

Literary Philosophy and the Use of Uselessness

Scott A Jarvie and Addyson Frattura

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Article abstract

We build this work from the memory of the time we stumbled into tulips at city hall. As guard sirens fled off into the night, we wondered, “Maybe we can borrow some.” We ripped handfuls from the ground and ran. “Don’t worry,” we said, “they are too busy to catch us stealing tulips.” Likewise, we get away with this useless project because others are busy doing useful work: exigent, coherent, important work. We support much of that busyness, and at the same time wonder what is lost with all that attention towards usefulness. What we offer here, through a hybrid of reflective, poetic, essayistic and scholarly forms, may be an attempted escape from the obligations of scholarship. It may be indulgent. It may tell the reader nothing, or only what the reader already knows. Yet it is oriented towards an enduring promise. This is the promise of a literary experience, understood as a kind of resonance, ineffable primarily, but nevertheless one that matters. Such a promise is found in the power and possibility of story, through poetic lines that must be broken and conceptual tethers left incommensurable. We enter this space of breaking and unfurling through an inquiry into use.

The question of use and uselessness is one way of holding human contradictions in both hands. By this we mean that we make and leave space for literary and philosophical inquiries considered useless—in that they do not resolve anything—but nevertheless matterful. We suggest that readers meander these curated pages as they \ meander through an art exhibition or a museum. Within a literary exhibition one can wander through pages, spaces, and ideas. Pause. Dwell. Think. We curate a literary home beyond the demands of making something of use and we invite the reader to sit with us. As with an exhibition, possibility cannot be controlled for and so we exist in potentiality acknowledging both its positive and negative potential. Through our use, misuse, and abuse of literature and philosophy, we make ourselves a home in a possibility that can only be offered, not demanded. We manifest this literary home through fragments of philosophy evoked through a series of microfictions.

As scholars, learners, teachers, and writers we are often asked to defend what our writing does. And it is implicitly suggested that knowledge creation is the result. What is the use of a work that cannot promise new knowledge? Literary knowledge may only be one gorgeous possible ordering. It is a practice which produces a kind of knowledge which is no knowledge, which is useless. If we must answer what it is that our writing does we suppose that—if anything—it offers up fictions for philosophizing. We explore a home for this work in scholarly contexts which too often find it useless, which is to say we position uselessness as a concept of value for our work as scholars, writers, and teachers. In the end we name no new uses but fiction; we steal tulips.





LITERARY PHILOSOPHY AND THE USE OF USELESSNESS

Scott Jarvie

San Jose State University

scott.jarvie@sjsu.edu

Addyson Frattura

University of British Columbia

fratturakamp@gmail.com

Scott Jarvie is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at San Jose State University. His most recent research focuses on the experiences of teachers, particularly with literature and poetry, and how literary perspectives inform their work.

Addyson Frattura is a PhD student situated within philosophy of education in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Addyson's scholarship focuses on the phenomenon of school expulsion and school discipline through the intellectual histories and literary traditions of Existentialism and Abolitionism with a particular commitment to the questions of human freedom and human suffering.

Abstract: We build this work from the memory of the time we stumbled into tulips at city hall. As guard sirens fled off into the night, we wondered, "Maybe we can borrow some." We ripped handfuls from the ground and ran. "Don't worry," we said, "they are too busy to catch us stealing tulips." Likewise, we get away with this useless project because others are busy doing *useful* work: exigent, coherent, important work. We support much

of that busyness, and at the same time wonder what is lost with all that attention towards usefulness. What we offer here, through a hybrid of reflective, poetic, essayistic and scholarly forms, may be an attempted escape from the obligations of scholarship. It may be indulgent. It may tell the reader nothing, or only what the reader already knows. Yet it is oriented towards an enduring promise. This is the promise of a literary experience, understood as a kind of resonance, ineffable primarily, but nevertheless one that matters. Such a promise is found in the power and possibility of story, through poetic lines that must be broken and conceptual tethers left incommensurable. We enter this space of breaking and unfurling through an inquiry into use.

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Keywords: literary philosophy; aesthetic education; use; fiction; poetry

Part One: Front Matter

I. Prologue

1.1 *Poeming*

They are too busy to catch us stealing tulips.

1.2 *A Non-troduction*

“Don’t say the thing you always say.” Okay, I will say something else.¹ I won’t use old words in the same way. They are tired and faded from being left too long in the sun. They are, at times, vacuous, employed without thought. But if I am not to say the things I always say, am I to introduce myself anew? Each time I have already breathed more breaths than before. By way of introduction, I can’t provide an introduction. Or maybe I refuse. It is not that I believe myself too phenomenal for words. It is that I do not trust the prescription of an introduction. It feels too conclusive, in that it leads one to a supposed end.

