

ELUNED SUMMERS-BREMNER

Love's Pleasure, Love's Pain

Love is a story that tells itself—fortunately
Pleasure is the infinite experiment.

—Anne Carson.¹

HOW TO BEGIN DESCRIBING the pleasures to be found in reading really quite depressing books? A lot depends on exactly which kind of depressing reading one has in mind, of course. Fictions whose impetus is a traumatic experience or act of history whose aftershocks register through the very pores of the narrative can produce a feeling in the reader that is not entirely unpleasant, whether it is the cathartic effect Claude Lanzmann sees as an unjustifiable response to telling stories about the Holocaust² or the less explicable state of feeling induced by the doggedly mournful endeavours of a W.G. Sebald or a Samuel Beckett. The kind of book I am thinking of, though, is the one Anne Carson refers to in the epigraph above and, in more detail, in her book-long enquiry *Eros the Bittersweet*, a story that is a story before we encounter it in a book and whose wholesale cultural acceptance seems to prevail the more that reading rates, in the so-called developed world, decline. I am talking about love stories, romantic narratives, books whose rationale is to raise a flag against forlorn hopes and acquiescent on-the-shelfness wherever these are found and to insist, as Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* does, that to love is to look for signs and to have hungered for love is to be a book that someone,

¹ "The Anthropology of Water," *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) 190, 238.

² Claude Lanzmann, "The Obscenity of Understanding," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 200–20.

somewhere, someday is bound to love enough to not only take to bed but to commune with, curl up alone with, forsake others for—in short, to abandon all pretence of prior knowledge of and to simply settle down with and, happily or unhappily, for-as-long-as-it-may-last-together, read.

As Renata Salecl observes, “one of the greatest illusions about love is that social codes prevent its realization,” when, in fact, the opposite is true.³ Get too close, too soon, to the love object and the would-be lover is unable to harbour his or her part of the exchange whereby each partner intimates in the other a wealth of potential ways of being. The same holds for the literature of love, which, despite the promise or premise of a happy outcome, is devoted to the elaboration of obstacles to the achievement of desire. It is obvious, too, that for the reader this teasing game with that most serious of states of mind and feeling offers pleasures, in much the same way as reading about murder does. We can approach, in the knowledge that we will be saved from, complete identification with the eventual fact of our own death, or, in the case of love stories, with the fact of our own vulnerability and possible heartbreak. What happens in such cases is that the book itself, which contains the story of love or death, mediates the work of identification for the reader. Because the author has put the book between the reader and the attractions of possibly eternal dissolution, we can abandon ourselves freely—in mortal fear or mortal longing—to its arms (or pages, depending on how fanciful the reader). In this respect, readerly pleasure is childlike and is heightened by the addition of further disjunctive, yet also pleasurable protective, layers. Alberto Manguel’s *The History of Reading*, an undisguised documentary of a lifelong love affair with books, remarks how books were the better able to furnish the child Alberto with a permanent home the more his diplomatic family travelled, providing that certain elements could be found: a lamp, a sleeping or quietly knitting nurse, and beyond this circle a murmur of incomprehensible voices, a strangeness just sufficient, like stormy weather beyond lamplight, to emphasize the communion taking place within.⁴

³ (*Per*) *Versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 1998) 6.

⁴ *A History of Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1996) 11.

Having established that thwarted love makes good fiction because its necessary obstacles function there, as they do not, so clearly, in real life, as pleasurable devices to invite the reader in to sustain the story, I should state that the romantic narratives I am concerned with in this essay engage a further complication. These are the novels of Anita Brookner, which frequently involve a heroine whose ability to love and find happiness is compromised by a prior or more pressing love of reading. Within the plots and workings of her narratives, Brookner continually invokes readerly pleasures as a supplement to, and possible refuge from, the feminine drive to further, at the self's expense, love's unending story—what is called feminine masochism in some accounts. In using reading pleasure as the third term intervening in, or enabling, a series of recognizable opposites—a woman and her desire for love and marriage, a woman and a particular man, the reader of the book and the unknown story, its possible ends—her fictions provide rich insight into how reading pleasure functions, as does love in the developed western world, as a zone of conspicuous exception.

Love and reading are conspicuously exceptional in the sense that the pleasure we expect both activities to open onto requires us to assume a position of positive unknowing, or, as it is sometimes described—in terms I have always found curiously mean-spirited for such rich and rewarding activities and so will not be adopting here—of the willing suspension of disbelief. When we read, it is our own imaginative construction and habitation of an internal fictional world that we occlude or fail to register, much as we occlude ourselves from the scene when in the act of dreaming. Yet it is this absent presence, habitually practised, that forms the condition of possibility on which fiction's reality effect depends. Within the realist domain, readers will identify a fictional scene as lacking credibility if they are unable to imagine themselves participating in it invisibly, which demonstrates the seldom remarked fact that a reality effect in fiction depends upon a double, not a single, act of construction or deception. In the land of fiction, it takes two lacks or occlusions to make a positive. Or in a formulation perhaps more familiar to those of us who read and write about literature for a living, it takes two kinds of easy-seeming labour to get us into the happy realm of comfort reading: that of the writer who expends her labour to make a highly artificial, and so real-seeming, world, and that of the reader who expends his on harbouring this world, his own active presence blanked out, leaving him free to

move around invisibly within it. The writer makes the story for her as yet invisible readers, and the readers invisibly enter, and thus substantiate in their minds' eye, the story's would-be world.

