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Beyond the Fragmented Subject

In a recent book, Marianne Noble describes the forms of interpersonal contact that are evoked in the works of four antebellum writers. Theoretically speaking, she believes the concept of “human contact” requires vigorous defense. For “today,” she says, “scholars tend to be skeptical about the possibility” of “anything we might call human contact.” Since “they doubt the existence of authentic selves,” they cannot envision two selves greeting each other. Against this background, Noble draws on psychoanalytic theories ranging from object relations to relational psychoanalysis to argue that distinctive selves do exist, and that “attunement to the other’s individuality” is possible.¹

In another recent work, Katherine Ding remarks, similarly, on a “current scholarly malaise with claims of true self-revelation.” Unlike Noble, Ding happens to share in this malaise. Her own argument is that “the sense of interiority we [in the West] associate with character, personhood, or identity” is actually just a “performative effect,” the result of each individual’s “compositional” efforts. Further, the notion that one might disclose a part of one’s inner life to another is fatally bound up with “Romantic sincerity,” which in turn depends on “an outdated surface/depth model.”² These ideas will be more or less familiar to those who follow contemporary criticism. While it is hardly the case that everyone in our field adopts a strict antihumanism or posthumanism, these positions are often taken to represent the most sophisticated thinking available on the nature of subjectivity.³

For purposes of real life, it is hard to imagine that many members of our profession actually think we must do without “anything we might call human contact.” As I write, conditions of self-isolation prevail among non-essential workers in the United States, as states attempt to flatten the curve on COVID-19. During this challenging time, we academics are doing the same things to forestall loneliness that others self-isolating are doing. We reach out via phones and other media to sustain our interpersonal worlds, and by no means scorn what the meditation teacher Tara Brach, commenting on the same crisis, has called “the joy that comes from real, tenderhearted connection during such vulnerable times.”⁴

The fact that contemporary literary criticism has so little to say for “real, tenderhearted connection” is not due to any dearth of available theoretical models for describing such a thing. Psychoanalysts in the English-speaking world have for some decades been engaged in a series of rich, evolving conversations regarding the kinds of self-experience and mutual attunement of which human beings are in fact capable, at both the conscious and the unconscious levels. These discussions, many of them associated with relational theory, build not only on clinical findings but also on contemporary neuroscience and infant research.⁵ Why has this body of clinically and scientifically informed psychoanalytic theory not interested literary scholars, particularly those whose own work draws on psychoanalysis in one or another of its aspects?

In what follows, I will use the example of Max Cavitch to represent a small cohort of literary scholars who do draw on relational theory. My aim is not just to suggest that this psychoanalytic school offers fine alternatives for those in our field who have little affinity for antihumanism. More pointedly, I will show how the comparison throws into relief the weaknesses of the antihumanist understanding itself. Though my main touchstone will be relational psychoanalysis, that is hardly the only school to offer a potential answer to the pieties of antihumanism. Object relations theory, its precursor, is another good candidate. Were this a longer chapter, I would describe the work of Peter Rudnytsky, Michael Snediker, TreaAndrea Russworm, Nancy Yousef, Alicia Christoff, and David Eng and Shinhee Han – a partial list of contemporary scholars who bring object relations theory powerfully to bear on the interpretation of literary and other cultural texts. My larger point is that it is time our discipline engaged more fully with the range of psychoanalytic theory. Were we to do so, we would quickly recognize what is lost in antihumanism.

Yet as an obstacle to this more capacious inquiry, our field’s dominant discourse features a rhetoric that suggests that one cannot depart from the notion of a completely “decentered” or “fragmented” subjectivity without falling into political conservatism. We will see how this rhetoric operates through logical slippages, which serve to spread shame where it does not belong. This manipulative logic is a key delivery system for the “paranoid” thinking Eve Sedgwick long ago identified in literary studies.⁶ It has survived by decades the heyday of high theory, living on in conceptual tics that by now seem to call for no justification or even reflection.⁷

A final question I ask in these pages is why our profession should have clung for so long to a view of subjectivity that has these weaknesses. It is not that we lack for theoretical alternatives. Nor, of course, do we lack for literary matrices that could inspire new thinking.