I am averse to conclusions. I want to render a conclusion incomplete, questions unanswered, thought unresolved, a human undone. I want to go unperformed. I want to retain the always-possibility for more.² To say the things I always say might assume that I know what it is I *mean* to say, that each time the sentiments linger the same, that the words have the same imbalanced taste, that I do not continually fail the words themselves. I do love words however. My favorites are “precarious” and “ambiguous”; they teeter on the perimeter of their unrefined edges. So let me render what I can in another literary form, one less indulged by micro-dosing the existential.

A bright darkness hovers, terrifying and tender. As the sirens pull further into the night, I look to you: “Maybe we can just borrow some.” The breath barely escapes my mouth, as you shout the quietest shout I have ever heard: “Now!” We stumble and stagger into the tulips of city hall. I crouch, you trip, then we tumble. For a moment, everything is still. We are close enough to witness the perspectives of the tulips, looking up into an unending vastness. The call of the sirens returns. We rip handfuls from the ground and run. “Don’t worry,” you remind me, “they are too busy to catch us stealing tulips.”

Where do we begin? Anywhere. In literature? Of course. A series of little nothings.³ Follow however you please. It blossoms. As do you.

1.3. An Introduction: How to Read

This paper attends to the use(lessness) of literary philosophy. It consists of hybrid reflective, poetic, essayistic and scholarly forms, ones we understand as microfictions which engage questions around literary philosophy towards an understanding of the work and its possibilities. Through this form we seek to create a scholarly and literary home beyond notions of *use* and *usefulness*, working towards the creation of something without practical use but rather something with matter. For this reason we have not organized the piece conventionally. Instead, we group the microfictions under three larger sections: *Front*, *Middle*, and *End Matter*. Within *Middle Matter*, we further divide the writing into two subsections: *Questioning* and *Doing*, which inquire into some possibilities of literary philosophy as an abstraction and perform it as a process, respectively. This arrangement is a deliberate attempt on our part to represent scholarship differently, imaginatively, in keeping with the lines of argument within the piece. In doing so there is an apparent lingering worry, some discontent that may result from the way we choose to trouble scholarly *use*. This is exactly the space in which we hope readers will dwell, if only for a moment.

Use may be many things. It may be the function of an object or the utility of a service or the practicality of a pair of work boots. In *What's the Use?*, Sara Ahmed follows the word, tracing the path of “use” across history and into contemporary discursive life.⁴ Ahmed’s study considers varied resonances of the term, from its commonplace association with purpose—the “point” of a thing—to the tendency to affiliate usefulness with “what is plodding, rational, and charmless”, to instrumentality, to the affection engendered by the usefulness of instruments, to the much-philosophized concept of utility.⁵ “What has been striking to me,” Ahmed writes, articulating the impetus for our project here, “is just how central use has been to many scholarly traditions, that is, how often use has been given the status of an organizing concept.”⁶ Across these conceptual sojourns, the book’s titular question reveals a feminist project:

“What’s the use?” operates as a rhetorical question, one that points to the pointlessness of doing something...[that] can point not only to *what*, that which is now deemed pointless, but also to *who*, those who had assumed something had a point.⁷

Drawing on Virginia Woolf’s return to the question through the reflections of protagonists throughout her oeuvre, Ahmed frames this ask as an opening into living differently, seeking space for women, trans, and gender non-conforming folks beyond the instrumental demands of cis-men or the larger normative structures in which we all attempt to make lives. As such, following “use” and testing its associations also constitutes a queer project intended “to throw life up as a question.”⁸

Here we throw up scholarly *use* as a question. We take up the concept as something not yet settled, some thing with/in which we conceptually play. Beyond wordplay we conceptually take up two senses of use. The first is the *use of* uselessness. The second is *uselessness* itself. The first sense is in reference to utilitarianism and the ethical utility of that which is good for the greatest number of people. In other words, if something is good for the majority then it is good for all. In the second sense, we turn the utilitarian function of use against itself. It will be obvious that we are more inclined to defend uselessness against utility. To say something is “useless” may not be the condemnation it seems. The uselessness we seek is not the utilitarian function but rather the mattering of something beyond “utilitarian ends” that are of “exclusively economic interest.”⁹ The use of uselessness is perhaps best rendered as an echoing of Simone de Beauvoir’s warning that “oppression tries to defend itself by its utility.”¹⁰

