feminist clinical and political discourse around trauma, worries that the umbrella category PTSD elides crucial differences among traumatic events and responses to them. As she points out, when one diagnostic category

covers the Holocaust, child abuse, war trauma, political terrorism, and religious cults, more may be obscured than revealed. Additionally, and specifically where incest is concerned, she argues that the PTSD label leaves out of view the ambivalence that characterizes the relations of many "victims" to their "perpetrators." There is a complexity and variability to victim/perpetrator relations that PTSD cannot lay hold of or recognize.[19] This inability, Haaken suggests, contributes to the Manichaean pitch of trauma narratives, and especially narratives of sexual trauma, which depict all-or-nothing stories of good versus evil.[20]

Moreover, it is not just the ambivalent relations between "victim" and "perpetrator" that get written out; the complexity of the victim's relations to the other adults in her immediate circle also disappears. Just think here for a moment of the mother-daughter conflict in *How I Learned to Drive*. This is not the classic incest story in which the mother refuses to see what is happening to her daughter, or sees but remains helpless to "save" her. In fact, Li'l Bit's mother sees what's coming before "it" happens and gives a warning, albeit one that takes the form of blaming the daughter in advance for anything that might go wrong. The mother-daughter conflict, though, is not between seeing and not seeing incest, but between seeing and not seeing Li'l Bit. The mother cannot see in her daughter what Uncle Peck sees, recognizes, supports—a seeing that he also comes to exploit, of course.

Once framed as a stark contest between good and evil, helpless victim and all-powerful perpetrator, what *conscious* space remains for either ambivalence or moral ambiguity? (Psychic space is another matter, of course; the unconscious is nothing if not roomy.) In fairness, this casting out of ambiguity and insistence on the inherently traumatizing effects of adult-child sexual contact does make sense culturally: as feminist responses to backlash against feminism in general and as feminist attempts to focus attention on sexual abuse in particular. In the face of renewed and often virulent cultural battles over gender roles and the meaning of sexuality in women's lives, the hardening of the therapeutic and feminist line on childhood sexual abuse has its logics. Where sexuality is at once consigned to silence and compelled to speech and where women's sexuality is the especially fraught site of this double burden, one of the few ways for women to speak legitimately about sex is to speak from the position of victim. Speaking *as* victim inoculates women or, more accurately, *some* women (since race and class crucially mediate which women get counted as victims) against the charge of unruly desire. The irony of this new feminist command to speak our injury is that it too may perform a silencing—all in the name of liberation.

I want to be very clear what I am *not* arguing here. I am not denying the sobering reality of violence against women; I am not rehearsing by-now familiar accusations that feminists—and women in general—just need to get over it, where "it" refers to sexual violence in particular; I am not casting my voice with Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers, and other self-appointed feminist champions who want to res-

cue women from so-called victim feminism. Although one would scarcely know this from reading mainstream media accounts of feminism, the diversity of feminist thinking about sexual violence and about the stakes of designating something as a specifically sexual violence defies reduction to catchphrases like "victim feminism."

Nonetheless, there is yet reason to scrutinize dominant feminist approaches to the question of sexual violence. Much feminist effort has been devoted to exposing and analyzing the ubiquity verging on normalization of violence against women, and rightly so. Rape, domestic battery, incest are far too common experiences. However, to say that these are too-common experiences in the lives of many women and girls does not mean that they are experienced the same, in common. Nor does it make violence or the threat of violence the structuring condition of women's sexual subjectivity. What's more, this focus on sexual danger leaves little or no room to ask about women's pleasure and what might enable it. There is a far more complex story to be told here, a story about the way second-wave feminist thinking about violence, sexuality, and the body has been narrated and, in that narration, narrowed.