Within literary studies, the privileging of theoretical models that deny the existence of “authentic selves” extends to the subfield of literature and psychoanalysis. The conversation in literature and psychoanalysis is heavily imprinted by the antihumanist models that descend from poststructuralist psychoanalysis, with Jacques Lacan standing as the founding figure.⁸ Scholars sometimes do appeal to alternative psychoanalytic models, but in doing so they generally adhere to a small canon, selected on a principle of not offending sensibilities trained on the theory of the decentered subject.⁹ For example, the concept of the *observing ego* or the *observing self*, ultimately derived from Freud’s own ideas about the ego, remains to the present day a central element of psychoanalytic theory. These terms describe the part of the self that can witness and understand the experiencing aspects of the self, with consequences for a person’s stability and psychological growth.¹⁰ Nowadays this mental function is sometimes captured by other terms, such as “reflective function” and “mentalization”; but despite some theoretical variations, the same aspect of subjective life is in the theorists’ sights. But contemporary literary criticism, even when drawing on Freud’s own theories, generally steers clear of the concept of the observing ego, because of a settled idea that “the ego” and “the self” in all their aspects are fatally bound up with the individual’s adaptation to coercive social norms.¹¹

Or again, a literary scholar might draw on object relations theory, invoking the theories of D. W. Winnicott or a contemporary descendant such as Adam Phillips or Christopher Bollas. Yet it is vanishingly rare for such a scholar to touch down into the area of Winnicott’s thought that involves the “true” and the “false” selves, despite the high regard the psychoanalytic community has for that aspect of Winnicott’s contribution.¹² For the concept of the true self clashes with our own profession’s skepticism as to the existence of a self, which goes back to high theory’s dismissal of “some essence I might be.”¹³

When we turn to relational psychoanalysis, which stands at the cutting edge of psychoanalytic thought in the English-speaking world, the discrepancy between our own profession’s thinking and that of the analytical community is stark. Few scholars of literature cite relational theory at all. In 2007, Vera Camden, speaking both as a practicing psychoanalyst and as a literary scholar, noted that “most academics act as if the relational turn that . . . defines clinical practice today simply never occurred.” Camden remarked that our discipline was thus “out of step with the most fruitful and affectively enriching clinical research and practice of our times.”¹⁴ In the years since, the discipline has seen glacial, though promising, movement toward an encounter with relational theory, which, again, I will ultimately represent through the example of Max Cavitch.

Progress has been slow because academics find relational psychoanalysis ideologically dissonant. To read relational theory is to find that amid great variety, this school accounts for subjectivity in ways that conflict with the academy's preferred vision of a fragmented, discontinuous subjectivity. However much the relational theorists might question the existence of a static or singular self – thus, in some cases, accounting themselves postmodernists – they suggest that it is beneficial to be able to grasp and integrate some of the facets of one's self-experience.¹⁵ As the psychoanalyst Susan Fairfield writes, "If we imagine a continuum extending from a monolithic, rigid, and undifferentiated subjectivity to sheer random dispersion, it turns out that every psychoanalytic theorist has a mixed model . . . with the center of gravity located closer to one or the other end of the continuum but well short of the extremes." Thus, while some relational theorists conceive of selfhood in "plural" terms, they still affirm the need for forms of self-integration. On this score, Fairfield cites the theorist Jessica Benjamin, a "pluralist" who nonetheless affirms, with the psychologist Margo Rivera whom Benjamin here quotes, "a central consciousness that can handle the contradictions of the different voices and different desires within one person [and that represents] the growing ability to call all these voices 'I,' to dis-identify from any one of them as the whole story."¹⁶ I cannot make this point strongly enough: even the most postmodern of contemporary psychoanalysts do not view subjectivity as entirely decentered, as literary criticism in a postmodern psychoanalytic vein does. Fairfield, whose comments I have just quoted, sees this cleavage herself. She notes that she taught comparative literature before embarking on her analytic training; thus she is poised to compare the perspectives of the two fields. What she observes is that the "thoroughgoing postmodern pluralism" that one would think would follow from academic postmodern theory is not "consistent with psychoanalysis" as "currently theorized and practiced," even by those relational psychoanalysts who conceive of their views as postmodernist.¹⁷