Love—and here I am drawing on Jacques Lacan's astute and useful formulation—also operates by virtue of a working opacity or exchange of lacks. Like reading, love conveys union *through* the operation of invisible barriers, so that each partner in a love relation is ignorant of what the lover sees in him or her, while at the same time unconsciously seeing the beloved as the self he or she would like to be.⁵ In this way, love implies “the follies and torments of those in love,” as Alain Badiou observes, while remaining in excess of those experiences: “Let us say that love is a process which arranges such immediate experiences, without the law which arranges them being decipherable within those experiences. This can also be said: the experience of the loving subject, which is the matter of love, does not constitute any knowledge [*savoir*] of love.”⁶

Or, to put it another way, love is the privileged terrain of the beginner. She who holds to her belief in love is she of whom others indulgently say, *she'll never learn*, but this ignorance has benefits, for she who never learns is, like Manguel's inner readerly child who moves from home to substitute home, also bound to keep on reading. Like love, reading provides us routine access into another world on the condition that we remain largely ignorant of exactly how it is done. And if love is mutual captivation by a quality in the other that one cannot grasp or discern within oneself, then love, like reading, is the framework in which one gives what one does not know one has, what one is (happily) blind to, one's lack and one's belief that the world as it appears to oneself is all the world, in order to enter the world—and the world in the book—of another.

⁵ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 276; *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Vintage, 1998) 267–68; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1998) 6; Juliet Flower MacCannell, *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 256–58.

⁶ “What is Love?” *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 266.

"Dr Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature."⁷ So begins Brookner's first novel, *A Start in Life*, and goes on to detail the complex affective dynamics of this fate:

In her thoughtful, academic way, she put it down to her faulty moral education which dictated, through the conflicting but in this one instance united agencies of her mother and father, that she ponder the careers of Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary, but that she emulate those of David Copperfield and Little Dorrit. (7)

Like many Brookner heroines, Ruth Weiss is doomed by a sense of insurmountable contradiction between masculine and feminine principles. Interestingly, the novel's problematic is defined from the outset as a question about beginnings, signalled by the title, that are understood as and by means of fiction. It sets up the idea that not only are familial realities, whatever else they may be, also everyone's first fictions but that reading is inseparable from the reader's conflictual wishes and desires. This opening paragraph gives us something more, however. Ruth's parents, who, as we shall see, are like a pair of fractious children, have unconsciously agreed that Ruth carry on the familial conflict by living the progressive, achievement-oriented life of the male *Bildungsroman* hero exemplified by Dickens, undercut by (at best) the feminine uncertainty and (at worst) the deep attraction to suffering of Tolstoy's and Flaubert's female characters.

Thus books, from the outset, are indicated as regions able to contain not only marital and filial conflict but also, when read against each other, a potential commentary on their own contradictions. Because Ruth Weiss is an academic, she is able to recognize in the books of her childhood and adolescent years a form for her parents' dissatisfied and, in relation to her, ruinous desires. She is also able to find in her relation to literature the place of relative safety that the parental home—for she is the child, like Brookner herself, of Eastern European immigrants—did not provide. Books are a home and the possible means of her Dickensian passage out of it,

⁷ Anita Brookner, *A Start in Life* (1981; London: Grafton, 1985) 7.

both. Ruth reinvents herself and, by implication, her antecedents, in literary terms, even going so far as to “[blame] her looks on literature,” her “undisciplined” red hair “compressed into a ... chignon” and the “slight hesitancy” of her walk, resulting from a childhood illness, making her “appear virginal” (8).

These are terms any English Literature student will recognize as a cross between the assumed natural wantonness of woman in classical and medieval times and the unapproachable Courtly Lady, whose distance from the wandering songstruck courtier inaugurates, in the twelfth century, the literature (the lyrics) of canonical love.⁸ Yet Ruth clearly enjoys these contradictions, aiming, “instinctively, at a slightly old-fashioned effect ... her appearance and character ... exactly half-way between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (8), neither so modern as to seem shallow and too readily satisfied, nor so Victorian as to expect no happiness of her own. Coupled with the observation that her expectations of life are “extreme” and that from their having “never been fulfilled” she has “learnt nothing” (8), we find that Ruth is a successful scholar the first volume of whose three-part work on women in Balzac’s fiction has been published to “discreet acclaim” (7). Its title, *Women in Balzac’s Novels*, is described—with the perfect paradox of enjoyment quietly marshalled, its advance neatly forestalled—as likely “to do duty for the rest of her life” (7).