Certainly, the essays gathered together in Carole S. Vance's still timely 1984 anthology, *Pleasure and Danger*,[21] reveal that second-wave feminists were hardly of one mind on the matter of women's sexuality. The volume collected papers and talks given at the 1982 "Scholar and the Feminist" conference at Barnard College. Contributors acknowledged and analyzed the myriad social *and* psychic forces bearing down on women, but they also refused to conceptualize women's sexuality as a uniform or singular experience. Instead, contributors moved to complicate and even disrupt the category of "woman" by introducing such "other" critical differences as race and class. This productive feminist disruption also carried over to the category "sexuality," for it too is inflected—and complicated—by race and class. Just as crucially, contributors to the volume did not reduce sexuality or sex to a matter of sexual object-choice or sexual orientation. Rather, essays by Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Gayle Rubin among others dared to address sexual identifications and practices that did not fit into neat boxes—feminist, lesbian, or otherwise—about what women's bodies and women's pleasures were for.

The feminist possibilities on view in *Pleasure and Danger* were not universally applauded by other feminists; far from it. The volume and the 1982 Barnard conference were assailed by some antipornography feminists as worse than no feminism at all; indeed, Vance and the other contributors were accused, in sometimes vitriolic terms, of actively promoting violence against women.[22] The controversy around *Pleasure and Danger* is just one example of a feminism embattled over sex and violence. However, that feminists disagreed—and still disagree—profoundly over these matters need not spell the end of feminism. If anything, we might rather see contestation and difference as the very ground of a feminist politics.[23]

As Pamela Haag makes clear in her 1996 genealogy of second-wave feminist debates over violence, victimization, and sexed embodiment, the

unified subject of feminism is not and never was. In a brave and necessary essay, Haag returns to the feminist archives to reveal that for many 1970s feminist activists and theorists (and these categories are not mutually exclusive), violence was not understood as some external force that shattered a previously unified subject and a previously intact body. Rather, thinking, writing, and acting with and against the often violent backdrop of 1960s and early 1970s American politics, they came to see that the body-subject was itself created in and through multiple forms of violence: from the structural violences of racism and sexism to the psychic demand (one backed up by social force) that subjects, if they are to be subjects, must legibly represent their "sex" and their "race" to other subjects. As Haag points out, the feminist recognition that subjects became subjects not despite violence, but in some sense through it, was not a romanticization of violence as "good" for women. Rather, it opened up the possibility of agency in the wake of violence. Perhaps agency is even thinkable as a traumatic wakening out of violence, a suggestion that links the question of agency to Caruth's "enigma of survival."

The possibility that violences of various sorts are among the constitutive conditions of embodied subjectivity energizes much recent feminist and queer discussions about injury, agency, and embodiment. Importantly, this suggestion is *not* tantamount to claiming that women are defined by our violability. The latter assertion leaves little room for agency; within its terms, every woman is a victim waiting to happen. Moreover, given the heterosexual parameters of this rape script, every man is a rapist waiting to attack.

With literary scholar Sharon Marcus,[24] we need to ask, what if this very presumption—that women are defined by our violability—produces as its effect the truth it purports simply to tell: passive, victimized women? To ask this also means asking some hard questions about the privileged injury that is rape. Within one influential strand of feminism, rape is the very paradigm of injury; it is an injury to woman in her sex and, to the extent that woman's sex defines her, rape is thus an injury to her in her very core. (Feminists did not invent this privileging of the sexual, of course; but the feminist strain represented by Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and the antipornography movement more broadly has reiterated the privileging of the sexual.) Rape and other sexual injuries, according to this line of thought, are inherently traumatic and peculiarly devastating. However, by foreclosing what rape or incest might mean in the life experience of any particular woman (or man, for that matter), we define out of the category "woman" or "raped" any woman for whom rape or incest is *not* the worst thing that could have happened to her. The complexity of women's responses to rape and other forms of violence cannot be comprehended by the demand to narrate violation and only violation, whether that narration be conducted in accord with a legal vocabulary of assault or a medicalizing vocabulary of injury.