And so, we move away from the functional utilitarian goal of use and towards the promise of a literary experience perhaps understood as a kind of resonance, ineffable primarily, but one that nevertheless matters. Put differently, we understand use as something that is not wholly synonymous with value and function. Instead we engage with the making of a manuscript that may appear at times useless as a functional academic manuscript. This is our point. The point is less about the focused movement towards a point than it is about the iconoclastic exploding of the point itself. In other words, we are interested in literary destruction that is meant to confuse senses of use and disrupt patterns of comfortable reading. Although it is our hope that within this discomfort the reader might settle into the beauty of the contradiction of a useless use. And so, readers, please take up the following pages knowing they are created to destroy the idea of use. But remember they are also meant to imagine possibilities of a uselessness that nevertheless matters. Perhaps as you read you carry with you the metaphysical question, “Why is there something here instead of nothing?”, or the existential question, “What is the meaning of being?”, or the political question, “To whom or to what am I responsible?”, or the literary question, “What is beauty if it is not of use?” It is our hope that you engage with this work as an important matter of play, as there may be no point. Rather than asking *What’s the point?*, we suggest you ask *What is this experience like?* and *Where do I go when I read?* What follows is at least an offering of poetic fragments of no use.

Part Two: Microfictions

II. Questioning

2.1 Literature as a Possibility

I don't know about reading but I can listen to songs. The thing about music is that we have no defense against it. I learned this in a literature course, the instructor speaking of early Gospel standards crackling on the radio and the drunk Faulkner but I heard him. A possibility. Song to song, stirring text within text.

2.2 Archive

Literature: Middle English (*knowledge of books*), via French from Latin: *writing formed with letters*. Alternatively in the original English: *book learning*.¹¹

Book, as in the proto-Germanic *buch*, or *buche*, meaning *Beech*: referring to beechwood tablets on which runes were inscribed; but the word may refer to the tree itself (people still carve initials in them). Sometimes a history is more poetic than we can ever be.¹²

Learning, you might not know, carries within it a base sense of “to follow or find the track,” from the root “*lois-*”, meaning “*furrow, track*.” It is related to German “*gleis*” (“*track*,”) and Old English “*læst*” (“*sole of the foot*”).¹³

Education: to bring out, as in a conjuring, or lead forth, a party dispatched to parts unknown.

Knowledge: 2 parts. The first, from Old English *cnawan*, to perceive a thing to be identical with another. But *the second element is obscure, perhaps from Scandinavian and cognate with -lock ‘action, process,’ found in wedlock*.¹⁴

Philosophy: *body of knowledge*, circa 1300.¹⁵ Originally and famously: *love of wisdom*. Somewhere along the way the love was lost but the word remains, a bad or perhaps only pragmatic marriage.

2.3 The Misuses of Literary Philosophy

A literary philosophy may be an escape from the obligations of philosophy. No more rigorous analysis, no propositions. Rather: obfuscation, obscurantism, indulgence.

Literary philosophy may be indulgent. Which is to say: it may be too much the author's work, colored with the particularities of the person, subjectively contaminated. It may be a shirking of philosophical responsibility. No homage, no references, no evidence. Little attendance to method. It may be a smirk. Dan Beachy-Quick writes: *poetry counters clarity with drunkenness*.¹⁶ It may be drunk.

These make for poor uses, they say.

2.4 An Instrument

The problem as many note is one of instrumentalism: literature is no dumb tool and it has a will of its own if not in an animist sense. I mean it has no visible stopping point up ahead. Or perhaps it is only time without destination and without aim or end.¹⁷ Masschelein speaks of destining institutions but philosophy itself destines. As I understand it literature resists its own destining and so understanding philosophy as literary may be a contradiction.

If it is, it is a necessary one. Fitzgerald framed his project as a matter of holding *two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time*, philosophical or otherwise.¹⁸ Whitman famously valorized contradiction, the poet expanding his self to encompass worlds of logic and illogic alike.¹⁹ The whole point, writes Campbell (following Aristotle), of literary work is *to perceive resemblances even between things that are far apart*.²⁰ In that it's all metaphor, which is to say, poetry: *Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten*.²¹

2.5 The Abuses of Literary Philosophy

Literary philosophy may be many methods -- which is to say no method. A compromised fate worse than either literature or philosophy. It may have no answer for why it couldn't pick one or the other. Cake, had and eaten. It can induce groans. It can tell us nothing. It can tell us what we already know. It can confirm nothing, inspire nothing, provoke nothing, generate or generalize nothing. *Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is*.²² It may be a series of little nothings.