One of the strangest things about Brookner’s novels, given what John Haffenden, echoing many others, describes as her “exceptional stylistic gifts”⁹ and her remarkable, subtly rendered insight into character, is their refusal to depart very far from a definite pattern. A lonely, sensitive woman in middle age, who has some insight into the causes of her own unhappiness, cherishes romantic ambitions at odds with reality, choosing patently unsuitable men to long for or have an affair with, before she is ousted by a more worldly and attractive woman or women, usually one who thinks, or appears to think, about life in general and her own place in it rather less. A further strangeness, to my mind, is Brookner’s willingness, in interviews, to identify herself as the prototype for these

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1987) 287–89.

⁹ “Anita Brookner,” *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985) 58.

characters.¹⁰ Strange because of the apparently intrinsic reserve of her fictional creations, where, as we have seen, characters and events are frequently mediated by literature, but also by paintings or other artistic works. And in these fictions the most intimate moments tend to proceed, not forthrightly, but via understatement or descriptive transference, where characters' interactions are complicated by attention to the rhetoric of their language or their ambivalent relations to things.

A case in point is when Edith Hope, the protagonist of Brookner's finely pitched Booker prize-winning novel *Hotel du Lac*, becomes aware that Philip Neville has romantic plans for the two of them. He is described, perfectly accurately but at the same time with an extra component of representational distance—which the reader has come to expect from Edith, an intelligent, apparently sensible woman who writes romantic fiction for a living—as:

a wealthy man in his fifties, fastidious, careful, leisured, attractive in a bloodless sort of way, the kind of man who gave great thought to his way of life, a man in whom appetite might turn to some anodyne hobby, the collecting of drypoint etchings or the tracing of his own family tree. The kind of man who would undoubtedly have a fine library but whom it was somehow difficult to imagine in any other room of a house.¹¹

And earlier, when Edith is touched and infuriated by this man's assumptions about the staidness of her character, which he indicates with reference to her "moping around in that cardigan," the one the reader has been given to see as a Virginia Woolf-like garment, with its accompanying overtones of refinement battling genuine creativity and nervous tension:

¹⁰ Haffenden, "Brookner" 59, 62; Amanda Smith, "Anita Brookner," *Publishers Weekly* 6 (September 1985): 67–68; Shusha Guppy, "The Art of Fiction XCVIII: Anita Brookner," *The Paris Review* (Fall 1987): 150, 164; Olga Kenyon, "Anita Brookner," *Women Writers Talk: Interviews with Ten Women Writers* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1989) 11–14.

¹¹ *Hotel du Lac* (1982; London: Triad/Panther, 1983) 163.

To contain her anger—for she could not find her way down to the lake unaided—she tried various distancing procedures, familiar to her from long use. The most productive was to convert the incident into a scene in one of her novels. “The evening came on stealthily,” she muttered to herself. “The sun, a glowing ball . . .” It was no good. She turned around, searching for him, listening for the steps which should be following her and were not, and feeling suddenly alone on this hillside, in the cold. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself.

“I hate you,” she shouted, hopefully. (102)

One of the great enjoyments of this particular novel is its obvious delight in the multifarious accomplishments of femininity, which Brookner never makes the mistake of taking for granted, passing explicit judgement on or underplaying. Edith’s own feminine writerly profession, while gently mocked, as in the above passage, is nonetheless represented as a complex vehicle suited to her own largely unexpressed and conflictual passions and desires. The tropes of romantic fiction are, in their reliable banality, “distancing procedures” to which Edith is clearly accustomed, but there is a tenderness in her own momentary and unforeseen placement, like one of her own heroines, alone on the darkening hillside where writerly mediations fail, shouting out what any romantic fiction reader will recognize as an SOS call in the language of fortunate reversals—love/hate, joy/sorrow, ecstasy/pain—that is love’s expressive code.

In this novel, it is the character of Iris Pusey who most effectively enables Edith to avoid facing the reality of her situation. As it emerges at a point beyond the first half of the book, during which our heroine has remained something of a mystery, Edith has done the unthinkable in leaving a perfectly suitable man—for a woman of her apparently minimal visible attractions—stranded, unexpectedly and for no good reason, at the altar. For this outrage she has been sentenced, by various well meaning friends, to a sojourn in the eponymous lakeside hotel in late September, where summer yields to autumn and intimates the coming winter, Brookner’s favourite, liminally atmospheric season.

Edith meets Iris on Edith's first evening at the hotel, and this is conveyed to the reader retrospectively after Edith has extracted, in French, the name of the young hotel attendant who has brought her breakfast. Names are important in *Brookner*. Her own name, apparently English, carries the secret of her parents' attempted assimilation into English life—they were Polish Jews—in its aural likeness but visible difference from the original, Bruckner. Edith's own name holds a similar, slightly foreign-seeming secret only the proprietor of the hotel will learn, from the register: "Hope, Edith Johanna. An unusual name for an English lady. Perhaps not entirely English. Perhaps not entirely a lady. Recommended, of course. But in this business one never knew" (23). The forward looking, English seeming aspect of Edith's name—Hope—is stayed by its foreign antecedents, giving the sense, also signalled by her profession and her proficiency in French (another parallel with *Brookner*), that within her lies, if not hope's opposite, complete despair, at least some hidden depths or the potential to be a different woman.