Must a rape narrative conform to naturalized cultural scripts of injury and innocence in order to be legitimated as a real injury? What pre-

existing patterns of meaning-making and intelligibility shape what can be told, what can be heard? What would it take for us—for feminists—to be able to tell different stories, messy in all their complexity and ambiguity? Here is where Paglia and the others are actually in sync with the very feminism they rebuke: As Mary Gaitskill perceptively argues, both those who accuse feminists of being crybabies and those who would prescribe the exact order, down to the word order, of a consensual sexual encounter paper over the complexities of sex and injury.[25]

Gaitskill makes this observation in the midst of telling the story of her own *nontraumatizing* experience of rape. For Gaitskill, being raped by a stranger was *less* traumatic than her various experiences of emotional cruelty. In the case of this rape, she says, she did not need to ask how or whether she had contributed to it; it was not about her, even if it was done to her. The rape was bad, but "not especially traumatic."[26] Gaitskill's self-reporting does not fit into the cultural narratives of rape and sexual injury that are currently available, and yet, this is all the more reason to take her account seriously. As with the swerve orchestrated by Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, Gaitskill teaches by deviating from the expected path.

On the Value of Getting It Wrong

To get a sense of the intervention *How I Learned to Drive* makes into trauma theory and, especially, into mainstream feminist accounts of sexual injury, we need to ask what the secret is that Li'l Bit cannot or will not tell. Ultimately, the secret Li'l Bit has to share is not the secret of sexual abuse at the hands of Uncle Peck. Anyway, this is not much of a secret at all, for it is the rare audience member who comes to the play not knowing in advance that incest is one of its basic plot points. Moreover, for any audience member still in the dark, Vogel makes short work of bringing incest into the open—all the better to defamiliarize it as "the" secret that must be told. This defamiliarization does not quell the play's ability to disturb, however; it incites it.

Let's return, briefly, to the opening scene of the play and Li'l Bit's mischievous turn from confessing to teaching. As Li'l Bit walks us through our first lesson, she gently segues from an unspecified present to an "early, warm summer evening." "It's 1969," Li'l Bit informs us, locating us in the chronology of her past, "And I am very old, very cynical of the world, and I know it all. In short, I am seventeen years old, parking off a dark lane with a married man on an early summer night" (7–8). It's a driving lesson, although not her first one, we will later find out, and the sexual banter between the couple is alive with come-ons and refusals:

> *Peck:* [] I've got the mind of a boy scout.
> *Li'l Bit:* A horny boy scout.
> *Peck:* Boy scouts are always horny. What do you think the first Merit Badge is for?
> *Li'l Bit:* There. You're going to be nasty again.

Peck: Oh, no. I'm good. Very good.
Li'l Bit: It's getting late.
Peck: Don't change the subject. I was talking about how good I am. *(Beat)* Are you gonna let me show you how good I am?
Li'l Bit: Don't go over the line now. (9–10)

The man asks the girl to let him caress and kiss her breasts, his reward for not taking a drink all week. She relents, but to his desire or hers—or both? Her measured response—"Li'l Bit closes her eyes, carefully keeps her voice calm," advise the stage directions (12)—walks the line between desire and resignation. Nonetheless, there's a light, teasing quality to the scene, which defies the revelation to come: "Uncle Peck," she breaks his reverie, "we've got to go. I've got graduation rehearsal at school tomorrow morning. And you should get home to Aunt Mary" (12).

I suggested earlier that there are moments in the play when Li'l Bit seems to hold something back from the audience. But it's important to distinguish, as best we can, between those scenes in which Li'l Bit knows more than she says and those in which she discloses more than she knows. The scene rehearsed above belongs to the former category, in which the narrator exerts control over what we know and when we know it. Li'l Bit suspends identifying the married man as her uncle until late in the first scene. This is a wonderful setup to the rest of the play, because, through it, *we* get wonderfully set up. One conventional depiction—older (married) man and younger woman—turns into another, less depicted perhaps, but no less "ordinary" scenario (denials notwithstanding).

Thus, it seems to me that Li'l Bit's "secret"—if that is the right word for it—lies elsewhere than incest. As her narrative is pieced together, we get a sense of the ambivalence that characterizes her relation to Uncle Peck. Maybe this is the secret she has to tell and teach: not the brute fact of her violation and betrayal, but an ambivalent admixture of love and hate, desire and identification, pleasure and danger. Indeed, this is one of the features of *How I Learned to Drive* that makes it such a refreshing break from form: Li'l Bit is an active, unruly subject of desire; she is not simply prostrate before the other's desire for her. Moreover, Li'l Bit's desire for Uncle Peck is not purified of danger any more than her love for him is untouched by fear and even hate.