It may be quiet, for everything it says.

Or it may be powerful, seductive, useful but unable to articulate its uses, objectives, values, virtues. It may go willingly into the wrong hands and become an instrument for the most devious purposes.

It may be loud in all the wrong ways.

2.6 We're All Supposed to Try²³

I know the thing now is to turn back towards matter and a smarter and more ethical empiricism, but that elides the truth about it: every paragraph a conjuring, every word.

2.7 Imaginings

What if we had a literary²⁴ exhibition? One could meander through pages and spaces. To pause. To dwell. To think. A literary curation, a curated education meant to be undone. Let us think education curatorially.²⁵ To think curatorially about education suggests cultivating and bringing together things, ideas, people, content, and questions, as a pedagogical exhibition of sorts. The pedagogical exhibitor, like the curated arts-based exhibitor, offers a similar potentiality of producing, imagining, and authoring other worlds. Much like an exhibition, that which is created or experienced in education cannot be controlled. This is not to say that one ought not to attend a pedagogical exhibition without great care. No, this is to say that the possibilities cannot be controlled for and so we exist in potentiality. To nurture, to offer. The pedagogical, the curatorial. Always in potential, you and I. Remember for all that blooms in possibility dies there too. Misuse and abuse make home in possibility, as do imaginings.

2.8 ¿Me Entiendes?

If philosophy doesn't entail the production of knowledge in a strict etymological sense, it does in practice. What kind of knowledge does literature produce? While it may be that *language gestures incessantly beyond itself, hazarding claims about the way things are*, writes Felski, it is also true, following De Man, that *literature is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression*.²⁶ That is, fiction makes no bones about its status as fiction. Whatever knowledge we take from it requires mediation, masked and so at least immediately inaccessible, needing translation.

I think about this while reading McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*. The philosophical bent of the writing made me feel, when I first encountered it as a teenager, the resonance of wisdom. I heard in Alfonsa, for example, ruined matriarch and philosopher-queen, the deep currents of insight, as when she asserts, *I will tell you how Mexico was. How it was and how it will be again*.²⁷ I felt some truth, the unmistakable sound of conviction convincing me. Now rereading the second volume, I am surprised at how similar it is to the first. I've been told before, by specialist professors who devoted lives to the rigorous study of a few authors, Beckett or James or Woolf or Morrison, that writers only have so many tricks. Faulkner has his toolbox, his apple trees and ruined families and riders approaching in the night, and once you've read enough you can see the combinations,

one wisened scholar told me. And maybe that's the truth. If it is it isn't any knowledge I can much decode. You read enough and you hear the way he describes *the* wayward brother, Boyd, angel-white hair encircling his face halo-like, and it echoes resoundingly with that unnamed child in the *The Road*, whose head is a *[golden] chalice, a good house to a god*.²⁸ Every conversation about the inevitable unknowability of our consequences, how the future harbors a fate whose logic can never be known, feeds into it; it's all the same conversation like a confluence of tributaries. At some point the things the book says start to trace the anatomy of a coherent body of knowledge.

No, I think it's rather what Borges thought:

*A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.*²⁹

What I mean is: literary knowledge may only be one gorgeous possible ordering. *The house of fiction*, wrote Henry James, *has not one window but a million*.³⁰ What is this knowledge that literary philosophy may produce? A knowledge which is no knowledge; a knowledge which is useless.

2.9 Like Thieves

*They heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and they rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing.*³¹

This passage has meant more to me than any philosophy, and yet I'm not sure I understand. Like Bingham suggests, I share in its poetry in the absence of understanding.³² Or: what it means to me is pre-rational, or extra-rational. In what sense then does it still constitute a kind of philosophy?

2.10 Excessive

Words, like feelings, like sentiments, may be excessive. But excessive in the most outrageous and necessary way.