As a kindred disparity, contemporary Lacanian analysts often interpret Lacan in a manner that assumes the necessity of an ego, presenting a Lacan who would sound oddly conservative (or "humanist") to an ear trained in literary studies. For example, the Lacanian psychoanalyst Raul Moncayo clearly distinguishes "defensive" from "non-defensive forms of ego-functioning." If I may speak telegraphically for readers who know Lacan, Moncayo associates "non-defensive ego functioning" – which he sees as positive – with what Lacan calls "the subject of the unconscious."¹⁸ Yet literary criticism, whether drawing on Lacan or on a different psychoanalytic theorist, seldom makes space for ego functioning in this positive sense. To someone trained in our discipline, the phrase "non-defensive ego

functioning” might sound like something pulled from the pages of the long-despised ego psychologists, the very school that Lacan attacked.

What all this means in practical reality is that our profession’s commitment to a particular view of subjectivity confines us to a silo that admits only cracks of light from the contemporary psychoanalytic world. This wary behavior is motivated by a widely felt need to protect ideas whose truth our profession established long ago, in the theory era of the 1980s and 1990s. But did earlier critical generations in fact establish the superiority of the model of decentered subjectivity?

Let us make a brief detour into the critical past, to observe a form of tendentious reasoning that has permeated academic discussions of subjectivity since the 1980s. I here discuss a critical example that appeared around the turn of the millennium. It is thus recent enough to have some continuity with contemporary inquiry, but remote enough to belong to a time when Lacan’s ideas were still being extensively laid out on the page, rather than simply assumed as a part of the conceptual bedrock as is now the case. In 2003, then, the literary scholar Cynthia Marshall published a piece in *PMLA* in which she described the importance of Lacan for her own account of early modern forms of subjectivity. She remarked that she rejected “the dynamic therapeutic models drawn from object relations and ego psychology.” Her brief against those models was that they “delineate the interaction of a clearly posited self and other.” She preferred Lacan because “the subject for Lacan is not defined in the humanistic terms of interiority or depth.”¹⁹

Today, these understandings are still widespread, though the current style is to nod to them rather than to elaborate and justify them. Briefly, the idea is that the integrated sense of self that is valorized by object relations theory and midcentury ego psychology is a phenomenon that from the different, Lacanian perspective is just a bundle of Imaginary identifications.²⁰ A further common complaint against ego psychology in particular, and one that may lie in the background in the present case, is that this school has a conservative tenor, as it associates psychological health with the individual’s adaptation to society.²¹ From these various considerations, it is thought to follow that when an analyst indebted to either of these two schools helps an analysand to strengthen his or her sense of self, the result is to inhibit the analysand’s productive encounter with his or her actual fragmentation (or lack). A final academic commonplace rehearsed in Marshall’s remarks is that in historical terms, the experience of cohesive selfhood, along with the sense of having “interiority” and “depth,” belongs only to members of modern Western societies; this selfhood supposedly evolved in tandem with early modern “humanism,” and in the centuries since has served a toxic bourgeois individualism.

The rising academic generation no longer devotes pages of exposition to these concepts. Yet a normative understanding persists to the effect that cohesive selfhood is an illusion born of Western modernity, and that an affirmation of self-cohesion in any form is tantamount to political conservatism.²² As far as I can see, that is the only reason that for purposes of psychoanalytic inquiry, object relations theory has a lower prestige in the academic humanities than theories involving an incoherent or a shattered subjectivity. Yet we are here looking at a disciplinary bias rather than a well-reasoned preference. Our profession has somehow avoided the collective conversation that would have carefully weighed object relations against the psychoanalytic models that valorize a fragmented subjectivity, a discussion that among other things would have compared the actual political and social implications of each.²³

As an index of this bias, innumerable scholars over the years have drawn on the ideas of the psychoanalytic queer theorists Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, who propose (varying) forms of self-shattering as a means to oppose “the fixity and coherence of the ego’s form.”²⁴ In the meantime, the theorist Michael Snediker, who likewise engages in psychoanalytic queer-theoretical inquiry, has had far less influence. Yet Snediker’s *Queer Optimism*, published in 2009, offers a brilliant rejoinder to both Bersani and Edelman, using object relations theory as a fulcrum.²⁵ Snediker’s book, while very well received, should have had a cutting impact not just on the conversation in queer theory but on the default understandings of the profession as a whole. Instead, the conversation proceeded largely as before.