There are numerous scenes that make clear Li'l Bit's desire for Uncle Peck as well as her identification with him. Buckle your seat-belts and fast forward to 1979: Li'l Bit is twenty-seven; she's on a "long bus trip to Upstate New York" during which she picks up a high school senior (40). Afterward, she tells us, "I lay on my back in the dark and I thought about you, Uncle Peck" (41). This direct address to Uncle Peck, calling him into presence, becomes indistinguishable from her imaginative identification with him: "Oh. Oh—this is the allure. Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded. This is how the giver gets taken" (41). She addresses this reverie of praise and wonder to Uncle Peck even as she assumes his position, a redoubling of desire at and

as the site of identification. This is a glimpse, then, not of the reiteration of predation ("Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" [86]—questions without answer), but of desire's melancholy turn inward into identification.

My invocation of melancholy here is deliberate. In his famous discussion in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud traces an analogy between mourning (which he considers a normal psychological response to loss) and melancholia (which he describes as a pathological response).[27] He is seeking to show what mourning and melancholia have in common and, especially, where they differ. Along the way Freud resorts to a range of metaphors to describe the process of melancholia: figures of flight, falling, shadows, wounds. "Mourning and Melancholia," written in 1915 and first published in 1917, is part of Freud's evolving theory of identification, the topography of the ego, and the formation of conscience. His puzzlement at the quality of ego's attachment to loss and the force with which lost objects continue to affect the ego also anticipates his investigation of trauma and the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.*

Both mourning and melancholia are a relationship to loss, and in both cases the ego suffers profound loss of interest in the outside world, inhibition of all activity, loss of capacity to love, and painful dejection. However, the melancholic suffers a blow to the inner world that seems to exceed the loss itself. "In mourning," Freud tells us, "it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."[28] This diminution of self is marked by lacerating reproaches to self-regard,[29] a self-abasement not present in mourning; the mourner might lash out at a world suddenly bereft of his (or her) lost object, but does not, Freud says, turn the fire on himself. If mourning is characterized by dejection, melancholia is marked by *abjection.*

There is one more crucial difference between mourning and melancholia, a difference that bears on Li'l Bit's secret and its retreat from understanding. In melancholia, the subject may know well *whom* he or she has lost, but not *what* is lost. Melancholia, then, involves an object loss that is withdrawn from consciousness and *absorbed into the ego.* Lost, yet unrecognized as loss, the lost object cannot be mourned as gone. And yet, this nonrecognition of loss does not spare the subject of melancholia; the unknown loss produces internal work similar to that undergone in mourning. However, it is a kind of psychic work that defies understanding; neither the subject of melancholia nor those who surround her know what it is that absorbs her. This defiance even of self-understanding results in part from a change in the ego; in the place of an object that cannot be mourned, there comes an identification with the lost object or, perhaps even, with loss itself. All unknowing, Freud observes, "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego."[30] But the psychic pull of melancholia also derives from the ambivalence of the ties that bound, and still bind, the subject to its lost and unmourned object.

Now there is much in Freud's discussion of melancholia that we might wish to contest. For example, his opening distinction between

mourning and melancholia depends on another, between "normal" psychological responses and "pathological" ones—ultimately, a distinction that does not quite hold. Indeed, it cannot even hold for Freud; when he returns to the topic of identification and the constitution of the ego in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923), "normal" processes of identification come more and more to resemble the melancholic model of object-identification he has initially diagnosed as pathological in "Mourning and Melancholia."[31]

A related problem has to do with depoliticization. To pathologize melancholia is also to treat it as an individual problem and remove it from the social.[32] Curiously, this hermeneutic bracketing of the social, a bracketing I have earlier criticized in the clinical and pop cultural discussion of trauma, follows melancholia's path from the outside in. That is, within the terms of Freud's analysis, melancholia is an inward turn that cuts the subject off from the world around her. This is also what ego psychology's individualizing diagnosis of melancholia effects: a flight from the world.