2.11 Useless Literature

I think about all the texts that have come and gone in my life without any conscious psychic record. These I can remember reading but can't much remember: Steinbeck's *To A God Unknown*; Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*; *A Tale of Two Cities*; more than one Graham Greene novel; several dozen course texts; most poems. These all left a subconscious imprint, if we're psychoanalytically inclined. I don't know. I know I'm not proud I can't remember them, and I don't think any less of them for the reading appearing useless now. Whether or not they were useful, though, is a spatiotemporal question: *who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, they spoke to me there, then?*³³

2.12 And of Clay Are We Created³⁴

Is declaring something "useless" the condemnation it seems? A use may only present itself in a particular time and place. An event occurs; the next page reveals something previously unexpected; a diagnosis arrives suddenly; a nation falls overnight. In the rubble, new uses emerge from chrysalises, pop up like fungi after fresh rain. In the rubble, the beacon from the black box clicks on. In the rubble, two arms and a torso flail, a greyed and bloodied mouth wails. It may be that the body is only being held together by the particular combination of matter in the rubble, like that little girl trapped in a landslide in Colombia for 60 hours. She passed, but that became a story, a literary one, and found its way into a classroom in Chicago 29 years later. That's a use, plucked from the rubble, though a sad one: *Writing the story*, Isabel Allende wrote, *failed to exorcise her ghost.*³⁵

III. Doing

3.1 The Uses of Literary Philosophy

In *The Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski argues that literature can create knowledge, but it can also produce experiences of shock, enchantment, and recognition. These purposes are not unrelated: the shock, often disturbing, produced by reading outside the self can settle, eventually, in or as new knowledge, perhaps even a recognition of the self one did not perceive before. Other times that outer experience takes on a different affect, an enchanting one. We follow. Or, put differently, literary experience might be understood as a kind of resonance, primarily ineffable, but one that nevertheless matters. A prerational affect, settling prickly. Present. In "Octet", Wallace speaks directly to the reader: *This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?*³⁶

Philosophy produces knowledge too, about the way our world (and our self) is and should be. Its utility is often understood as such. That knowledge may be shocking, or enchanting, or involve recognition, but that doesn't seem to be explicitly its use. What a literary philosophy, may do then: offer up literary uses as ones for philosophizing.

3.2 On Use

In the middle of the conversation I recognized laying nearby a book I should've read a long time ago, a Bush-era war story satirizing the Texas I grew up in, its grotesque third generation oil tycoons and football owners and the crassness of its airports, the way *the troops* are spoken of and to, professional cheerleaders, patriotic tragedies, the lazy vulgarity of modern warfare, hilarious and cruel and dooming, all this in this stranger's classroom.³⁷ And I hadn't read it. It might as well have been on the shelf in the store and me browsing, noting, and passing again with a satisfaction that I would have, would like to, someday.

The shameful ignorance of being a reader, that fraud through which all things are possible.

3.3 Dirty Laundry

How are you?

I dis-arrange
the arrangement
books in
previously planned piles
intentions and desires.

Undoing planned plans
arrange the books
incomplete oval.

Methodically and
with a calm touch
I place each book
on the fake wooden floor
I position and reposition
the ideas, the sentiments, the dreams.

Things I will never taste
words I will never read.

They ask,
what are you doing?

Arrange myself within the oval
cheek to fake wooden floor
coolness refreshes my face
almost calming.

This is my book coffin
I suggest.

Perform hyperbole
jokingly and seriously
exaggerative
purposefully morose.

Hyperbole
make sense of the word.

Hyper, as in excessive
Bole, B-O-L-E as in --

Bole is actually the trunk of a tree.

Perhaps hyperbole is
excessive honesty
lines within trunk of the tree
detail what it has lived through.

Anyway
the book coffin
portal to existential doom.

Hyperbolizing all over the place
tree trunks burst through
fake wooden floors
catching words off the page
excessive tree trunks.

Recite variations of this story
when I can no longer say
everything is fine, I'm doing well.

This story is to say
I feel like an excessive tree trunk
immobile and perpetual.
Too much
I feel too much
I need to tell you
I don't want to tell you.

Recite variations of story
garner a few laughs.

I like to feel the rhythmic vibrations of a chuckle.

Tonight
I lay on fake wooden floors
this time, door closed
tree trunk toppled over.

I curl into myself
surrounded by dirty laundry
switch off the light
to add more darkness
to darkness.

As if to affirm
outsides with the insides.

No one
to witness
but embarrassed
still
the same.

Message friend to affirm
ridiculousness
of toppled over tree trunk

into excess.

The friend offers
dirty laundry
wonderful companion
to stints of sorrow
pre-soaking with tears
helps with stains of all sorts.

They say.

If that is the case
my clothes ought to be
fucking sparkling
I am sparkling.

But,
I still confuse
another's despair with love
another's control with care
another's anger with passion.

Salt water
pre-soaks
here before.

I want
stories
through humor.

I want
to speak
pain as if resolved
to speak
emotion as if complete.