Another marker of the same bias is the fact that to the present day, scholars whose thinking accords with antihumanism are allowed to proceed via the most gnomic of references to apparently settled truths. For example, “interiority” and “depth” will be attributed out of hand to the illusory “sovereign subject,” and it will be asserted, without explanation, that “the ‘I’ is “other to itself.”²⁶ In contrast, those who rely on object relations must provide a scrupulous, linear account of their theoretical framework. My concern, throughout, is with the profession’s default understandings, rather than with any monolithic ideology. The question I ask is not “Which ideas has every person in our profession agreed to?” but, more modestly, “Which are the ideas that go without saying, the ones that can be invoked glancingly, without a coherent elaboration or defense?”

In the two decades or so since the “death of theory” was widely pronounced, the same dutiful thinking governs critical movements that on the surface appear new.²⁷ It is as if the eminences of high theory had among them settled once and for all certain questions regarding the nature of human subjectivity. For example, an article of 2016 that is situated squarely within

the movement known as the new materialisms praises a particular literary work for “successfully destabiliz[ing]” the idea of “integrated” selfhood and asserting in its place a “fragmented,” “split or posthuman subjectivity.”²⁸ Though the article cites theorists of the posthuman rather than Lacan, the concept of the “split” subject has been a staple of critical discourse since Lacan’s thinking first entered the discipline in the late 1970s.

Yet the reasoning that has long supported this idea of a “fragmented” subjectivity rests on a false binary. If the present chapter spreads awareness of this central fault, it will have done its main work. The conceptual sleight of hand I am about to describe has probably always been unconscious; its function in any case is to suppress alternative opinion.

To see how the binary works, let us spend another moment on Marshall’s work, again as a sample of ordinary academic discourse produced at a juncture when colleagues were still devoting pages at a time to vindications of Lacanian theory against alternative psychoanalytic models. Marshall’s theoretical framework was entirely normative for the moment in which she wrote. Her work was very highly reviewed; when the book-length study associated with the essay I have quoted above was published, colleagues praised not just its readings of early modern texts but also its theoretical apparatus.²⁹ Gail Kern Paster’s blurb, for example, opens as follows:

Brilliantly employing the insights of Freudian, Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis in a series of close textual readings, Marshall demonstrates the early modern self’s desire for self-dissolution in the rough textual pleasures of jouissance.

Recall, then, that Marshall criticizes “ego psychology and object relations.” Yet neither in the essay I have quoted earlier nor in the book where she makes the same dismissals does Marshall indicate that she has actually read any work from either of these schools. Particularly in the case of object relations, her critique is captious. Marshall rejects object relations theorists on the grounds, again, that they describe “the interaction of a clearly posited self and other.” But what would a psychoanalysis look like that did not validate the existence of self and other, and the potential for interaction between the two?

Most practicing psychoanalysts, including Lacanians, would have serious concerns about a person who had no sense of where the self ended and the other began. As it happens, confusions of self and other are often experienced by individuals with the cluster of symptoms commonly diagnosed as borderline personality disorder; these confusions can cause great suffering for these individuals and those close to them.³⁰ On the other hand, perhaps the force of Marshall’s critique is lodged in the word “posited” – “a clearly posited self

and other” – on some notion that object relations theory conceives of selfhood in terms of the individual’s experience of a “posited” identity, reified and abstract. Yet that by no means describes what one finds when one reads the object relations theorists themselves – Klein, Winnicott, Bion, Fairbairn, and so on.

On one side, then, stands Lacan, whose thinking is taken to be rigorous. On the other side are placed not only the ego psychologists, some of whom arguably did encourage a reified self, but also the object relations theorists. Like much scholarship before and after, this work creates the impression that if one were to try to nudge the conversation at all in the direction of assigning some value to individuation, interiority, and self-cohesion, one would fall in with the conservative ego psychologists.³¹ Marshall makes her theoretical case only by caricaturing as the psychoanalytic other everything that lies outside the Lacanian branch of psychoanalytic theory.