We might ask, both with Freud and against him—which is to say, with Freud but also with Paula Vogel—what refusals and blind spots in the social require the withdrawal into and burial within the self of Li'l Bit's ambivalent relation to Uncle Peck. By "refusals" and "blind spots," I do not refer to a cultural refusal to see or acknowledge the "reality" of incest and adult-child sexual contact. (This latter, when it does get spoken about, can only be spoken as "abuse," a term that squeezes out all moral ambiguity and also evacuates the category of childhood.)[33] Rather, I mean the assertion that these experiences necessarily wound the one who undergoes them and, not only that, that this is all these experiences amount to: loss and more loss. The simultaneous refusal to recognize incest and adult-child sexual contact and insistence, when they do break the horizon of the visible, that such experiences injure and traumatize without spare may be part of what propels such experiences inward and away from consciousness in the first place (a firstness that is displaced in favor of the immediacy of trauma). In view of this, far from pathologizing this inward turn, we might rather marvel at the melancholic's rebellious refusal—"revolting" is Freud's term (but he does not mean it approvingly, whereas I do)—to get over it and give up so despised an object or object-relation.

Dare to Witness

Let's turn again to *How I Learned to Drive* and its ambivalent course of desire and identification. It's fall term 1969, Li'l Bit's freshman year in college. Uncle Peck counts down to her eighteenth birthday in December, then pays a birthday call. The scene of their encounter makes clear her desire for him—and her confusion:

> *Peck:* Li'l Bit. Listen. Listen. Open your eyes and look at me. Come on. Just open your eyes, honey. *(Li'l Bit, eyes squeezed shut, refuses)* All right then, I just want you to listen. Li'l Bit—I'm going to ask

> you just this once. Of your own free will. Just lie down on the bed with me—our clothes on—just lie down with me, a man and a woman . . . and let's . . . hold one another. Nothing else. Before you say anything else. I want the chance to . . . hold you. Because sometimes the body knows things that the mind isn't listening to . . . and after I've held you, then I want you to tell me what you feel.
>
> *Li'l Bit:* You'll just . . . hold me?
>
> *Peck:* Yes. And then you can tell me what you're feeling. (80–81)

And so, they lie together, the man holding the woman. As Li'l Bit and her uncle lie together, on an unadorned bed, discrepancies between body and word, between what we desire and what we can allow ourselves to have (or become?), play out before us. The Greek Chorus steps onto the stage, intoning a "Recipe for a Southern Boy." Without leaving Uncle Peck's side, Li'l Bit joins in the litany, praising, in turn, his "warm brown eyes," "warm hands," the "slouch of the fishing skiff in his walk," "sweat of cypress and sand," and at last "his mouth" (81–83). Speaking her desire, she comes quite nearly to enact it, leaning into his body, breath to breath, as if to kiss his mouth. Then, abruptly voice breaks from body: "I've got to get back" (83). Asked by her uncle if she really feels nothing, Li'l Bit lies, "No. Nothing" (84). After sending him away, after saying no to his desire *and* hers, Li'l Bit will never see him again. It will take him "seven years to drink himself to death" (85).

The afterwards of this refusal and this death is another memory, but one that takes Li'l Bit and the audience further back than the beginning. It is 1962, Li'l Bit's first driving lesson, the first time Uncle Peck crossed the line. In this, the penultimate scene of the play, Li'l Bit, the woman whose memories have been the driving force of the play thus far, exchanges the role of narrator for that of spectator and witness. Her life, her lines (lifelines?) now spoken by the Teenage Greek Chorus, Li'l Bit watches and listens as her own story unfolds before her, as if it were happening to someone else, as if it were a scene in someone else's life. A play even. The stage directions for this scene yoke the work of memory and the work of theater:

> The Teenage Greek Chorus member stands apart on stage. She will speak all of Li'l Bit's lines. Li'l Bit sits beside Peck in the front seat. She looks at him closely, remembering. (88)

Li'l Bit takes her seat in the theater of memory. Only now, at this late juncture in the play, a play whose temporal indices are as revisable as memory itself, do we witness what precipitated Li'l Bit's flight from her body and into her head. She is eleven; she will be thirty-five "before you know it" (91). She lives both times at once.

Throughout this scene, as the Teenage Greek Chorus takes Li'l Bit's part, she watches herself remembering, objectifies her memory as her self.