In solitude
there is no humor for me
un-performed
pre-soaked.

I dress
dirty laundry
layered up.

laugh so they know
laugh so they don't worry
laugh so I can speak honestly.

Excess is departure
no confirmation
of arrival.

To be excess
to digress into the real
the honest.

Ask, how are you?
I do not mean
the reflex.

I mean it.

how.
is.
your.
heart.

To ask, is to offer.

When I ask
because I know
the way excess
melts me to the ground
piles of dirty laundry.

When I ask,
because I see you
need to be seen
I want to be seen.

When I spin it into a joke,

because I need laughter
 so I can shake
 rattle off dirty
 water
 spincycle through.

My reply
 when I answer
 because I desire
 to offer
 honest excess.

3.4 A Contradiction

It's somewhere in the classics: ethics and aesthetics are one. I don't know man but I'd like to be persuaded. Beyond doubt. I don't think those 19th century bohemians had it right. Art for art's heart's sake. Art Heart for art's sake. That 'for' is of course the problem, moving past and out of presence with the thing. I don't know that we should say anything about it. What we need is a harmonica: a thing that speaks without speaking, a voice sounding without language.

3.5 Books Ain't No Good³⁸

Says Crooks in *Of Mice and Men* who is alone and bitter about it, and what use is a philosophy even a literary one without the persons to which it is directed? Perhaps it has a use but not a good one as that sclerotic and isolated minor character suggests, a black man in a white novel.

3.6 Whispering Softly to Myself the Word "Paralysis"³⁹

When we can't think we become conduit to voices around us. In this room, a cheap poster looms: *Why do I need this class?* On screen, Dicaprio answers: *It will be.*⁴⁰ This kind of reading is heavy-handed, the way when Gatsby and Daisy finally warm up to each other the torrent outside dries up and sun starts to shine. I perk up again and note, dumbly, when the words I theorize with make coincidental appearances: *enchanted, objects, affect, dogs*. A heavy hand, thinking of the work to come. *Days of nothin'*.⁴¹ I write with what I have: rememberings of others' voices peeled and pasted like stickers. *Days like lost dogs.*⁴²

3.7 *We All Want the Same Things*⁴³

Yesterday, I passed a kid in the hall whose friend asked what he was wearing. “I’m dressed for eternity.” Of course that isn’t what he actually said; he said “fraternity.” The promise and the lie are not mutually exclusive.

3.8 *Options*

They tell you: you must act. You must defend. You must fight. You must struggle. These are not necessarily untruths. But they are not singularly true, either. What exists in the in-betweens? Space. Must find space. Space for uselessness.

You must defend.

You must fight.

You must struggle.

Where is magic? The softness of a tender space. In-betweens. Outsides. Off the page. Neglecting conventions, desiring aesthetic intentions. To struggle in art. To fight in poesis. To defend in imaginings. More space. There must be. Possibilities we have not yet dreamed.

; — ... : , you we ~~must~~ create

Options. There is space here to dream.⁴⁴

3.9 *On the Uselessness of Permissions*

I slept in and drove to the site. Here, a road sign. Here, a request. I quote too often from books I’ve never read: *How can you pretend I do not exist? It would almost be as impossible as I pretending you do not exist.*⁴⁵ I misrepresent my quotes in the telling of them. And what do we expect. Here, you meet someone whose function serves to permit or inhibit your presence. Laid back, a microfiction. To kill a method: time. You listen to The War on Drugs on the way down and rhythm runs through it with a history. Which is yours. I do not know why we have to request it. I mean, I know. But I do not believe in the thing, especially here, this place—which will be my own tainted thing, a legend full of leaves.

3.10 *Poesis*⁴⁶

I attend to the garden with focused hands. The garden is a composition, textures of life. It is always unfinished. Along with the weeds, I pull out subtleties of residue. In this very doing, thought becomes undone, unstuck. Dirt, bug, rock, dead leaf. The residue is curious. It does not *represent* the complexities and mundanities of the garden. Rather, I *attend* to the garden. Peculiar and undone, the garden confronts me with ordinary encounters. These moments, marked by newness, are cultivated into existence. The garden is a narrative. It is poesis. Wonder, disorientation, potentialities. The world unfinished, always unfinished. Yet, to attend to the unfinished.