As befits an author, however, Edith is grateful for the linguistic and formal procedures through which she and her companions are "beginning to acquire substance" as they learn each other's names, for she is wary of others' good intentions which have so recently been deployed against her own unformed and ambivalent romantic wishes (37). Mrs. Pusey, whose daughter Jennifer constantly attends her mother and has a "curiously insistent physical presence" (37) the implications of which will become apparent later, is what Edith regards as the representative of "an alien species" (38). It is this foreign femininity, so different from Edith's own, that attracts:

For in this charming woman, so entirely estimable in her happy desire to capture hearts, so completely preoccupied with the femininity which had always provided her with life's chief delights, Edith perceived avidity, grossness, ardour. It was her perception of this will to repletion and to triumph that had occasioned her mild feeling of faintness when she watched Mrs. Pusey and Jennifer eating their dinner. She had also perceived a difference of appetite, one that seemed to carry an implicit threat to her own. Yet she dismissed this as ridicu-

lous (dismissed it also as potentially too painful to contemplate) as she sat drinking coffee in the agreeable company of Jennifer and Mrs. Pusey and basking in the high summer of their self-esteem, which in its turn shed a kindly light on all those within its orbit. (39)

The question of appetite, like that of names, is another Brookner constant, where it carries a depth of conflictual meanings. As David Galef notes, "the connection between food and love is more poignant for women who have traditionally begun by eating but have grown up taught to serve others,"¹² a pattern that repeats itself in the intimate relationships of Brookner's female protagonists.

As in Edith's case, Ruth Weiss, Kitty Maule in Brookner's second novel *Providence* and Claire Pitt in the later *Undue Influence* all enjoy food only when prepared for or in the company of men. But all three, like Edith, also channel or deflect their unplumbed longing for personal happiness into scholarly, book-related pursuits, staging an expression of the unconscious conflict between an appetite for words and their rewards and an appetite for food, sex, and other fleshly pleasures. As a fiction writer, Edith, like Ruth and Kitty who are both academics, demonstrates the difficult-to-articulate but significant problem women face, where the primal pleasures of eating, usually operative between infant and mother, must yield to their ambiguous replacement, the pleasures of words that are at once expressive, rewarding, and sustaining, but also distancing. If, as Julia Kristeva claims, feminine subjects must kill off maternal identification in order to smoothly inhabit language instead as "second nature,"¹³ in a version of primal repression, then women themselves, their own bodies indexed to the foregone world of maternal pleasure, may be unable to resolve the linguistic versus fleshly pleasure conundrum.

Because Edith is a writer, it is significant that it is her own "perception of th[e] will to repletion and to triumph" in the Pusey women that occasions in her a "mild feeling of faintness" when she

¹² "You Aren't What You Eat: Anita Brookner's Dilemma," *Journal of Popular Culture* 28.3 (Winter 1994): 1.

¹³ *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 53.

sees them eating (39). This indicates that the feeling is simultaneously immediate, that is, Edith's own, and subject to the observational distancing of her habitual writerly procedures. But the "implicit threat" the women's appetite seems to carry to Edith's own desires, too painful to contemplate, is also mixed, because it is inseparable from her genuine desire to share in their company. By this is signalled, early in the book, Edith's own complex orientation within the tropes—literary, affective, nutritional and sartorial—of the work in progress Freud was not the first to identify as the unquantifiable character of femininity.

Iris Pusey's physical presence is conveyed as being inseparable from its effect on Edith's own, to the reader, as yet unknown amorous (and nutritional) inclinations. In this respect—and I think there is a strong case to be made for this in Brookner's entire literary output—eating, like feminine sexuality and desire, is only presented in apparently easy-answer terms in order to emphasize its ultimate function as peculiarly overdetermined question. What women's being fed and then taught to nurture means for others or for their perceived lack of satisfaction is one thing, but what it means for them is an extremely complex navigation between denial, desire, generosity and the felt benefits of repeatable behaviours which, no matter how neurotic, serve to anchor the desire for sustenance within an affectively recognizable zone. This affective recognition operates as a continuing absence of conscious satisfaction, of pleasure, which at the same time delivers unconscious satisfaction of a reassuringly reliable kind: the pleasures of repeated dissatisfaction, one might say.¹⁴

We know already that Edith does not want to reflect on the circumstances that have brought her to this underpopulated hotel at the dying end of the tourist season. However, we do not yet know that Edith is being punished for crimes against the institution of marriage and its reserve arm or attenuated army: undistinguished but potentially life sapping masculinity. The latter is conveyed with horrible acuity through Edith's taking swift and resolute flight at the church steps upon suddenly glimpsing "in a flash, but for all time, the totality of [her would-be husband Geoffrey's] mouse-like seamliness" (129). On Edith's early observation of the Pusey women,

¹⁴ Ellie Ragland, *Essays on the Pleasures of Death from Freud to Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 88–96.

the word “perception” repeats, following “perceived” (“Edith perceived avidity”) in the previous sentence, subtly remarking the simultaneous interest and regathered need for caution of Edith’s relation to these alien women (39). Perception, of course, is normally conceived visually in relation to rational induction. Edith’s already doubled perception, however—and we should remember that Edith doubles repeatedly back on the same romantic story for a living, thus unconsciously revisiting her own uncertain passions—brings to mind Freud’s point about negation, whose own doubled function he relates to the act of pleasurable and unpleasurable eating.