The Teenage Chorus stands to the side of the "action" and speaks Li'l Bit's confusion and fear as Uncle Peck places the eleven-year-old girl on his lap, behind the wheel of his car, and then reaches up under her shirt. Simultaneously, we witness another encounter in time. As Li'l Bit listens to her own story, words now spoken by another, she climbs back into the car of memory. We hear one story even as we watch another unfold before us in the shared space-time that is live performance. At the same time that the Teenage Greek Chorus gives voice to Li'l Bit's fear ("Uncle Peck—what are you doing" and, then, "Uncle Peck—please don't do this" [90]), she leans back into her uncle and reaches up to stroke his face, giving us to wonder if it is the eleven-year-old girl touching him or the adult woman, in memory willing connection with the lost man who taught her love and loss at once.

The accumulated weight of Li'l Bit's memories teaches us at what cost she learned to drive and learned to love; she retreats into the fire in her head, leaves her body behind, feels shame at and in her body. "That day was the last day I lived in my body" (90). These are the first words she speaks when she resumes her place as teller of her own story. But the last words of the Teenage Greek Chorus—Li'l Bit's eleven-year-old self—echo at her back, "This isn't happening" (90).

This doubling—of time, of Li'l Bit—is readable as the splitting off that characterizes trauma. But I want to resist this reading. Instead, I am struck by the doubling, or standing in, that is witness and that is also the intersubjective occasion of the self. The scene I have just described is one of two moments in *How I Learned to Drive* that explicitly represent what it means to remember trauma and bear witness, a remembering and a witnessing that blur the lines between self and other, inside and out, past and present (34–35).

Let's briefly consider the other scene in which *How I Learned to Drive* seems to reflect self-critically on bearing witness. On a drive home from a drunken 1968 celebration with Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit falls asleep, and as she sleeps Uncle Peck walks downstage towards the audience and begins another lesson, a fishing lesson, for the never-seen Cousin Bobby. But the scene of pedagogy turns—as had happened before with Li'l Bit—somewhere else. In some productions of *How I Learned to Drive*, the actress playing Li'l Bit is stationed off to the side while this scene unfolds, as if she has awakened from sleep—or has fallen into a dream?—and is watching Uncle Peck "seduce" Cousin Bobby. The uncertain status of the scene—is it a dream; a memory (but if so, whose); a speculation on Li'l Bit's part that Uncle Peck must have done something like this to someone else, so why not to Cousin Bobby?—is only enhanced by the fact that we never see Cousin Bobby. The actor playing Uncle Peck speaks his lines to an empty space and mimes interactions with a body that is not there. In some sense, then, we are being asked whether it is possible to witness what we have not seen. This is a question with deep ethical import, for it raises questions of our responsibility to and before others whom we may never know.[34]

Vogel also recognizes that there is another deep and deeply ethical challenge she has presented her audience: how to witness what you cannot bear to see. In her opening notes on casting, for the Teenage Greek Chorus Vogel "strongly recommend[s] casting a young woman who is 'of legal age,' that is, twenty-one to twenty-five years old who can look as close to eleven as possible." "If the actor is too young," Vogel worries, "the audience may feel uncomfortable" (4). Now, this is a striking worry for a play that is all about discomforting audience members' presumptions. But, of course, there is discomfort and there is discomfort. What distinguishes one kind of discomfort from another? What, in other words, makes discomfort bearable, even if it scarcely feels that way at the time?

Vogel's proposed solution pivots on the peculiar status of the live body of performance. On the one hand, Vogel cautions directors to cast an actress who can plausibly play—"look"—eleven; on the other hand, she wants to make sure the audience knows full well that the Teenage Greek Chorus, the actress who will speak as the eleven-year-old Li'l Bit, is really (in life and off stage) and most definitely not eleven.

The casting choice (which is also an acting direction) certainly seems in keeping with the Brechtian leanings of *How I Learned to Drive:* its suggested use of screens for the slide projection of traffic signs; musical interludes to signal mood shifts and mark time; a narrative that circles back on itself, revising as it goes; and defiance of simplistic notions of "good" characters versus "bad." Making visible to the audience the chronological discrepancy between the Teenage Greek Chorus and the actress playing her could thus be understood as a kind of "alienation effect," intended to open up a critical distance between actress and role *as well as* between character and audience. This interpretation is fine as far as it goes, but does not adequately get at the charge of the live body of performance.