3.11 *Mythopoesis*⁴⁷

From Greek, mytho + poesis, meaning storysong. I am story.⁴⁸ Framed on the wall in some unknown gallery, I watch the playful light of day. It is quiet in here. But we stir with possibility. Morning has just breached as the crows trade stories. Some humans turn to catch a glimpse of themselves in the mirroring window. They are curious animals. Others bustle by, almost in a panic. And so I wait, I endure. Abruptly, one halts. They peer through the glass witnessing me. As I witness them. Breath fogs their view. They wait until it dissipates. I observe them. As they observe me. Their eyes note my colors, textures, ambiguities, possibilities. Because they believe, I am meaning, I am story. The human pauses to hold one last moment. Then, they are gone.

And so, I “lay quietly in waiting.”⁴⁹ I am the promise of story, the promise of art. What is the here? Perhaps it is the located belief in stories within art. The viewer’s capacity to believe harkens a pedagogical necessity. In the enduring stories. The stories never completely disappear. An enduring promise, art retains within it, promise and possibility.

3.12 *Unnecessary*⁵⁰

The story is in
the unnecessary details.

The extraneous
the side notes
the mundane.

It’s in the
beside the point,

Beyond the point,

The point was never
about the point.

Make familiar
unfamiliar
why I write.

Daydream in sounds
in sentiments.

Keys, door, car, crows
a muffled scuffle
bike tires crunch
rumble of overheard mumbles.

her parents are...
She can't like...
So, it's funny because...

Wind and more
so many cars
crosswalk beeps
siren calls
other birds.

Find words, sounds
pull them from the gutter
feed them humble.

To know vaguely
listen back.

Where am I
in sound.

Let us
sit in the swamp tree
discuss the mundane
the earthly world

literary tattoos
flame of something fierce
everyday failures.

Take what you need
leave what you find
cleaning shit for in-store-use
don't take.

Creaky door
leaky sink.

Theatre of poetry
passing time
in the visitor's log.

what the fuck am I?

*lady bug loves heavy metal and
coffee from JJ bean
this morning I had money,
but then I spent it on books and
some French girl*

All good, take your time
subtle architecture of chance
but the heart has eyes.

Pedaling hard
car locks
that way, straight down
This way?
No worries
Thank you
Loud, so much

Busy intersection
perfect for cycling
conversations.

Something that way

Sorry I can't help you more
See yah
Thank you
Goodbye

Sounds, so many
bus, train, child giggles.

Hum of funky music
metal clink
Hi, do you know where...
Beats and vibes
up a ways, they merge
I've never been.

Back outside
hum of the day
gravel, crackle, snuffle,
pedal rub,
shuffle, clink, lock.

Quiet.

No confirmation
but you have arrived.

Doubled time
16 minutes should be
40 minutes would be
beyond time could be.

Pocket wrench
new book smell
sound monologue.

Guess what time it is,
exactly 10
both wrong.
Is there time
in a journey

Fragments.

Not the best sounds
bikes roll
and night hums.

What is somewhere

Found a nickel
red wine in a mug
skateboards scrape
people scuffle
repeated sounds

I found this poem
extraneous and
magnificent.

I hope you have a nice day tomorrow

All the sounds you can hear
when you're exposed
mundane and outrageous

A thing can't be lost

Take care.

Part Three: End Matter

Epilogue

4.1 On Naming New Methods

But we already have fiction.

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ENDNOTES

1. It is important to note that our use of pronouns is intended as a non-singular “I.” Or rather a common or collective “I.” When we utilize the “I” it represents more than a literal singular self insofar as “narrative authority does not require being at the scene. It requires only that one is able to reconstruct the scene from a position of nonpresence in a believable way or that one’s unbelievable narration is compelling for its own reasons.” Moreover, “the ‘I’ has gotten out of control by virtue of becoming written. Philosophically, we are asked to accept an ‘I’ who is not the same as the history of its opinions, who can ‘undo’ and ‘destroy’ such opinions and still remain intact. Narratively, we have an ‘I’ that is a textual phenomenon, exceeding the place and time in which it seeks to ground itself, whose very written character depends upon this transposability from context to context.” Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 4 & 25.

2. When we utilize the words “possibility” and “potentiality” we do not seek to inadvertently imply a perpetual positive possibility. Rather, we suggest that possibility always retains, within it, both positive and negative potentialities. Possibility and potentiality do not retain sufficient reasoning and resonance unto themselves. Our usage is, at best, as necessary as it is cautionary.

3. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 9. Here, we interpolate Stewart’s evocative notion of “little somethings” in the context of literary philosophy.

4. Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

5. Rita Felski, “Introduction”, In “Use”, special issue, *New Literary History* 44, no. 4 (2013): vi.

6. Ahmed, *What’s the Use?*, 8.

7. Ibid, 1.

8. Ibid, 3.

9. Nuccio Ordine, *The Usefulness of the Useless*. Translated by Alistair McEwen. (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2017): 4. See also for reference on the intellectual tradition: John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Stanford University Library, 1887.

10. Simone de Beauvoir, trans. Bernard Frechtman, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road, 2018, 102-3.

11. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “literature,” accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/literature>.

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16. Dan Beachy-Quick, “A Pedagogy Torments Itself with a Question that Questions Itself,” in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press), 85.
17. Jan Masschelein, “Experimentum Scholae: The World Once More...But Not (Yet) Finished,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 30, no. 5 (September 2011): 531.
18. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack Up* (New York: New Directions, 1945/2009), 69.
19. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Modern Library, 1891-2/1940), 73.
20. Cary Campbell, “Practicing ‘Literariness’: A reminder for philosophers and philosophers,” *Epoché* (May 2018), <https://epochemagazine.org/practicing-literariness-a-reminder-for-philosophers-and-philosophasters-d-59045b9e8d6>, para. 19.
21. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 28. “One really ought to do philosophy as poetry”, or, “The only way to philosophize is to poem”, depending on your German.
22. Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man”, *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45235/the-snow-man-56d224a6d4e90>.
23. Songs: Ohia, *Magnolia Electric Co. (10th Anniversary Deluxe Edition)*, Secretly Canadian SC300, 2013, digital album.
24. “Sometimes I think what we want to make possible is the living of lyrical moments, moments at which human beings (freed to feel, to know, to imagine) suddenly understand their own lives in relation to all that surrounds.” Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 7.
25. Dónal O’Donoghue, “The Promise of the Curatorial,” in *Learning to Live in Boys’ Schools: Art-led Understandings of Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 97.

26. Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 11; Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 86.
27. Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 226.
28. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 75.
29. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Maker: Afterword" in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 327.
30. Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Modern Library, 1966), xxxii.
31. McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 30.
32. Charles Bingham, "Two Educational Ideas for 2011 and Beyond," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no. 5 (September 2011), 518.
33. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952/2002), 439.
34. Isabel Allende, "And of Clay Are We Created" in *The Stories of Eva Luna*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Atheneum, 1991).
35. Celia Correias Zapata, *Isabel Allende: Life and Spirits*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2002), 76.
36. David Foster Wallace, "Octet", in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), 131.
37. Ben Fountain, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (New York: Ecco, 2012).
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39. James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Penguin, 1914/1993), 1.
40. *The Great Gatsby*, directed by Baz Luhrmann (2013; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures), DVD.
41. *True Detective*. "Seeing Things." Directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga. Written by Nic Pizzolato. HBO, January 19 2014.
42. Ibid.
43. Craig Finn, *We All Want The Same Things*, Partisan Records PTKF2144-0, 2017, digital album.

44. "The arts will not resolve the fearful social problems facing us today; they will not lesson the evils and the brutalities afflicting the modern world. But they will provide a sense of alternatives...they will enhance the consciousness of possibility if we learn how to attend. And this itself may make a difference if more and more people are awakened, if they are freed to move through openings and develop a sense that things can indeed be otherwise than they are, somehow better than they are." Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 47.

45. Dave Eggers, *What is the What* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006), 535.

46. "A moment of poesis is a mode of production in an unfinished world." Poesis is framed, within a discussion of weak theory, as the coming unstuck. Stewart positions this claim by destabilizing the resoluteness of a "strong" or "paranoid" theory. The destabilizing, in and of itself, partly constitutes a weak theory in which poesis is a mode of production. In essence, the poesis is about continual emergence in a world or space that is unfinished through perpetual emergence. Kathleen Stewart, "Weak Theory in an Unfinished World," *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 1, 2008, 77.

47. In a conversation on searching for origins, Rocha writes, "In the extreme, all fails. The problem with ancient mythopoesis, with religious myths, stories, poems, and songs, is this: they are untrue when taken literally and unimaginatively, and constantly risk floating into non-sense, nuttery, and fundamentalism." Sam Rocha, *Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study, and the Human Person* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 2.

48. "In time, the stories may be lost to history, only to be retained by some folkloric oral tradition that was thought to have passed. It is here that art retains its promise, even when that promise lays quietly in waiting." Aram Moshayedi, *Stories of Almost Everyone* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, University of California, 2018), 22.

49. Ibid.

50. "And why should we wonder?" Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 18.