In his 1925 essay “Negation,” Freud, musing on the complex meanings of denial in analysis, floats the idea that negations have a border preserving, as opposed to a border destructive, function, and that this minimal act of preservation enables people to accept, in a provisional form, some material that, while unwelcome, “is indispensable to ... proper functioning.”¹⁵ Thus when a patient says: “You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s *not* my mother,” the psychoanalyst emends this to “So it *is* his mother,” because it is the subject matter of the association that is important: “It is as though the patient had said: ‘It’s true that my mother came into my mind as I thought of this person, but I don’t feel inclined to let the association count’” (667). Negation enables border control, then, without the more thoroughgoing effort of complete repression. The judgements involved in negation are a means of deciding which attributes belong to people or things as well as which mental representations have existence in reality. In both cases, as Freud puts it, and “expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral—instinctual impulses, the judgement is: ‘I should like to eat this,’ or ‘I should like to spit it out’; and, put more generally: ‘I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out’” (668).

Brookner’s novels are full of these kinds of dynamic double negatives, which space prevents me following up here. Writing on the same essay of Freud’s in her landmark piece “Negativity in the Work of Melanie Klein,” however, Jacqueline Rose, in an attempt to rehabilitate the sometimes maligned-for-being-too-literal-minded theorizing of Klein, points out that Klein’s bleak take on Freud’s negation equals that of Lacan:

¹⁵ *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995) 668.

Negation, for Lacan, is death in the structure, or what he calls the 'real,' which, for symbolization to be possible, has to subsist outside its domain. Negation shows the subject, and its world, arising in an act of demolition. For the subject to enter into the possibilities of language and judgement, something has to be discarded, something falls away.¹⁶

Negation, claimed by Lacan as the structural *entrée* into language, the price we pay for its secondary rewards, marks the end of unity between mother and child. Yet it also ushers in the richness of what is now perceived, not just as loss of primal pleasure but—via the entire paradoxical mythos of home it charges, from doomed love to the immigrant's alienation passing as nostalgia ('you can't go home again')—as loss that doubles the desirability of what it takes away.

The maternal home, now irrevocably lost with the advent of the compensations brought by language, is replaced by the subject's own act of internalized negation.¹⁷ Unlike animals, the apprentice human subject gives up the possibility of a life of pure, unmediated pleasure in order to have the much more difficult-to-count-on possibility of pleasures that are socially meaningful, that is, pleasures that may be shared. This first taking in of absence and making it something else—namely a working, living and, at first, temporary answer to such questions as 'why am I here?' and 'what do they (parents, teachers, and later, lovers) want from me?'—is then forgotten as the subject manages to construe a self around it. As when we read, we take in an absence—the promise of the story, its 'not yet told' that we want to be part of—and by means of the book which offers us sufficient shelter, give it a home, in a version of how children learn by doing. And in learning to read, we forget the working absence, as delightfully—and ideally, for

¹⁶ *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 155.

¹⁷ Lucie Cantin, "The Trauma of Language," in Willy Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin, *After Lacan: Clinical Practice and the Subject of the Unconscious*, ed. Robert Hughes and Kareen Ror Malone (New York: SUNY Press, 2002) 40.

the childlike reader of any age—there are no longer any barriers. We are invisibly within the story, whether it is the story in the book or the story of our family and their own unknown story, that of history.

Freud called primal repression the first time in which maternal absence is doubled by the subject to become the costly but rewarding task of finding by building a home—the self—in language, although the emphasis on language as enabling obstacle is Lacan's. For Freud also, though, our not yet fully developed story is repressed in its absence (a double negative, again), and this lively absence goes underground to labour in the real, energetic sense. And so this internalized 'nothing,' this sacrifice in the flesh, never lies down quietly or simply goes away.¹⁸ It is potentially deadly because it taps into the formless flipside of lost primal pleasure that enables, in relief, the drama of life and language to unfold. This formless region marks the subject's eventual return to the land of the not-yet, the before-language, the world as it was before and as it will survive her, the inadmissible fact of her own death.