One of the distinctive features of theatrical representation is its involvement of bodies in shared time and space. On stage, actors and actresses do not just speak characters' lines but embody them, bringing flesh to word, gesture to figure. Just as crucially, there are, on the "other" side, the witnessing bodies of the audience. In the peculiar alchemy of live performance, these lines of division—between onstage and off, actor and role, actor and audience—can blur or otherwise be confounded. This crossing over is both the risk and the thrill of theatrical representation.

The risks can only be ratcheted up in a play whose story line revolves around (even as it is not reducible to) such a morally freighted topic as incest. Ultimately, the audience of *How I Learned to Drive* is called to witness not the moral clarity of injury, but the messy ambiguities and ambivalences of lived embodiment, and these complexities are played out in and across real bodies in shared space and time. Perhaps, if the audience is to bear witness to what is before them, they must not see what they already think they know. Perhaps, just perhaps, to see too close to the "real" would alienate in the wrong way, potentially pushing the audience back from the uncomfortable lessons the play has to teach. In many respects the dare of *How I Learned to Drive*—the dare not just to see, but to

witness, not just to experience, but to comprehend—is the dare of theater itself.

The association between theater and witnessing is a long-standing one; the English word *theater* comes from the ancient Greek verb *theaomai*, "to view, gaze at, behold." "Behold" is perhaps the best translation of this deponent verb, for it preserves the self-reflexivity otherwise lost to translation. As a deponent verb, *theaomai* has no active form, but is used in the middle voice to communicate the active sense of viewing (as opposed to being viewed). The middle voice, though, reverberates with the promise (and risk?) of a double movement: out into the world and back onto the self. Theater, when it works, is the activity of witness—an activity that takes place, as it were, on both sides of the stage. The challenge to spectators is not just to sit and watch a play, as if the play were some passive object to be quickly consumed and passed; rather, spectators, if they are also to be witnesses, are in some fundamental sense taken in and transformed by what they watch. (And here's another reason I like to translate *theaomai* as "behold." I like its grasping-ness, the way in which one kind of sensory perception, sight, is explained in terms of another, touch.) This is more than empathic identification. Witnessing as beholding requires an openness to the surprise of the other—and of the self.

In the excruciating final scene of *How I Learned to Drive*, Li'l Bit tells us, "The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving" (91). That she should feel most alive while driving seems counterintuitive. For wasn't the car the scene of her trauma, the place where Uncle Peck had unfettered access to her? However, if, as I have suggested above, Li'l Bit's trauma and her secret are bound up in all that she has loved and lost in Uncle Peck, a love and a loss whose high toll do not cancel out their value for Li'l Bit, then it may only be while driving that she gets to have him again—by being him. For the length of the drive, she is not pressed to get over him or get over herself. If the price tag for getting over the loss is letting go of an object and an object-relation that the world tells you was not worth having in the first place, then this melancholy refusal to get over it already is not destructive of the self, but may even be constitutive of its ongoing life.

In the topsy-turvy world of *How I Learned to Drive*, Li'l Bit's rituals of remembrance and revision, as she moves us and herself back and forth in time, enact a truth-telling that, in Ann Cvetkovich's words, "def[ies] simple notions of disclosure."[35] Importantly, the play proposes that this defiance of conventional expectations of how memory works and of knowing our own stories and communicating them to others does *not* mean that understanding and healing injury is impossible, but is the very condition of forging a different relation to injury and to identity. But we cannot do so, the play suggests, unless we stop seeking for hard-and-fast truths and instead allow for the ambivalence of an arrival that is at once too soon and too late.

None of us can meet the past again face to face; we are always too early or too late. But this suspension of time, even as we move through it,

might be the condition for another kind of meeting. The final image of the play presents melancholia shorn of pathology (judgment from others) and shame (judgment of self). Li'l Bit steps out of the past and into the car:

> Ahh . . . *(Beat)* I adjust my seat. Fasten my seat belt. Then I check the right side mirror—check the left side. *(She does)* Finally, I adjust the rearview mirror. *(As Li'l Bit adjusts the rearview mirror, a faint light strikes the spirit of Uncle Peck, who is sitting in the back seat of the car. She sees him in the mirror. She smiles at him, and he nods at her. They are happy to be going for a long drive together. Li'l Bit slips the car into first gear; to the audience)* And then—I floor it. (92)

Where the *live* recedes, there is memory's psychic life of witness, and perhaps theater's too—if we open ourselves to its lessons.

NOTES

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1. Paula Vogel, *How I Learned to Drive*, in *The Mammary Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 7. Subsequent references are given in the text.
2. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
3. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 12.
4. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 24.
5. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 27.
6. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 27.
7. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 58.
8. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 31; Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 131–32 n. 5.
9. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 58.
10. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.
11. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.
12. The term "behindsight" is borrowed from Lee Edelman, "Seeing Things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance, and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 101.
13. In this regard, *How I Learned to Drive* not only intervenes in trauma theory, but also checks the developmental flow of most psychological theory, which posits neat stages through which individuals pass en route to normal adulthood. Even Freud, for all his hedging, ultimately succumbs to a developmental bias.

(Witness the arc of *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.*) Vogel's playful vocabulary of "drives" and "driving" productively and punningly engages Freud's notion of the drive, which figures so crucially in his developmental model of human sexuality. But, this engagement with Freud's drive theory is also a rebuttal, since *How I Learned to Drive* ultimately refuses to map sexual development or maturation more generally along the lines of a linear progress narrative. *How I Learned to Drive* might thus serve as a generative case study for a nondevelopmental psychological theory. I pursue this possibility at greater length in *Against Childhood* (Beacon Press, forthcoming). See also Elspeth Probyn's lovely essay on the place of childhood in gay and lesbian narratives, "Suspended Beginnings: Of Childhood and Nostalgia," *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 439–65.

14. David Savran neatly summarizes Vogel's anti-Aristotelian style in "Loose Screws," his introduction to *"The Baltimore Waltz" and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996), ix–xv, especially xiii.

15. Savran, "Loose Screws," xii.

16. Ann Cvetkovich, "Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory: Incest, Lesbianism, and Therapeutic Culture," *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 366.

17. Janice Haaken, "The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychic Trauma," *Signs* 21, no. 4 (1996): 1069–94, especially 1078.

18. Pamela Haag, "'Putting Your Body on the Line': The Question of Violence, Victims, and the Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism," *differences* 8, no. 2 (1996): 24.

19. Haaken, "Recovery of Memory," 1079. See also Cvetkovich, "Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory."

20. Haaken, "Recovery of Memory," 1083.

21. Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexual Imagery* (1984; New York: Pandora Press, 1992).

22. In feminist histories of "second-wave feminism," the 1982 Barnard conference has often been set down as the opening battle in the feminist "sex wars." There are strong historical reasons to resist doing so, however. This way of telling the story overlooks the fact that women's sexuality was already a matter of heated debate among nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century U.S. feminists. In addition, it also leaves out broader cultural currents and debates over sexual identity and practices that influenced the direction(s) of feminist sexual politics. See Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

23. For a helpful discussion of the value of feminist political differences, see Janet R. Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

24. Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385–403.

25. Mary Gaitskill, "On Not Being a Victim," *Harpers*, March 1994, 35–44.

26. Gaitskill, "On Not Being a Victim," 42.

27. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243–58.

28. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 246.

29. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244.

30. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 249.

31. For a rich discussion of melancholia as at the heart of subject-formation,

see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

32. For a valuable treatment of melancholia that redraws it through the social and political register of Asian American identity and difference, see David Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (2000): 667–700. See also Douglas Crimp's important "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 3–18.

33. For a provocative feminist discussion of moral panic around the specter of childhood sexuality, see Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

34. For helpful discussions of the ethical dilemma of bearing witness to the trauma of the other, see Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience;* and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

35. I am here borrowing from Ann Cvetkovich's important discussion of the ambivalence of telling and healing trauma in Dorothy Allison's novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina.* See her "Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory," 360–61.