Orientation within the repeatable pleasure/unpleasure of reliable loss, orchestrated suffering or a cherished, remembered pain thus speaks the truth that shadows human pleasure as a possible social good.¹⁹ Our deepest pleasures are liable, not only to be conversing with our deepest uncertainties and pains, but to open onto the field where repeated, potentially numbing, satisfaction compensates for the inability to even register another's real enjoyment. Each person's own enjoyable consistency of suffering forms itself around experiences of loss or absence that are themselves more than sufficiently consuming. If a pleasure did not fail to satisfy completely, there would be no need to revisit it, and, indeed, in cases of death by romantic pact or chemical overdose, complete, annihilating satisfaction is effected. But the loss or absence we seek to make good with repeated pleasures leading to affective consistency or fleshly satisfaction is not formless but structurally and humanly quite particular. It is the instance of finding ourselves,

¹⁸ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher, 25.2–5; Richard Boothby, "Figurations of the *Objet a*," *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Routledge, 2001) 2:160–64.

¹⁹ Ragland, *Pleasures of Death* 84–114.

exiled from the realm of instinctual satisfaction that marks the animal domain, in a world where pleasures cannot be relied upon to appear when we desire or need them—indeed, where our own desires and needs cannot be expected to arise where we would like to feel them. In response, each person gathers affective forces around this originary, unresolvable unknowing.²⁰

The bleak story of Claire Pitt in Brookner's more recent novel *Undue Influence* provides a version of this dynamic. Claire extends her work on the nature writings of the dead father of the two maiden sisters in whose antiquarian (and antiquated) book shop she happily works, with no prospects and little pay, for as long as possible. But the reader never learns why it is that she, an intelligent, educated woman, with the money, following her parents' death, to do as she pleases, is crippled by inadequacy and ennui. A palpable absence of meaning that is never given form but the more obscurely threatens must be bought off, with painfully intricate denials and a manipulative affair with an inadequate man, day by day. This is Claire's own intimate negation, which she goes to considerable, seemingly senseless limits to protect.

Discovering in the final page of the ancient sisters' father's final notebook evidence of an unhappy, adulterous affair, Claire seals the secret back under the book flap to protect their memory of him, but she seals her own fate thereby as well. At the novel's end she goes away to an unforeseen destination only in order to advance her chances at reliving lost beginnings on her return: going penitently back to the shop, now under new, uncaring ownership, and maintaining the laboured distractions of her hopeless, doomed affair. Thus a secret to do with books, language and a dead man's once living, burning flesh, whose absence in the journals only increases its importance, a secret carried by St. John Collier to his grave, serves to mask and carry from Claire, but never far enough, her own inexpressible but also unincorporable longings.

Claire is a typical Brookner case in which an educated woman, full of inarticulate desire, uses scholarly pleasures which superficially relate to men in order to investigate the meanings of femininity. But this investigation cannot be allowed to proceed too far. It is Claire's discovery that this man is rendered wordless, unable to go

²⁰ Judith Feher Gurewich, "The New Moebius Strip: Biology Starts in the Other," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 14 (Winter/Spring 2002): 147–54.

on writing, by the strain of his affair that causes her to seal his secret up, and while this intention masquerades as concern for the sisters' happiness it is in fact inseparable from Claire's own simultaneous need and inability to rewrite, like Ruth and Kitty, her own familial beginnings:

I stuck the page down again, and put the notebook at the bottom of the pile of others. In due course I would hand them back to Muriel and tell her that I had not found any new material in them. It was essential to save Muriel's belief in her father. Besides, I wanted to spare her unhappiness. The name would have haunted her, leading to futile speculation of an unwelcome kind. I wanted this family to remain as it always had been: spartan, upright, unquestioning. I felt far better equipped to deal with dubious behaviour than Muriel Collier. She was a protected species, whereas I was out in the world. Even I distrusted the world; that was why the Colliers had such a timeless appeal. Even if I was wrong in failing to give them credit for much intelligence I also knew that they were rare spirits, unique in my experience. I tested the page: stuck fast. I would suggest that the notebooks be kept in the safe. That way nobody would ever read them and capture their broken message.²¹

And yet we are not only looking at feminine masochism here (as in by far the greater number of Brookner's novels), but at something more interesting and problematic. The fact that that which is felt to threaten can also attract, and that habits—of eating, of envy, of perception—can bind and blind a person to the crippling implications of repeated enjoyments, does not preclude the possibility that to repeatedly frame a threatening pleasure, as Edith does for instance, by literary means, is also to sustain a relationship with desire as incompleteness, as a story not yet able to be read or written. The fact that many of Brookner's novels are concerned with the question of beginnings—whether that of a 'foreign' heritage, or

²¹ *Undue Influence* (1999; London: Penguin, 2000) 97.

that of a woman (like Ruth and Kitty) trying to rewrite her familial origins and make a new start either independently in career terms or romantically with a man—emphasizes the conflict between body as flesh and the mediatory properties of language that initiates the child as subject into the communicative world.

For many of Brookner's women, the pleasures of reading and writing are clearly the most reliable and enjoyable ones around, but the characters are unable to acknowledge that it is the very vexing of readerly and writerly pleasures by amorous desires perceived to be in opposition to them that gives the bookish pleasures their peculiar charge. Or, to put it slightly differently, that with regard to these two kinds of unreachable satisfaction—unreachable in conscious terms at least—each works as a brake upon the other. The repetition of suffering, in which bookish pleasures threaten amorous ones, which balance of interests precludes complete satisfaction by either, thus provides them a familiar place within femininity, that constituted by unhappy, possibly deathly, repetition. This enables the women to remain in the place of their familial, and familiar, alienation, which in some sense they regard as a duty to their parents, while also sustaining their readerly conflict or love for the unknown. While this means they never exhaust the possibilities of either story, they never have to be held responsible for their choices either. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this bind demonstrates the difficulty of invoking pleasure, which operates through such conflictual but ultimately static repetitions, as a possible social good.

The doubling or staging of the reading and writing component within the books does not end there, however, because it is symptomatic. That is, it is the form by means of which the body—its appetites and its anxieties, which for these women are locked into a stand-off the stasis of which is maintained by frustrated, conflictual energy—attempts to articulate its story, to break through the narrative frame. In the case of Edith, Claire, Ruth, and Kitty, there is a clear attempt, enacted through the labours of the love of learning that fuels scholarship, to mark out a possible region for the expression of an absence, the absence that fuels desire as an ongoing interest in a future love affair or future reading. This absence is not, and cannot be, quantified, because it is also the absence in which women's own relation to the world brought home by language consists. As feminine subjects, women substitute for

the maternal home the enriching and sustaining world of language, as does everyone who makes it through to the forfeits and attainments of the social realm. But women also symbolize—and not only for men, by any means—the very lostness of that maternal home that is made poignant, or curiously redoubled, by its exchange for language.

This means that, in addition to a feminine subject's human lostness, having to work to orient one's own desire—constitutively a lack, a productive absence—towards the lane of other people's by means of the already existing laws or conventions of language, there is an added complication. When it is claimed that women find their true identity in love, it is usually forgotten that both love and femininity are conditions dynamized by absence, love because it consists in an exchange of lacks or a performative declaration of risk and unknowing, and femininity because of its relation of likeness to the lost maternal realm. Thus, in order to give expression to or orient oneself within the field of this double absence, a feminine subject will require a further mediatory term.²²

Given this situation, it is significant that the relation between the female protagonists and their readerly and/or writerly concerns in Brookner's fictions bypasses that of their relations to men, which means that it continues to function as a question, especially for her (bookish) female readers.²³ There is clearly a connection between these women's inability to find satisfaction in their love affairs and their attachment to the particular pleasures made available by the love of learning, but the connection is not apparent to the women nor is it spelled out for the reader. There is evidence, however, that this lack of connection—or wealth of possibilities for unconscious connection, including conflicts—is registered by Brookner's readers. The registration takes a variety of forms but the most common is a response of mixed pleasure and unpleasure, or "fascination and chagrin," as Ann Fisher-Wirth puts it, shading at the extreme end into outright approbation.²⁴

²² Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," trans. Séan Hand, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 165–77.

²³ See Helga Kurz, "The Impossibility of Female Friendship: A Study of Anita Brookner's Female Characters," *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 15.1 (1990): 13–25.

²⁴ "Hunger Art: The Novels of Anita Brookner," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 41.1 (Spring 1995): 1–15; Daphne Watson, *Their Own Worst Enemies: Women Writers*

Daphne Watson, for instance, notes the success of Brookner's "formula" with the phrase, "every year another discourse upon vulnerability comes out," and approvingly cites Jan Dalley, whose review of *Fraud* admits that "the desire to kick Anita Brookner's heroines is always strong, and Anna Durrant, the latest in the long line of Brookner's tight-lipped, clean-fingered women, is no exception."²⁵ "Yet still there is the review; there is the book on the bestseller lists and stands," as Watson notes, despite the fact that "reading Brookner one might think that the whole Feminist movement had never occurred" (42). Watson also takes Brookner to task for a lapse in creativity, claiming that while "in her early and arguably wittier novels ... [she] give[s] her reader a sense of 'invention' ... in her later and certainly most recent novels, she has come to offer us 'conventions'" (43).

But there is another way to read this. From a psychoanalytic point of view, or even from the point of view of Brookner herself, as the marginal child of exiled Jewish parents, the overplaying of the same narrative pattern in book after book, as time goes on less disguised and more clearly apparent as convention, emphasizes the secondary gain women and other exiles may require, and reach, through the (conventional) repetition of dissatisfaction (a gain, incidentally, evident in Watson's own book chapter on Brookner and Pym, where it manifests as an unappealing and self-righteous tone that masks some of its own key assumptions).²⁶ Conventional repetition has the further effect of delivering a surplus of readerly affect as frustration, to which I can certainly attest. In my experience this frustration—manifesting, if not in the desire to kick

of *Women's Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1995) 37–44; Stephen Harvey, "Look at Me," Review of *Look at Me*, *Village Voice* 5 July 1983: 22; Adam Mars-Jones, "Women Beware Women," Review of *Hotel du Lac*, *New York Times Book Review* 31 Jan. 1985.

²⁵ Review of *Fraud*, *Independent on Sunday* 23 Aug. 1992, cited in Watson, *Their Own Worst Enemies* 42.

²⁶ I am not sure why, for instance, Watson thinks it is a slight on Brookner to compare her books with those of the equally popular Mary Stewart and Sally Beauman. If this is a high art versus low art kind of inference, perhaps the author should come clean and declare it (42). On the Jewishness of Brookner's narratives, see Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, "Compromise and Cultural Identity: British and American Perspectives in Anita Brookner's *Providence* and Cynthia Ozick's 'Virility,'" *English Studies* 78.5 (1997): 459–71; and Louise Sylvester, "Troping the Other: Anita Brookner's Jews," *English* 50 (Spring 2001): 47–58.

Brookner's heroines, then at least to have them engage for fewer pages in apparently unnecessary Angst—is just sufficiently assuaged by Brookner's genuine delight and skill in portraying conventionally feminine endeavours—houses, clothes, meals, social occasions, social nuance and so on.

These are portrayed as richly variegated and meaningfully dynamic fields whose implications for subjectivity, and not only for feminine subjectivity, to add a twist of my own partly prefigured by Alison Light, are far from being exhausted yet.²⁷ Who is to say that this finely balanced celebration of quiet, conventionally feminine employments which are their own fictional reward—reading about rooms inside houses inside a book one is reading inside a room, and so on, to echo Manguel—equalled by a commitment to unhappy love, the romantic's quest, does not serve a function like that in detective novels, where the life/death highwire is artfully, thrillingly walked? The latter allow us to flirt, enjoyably, with the threat of criminal violence, yet still, because of their containment by the physical fact of the book indexed to the closure of law and order, manage to contain it. Femininity and criminality, however, have equally been regarded as a threat to social functioning in a variety of cultures at different times.²⁸

I am usually given just enough of the above sort of uncomplicated attention, in Brookner's novels, to the feminine things that matter in the happily quotidian sense, to keep me (mostly) happily reading her. And I think it is because her novels work the fascinatingly narrow line between the entrapments and freedoms offered by convention, a conundrum particularly charged for the second generation Jewish latecomer, to borrow the title of one her own books,²⁹ that they continue to ignite and sustain this interest. That their largely feminine persuasion with its literary bent is yet at odds with their conventionality, with what can be told about them in reviews and criticism, is most interesting of all, and it is this excessive element that has nowhere to go in the fictions—that exceeds

²⁷ *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 219.

²⁸ Joan Copjec, "m/f, or Not Reconciled," *The Woman in Question: m/f*, ed. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) 10–18; Rose, *Why War?* 41–86; and my "Post-traumatic Woundings: Sexual Anxiety in Patricia Cornwell's Fiction," *New Formations* 43 (Spring 2001): 130–47.

²⁹ *Latecomers* (1988; London: Grafton, 1989).

both the feminine-coded immersion in loving and the masculine-coded immersion in learning—that seems to be registered, ambivalently, by Brookner's female readers.³⁰

Thus the phenomenon Watson helpfully identifies, whereby “still there is the review; there is the book on the bestseller lists and stands” for no obvious or identifiable reason (or, to ring a change on this querulous line of questioning, still there is the feminist critic who devotes a half-chapter to denouncing the novels, but cannot quite let them go, or go without such approbation), suggests that we still lack a form for the rich variety and contradiction of a woman's romantic longings. Certainly we lack a form that would give sorrow and alienation, and the validation of these via the traditions of lovelorn *literature*, whose very heartbeat is contradiction, their properly generative, as opposed to their annihilating, feminine place. If Brookner's novels were with hindsight seen to have brought this significant, lively absence to our attention, then their exasperating but still enjoyable fictions might turn out to have had a role to play *in* their very conventionality and repetition.

“Novelists,” as Anne Carson claims, referring to the ancient Greek tradition to make links with contemporary times, expand love's deeply self-divided and sustaining moments

into full-scale soliloquies of the soul, so that a character may debate his erotic dilemma with himself, usually at length and to no purpose. But emotional schism is not the exclusive property of heroes and heroines in novels. All who observe their fortunes, within and without the text, are programmed to respond in this way.³¹

If Brookner, as an English latecomer, emphasizes the programming at the expense of the soul's soliloquy, it is highly possible, in my

³⁰ It might also be the case that Brookner's deeply divided treatment of women's amorous ambitions is true to life, and that the test of its veracity is its summoning mixed reactions in her women readers. See Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998): 281–88; and “Love, a Queer Feeling,” *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001) 432–51.

³¹ *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986; Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998) 83.

view, that what her ambivalent readers register is a truth about erotic dilemmas that, although it outwardly pertains to feminine restriction, yet exceeds gendered configuring. This truth would be that love or erotic interest is sustained, rather than threatened, by programming, because in the inevitable exceeding of programming that love affords and on which it thrives lovers may circle back to their own excessive beginnings. There, when they did not know their names as yet nor the familial stories those names would stitch them into—a historical excess, no less, that gets called family, a tale always partly pre-written—they did know, daily, their need to guess aright the light in the eyes of another, whether promising happiness, harm or other, yet to be discovered possibilities.