It apparently follows that an utter dissolution of selfhood is the only viable alternative to a fantastically rigidified sense of self-coherence. In keeping with this understanding, and in particular reliance on the theories of Bersani, Marshall makes an implausible argument to the effect that certain early modern dramas, in portraying horrifying acts of violence on the stage – the blinding of Gloucester, for example – “shattered” audience members’ selfhood, thus giving audiences relief from a then-emergent “bourgeois” self-cohesion.³² I grant that aesthetic experiences can unsettle our sense of who we are; that can be a part of their appeal. But this disruption must be subtle and manageable, in order to prevent our simply exiting the aesthetic scene in order to avoid severe distress. If one’s viewing of a play were instead to lead to a total loss of ego functioning – a different phenomenon from a mere relaxation of self-boundaries – that would surely be a sign that the theatrical experience had reactivated a trauma or brought forward some other underlying disturbance.

To pursue a fictional example, if Shakespeare’s Claudius leaves the scene of “The Mousetrap,” it is surely because he sees in it a repetition of the traumatic scene of which he himself was the instigator, and of whose theatrical representation he is now the target. But as the narrative evolves, even this blow does not obliterate Claudius’ sense of selfhood. He gathers himself, using his full authority as king to clear the room with a simple “Give me some light: away!”³³ (3.2.257). To the extent, then, that this character reads plausibly to us in this moment, it is hard to see why we should believe that the typical reaction of flesh-and-blood audience members in the early modern period to merely theatrical representations of gore and mayhem was that their very identities were shattered.

Today, the dichotomized thinking I have just described continues to control academic discussions of subjectivity. The word “sovereign” has somewhat displaced “Cartesian” as the preferred descriptor for the congealed selfhood that represents one pole. At the other pole, and supposedly truer to the realities of psychic life, stands a subjectivity that is incoherent, fragmented, and incapable of integration. In an important recent work, Rita Felski makes a point similar to mine: “The notion of an inner nature, of a fateful inner self . . . , is viewed [by many contemporary scholars] as a naïve Romantic holdover or a nakedly ideological belief in the autonomy and supremacy of the individual.” Felski further critiques an academic preference for the idea that “what we think is inside is really outside: our sense of an inner reality is manufactured by external forces, and any sense we may have of our individuality or uniqueness is misplaced.”³⁴

There is no reason to assume that human self-experience cannot be conceived of except in terms of absolute stability or absolute dispersion. The critical theorist Mari Ruti makes this point in a number of superb recent works, though unlike me she takes a Lacanian route through the problem. Ruti sees Lacan, rightly interpreted, as offering a corrective to the academic thinking that in his name declares “subjective coherence . . . bad,” and “incoherence . . . good.” “Many critics,” Ruti notes, “promote a stark either/or choice between a fully autonomous subject and the complete pulverization of the subject.”³⁵ She places Edelman, Gilles Deleuze, and Lynne Huffer among the thinkers who have promoted this binary thinking. But on her own reading, Lacan himself, far from “advocating the complete destruction of the subject,” thinks in terms of a “middle ground.” Thus “[her] Lacan” is not the Lacan, for example, of Edelman, nor of most other literary scholars indebted to Lacan.³⁶

In this connection, Ruti and the philosopher Amy Allen have recently compared Lacan’s views on psychological life with the those of Melanie Klein, one of the founders of object relations theory. Like Lacan, Klein “offers a conception of subjectivity that occupies a productive middle ground between the rational, autonomous, and transcendental subject of Western metaphysics and the embrace of a radical desubjectivation.”³⁷ In fact, a different version of the present chapter might have challenged the antihumanist pieties by charting a conceptual course from Klein herself, though Sedgwick’s Kleinian critique of “paranoid” criticism, and on to Allen and then the remarkable work of the contemporary psychoanalyst Donald Carveth.³⁸ Though Carveth’s subject is not the academic humanities, I believe his theories offer a rich potential resource for those who wish to find a path past the conceptual blockages in our own field.

Alongside Lacanian theory thus construed, as well as Kleinian theory, another potential corrective to the dichotomized thinking that befuddles academic discussions of subjectivity is contemporary relational psychoanalysis, to which the remaining discussion is devoted. One of the gifts of relational theory is to offer a vivid picture of the middle ground that lies between congealed and fragmented subjectivity. Relational theorists see a sense of self-continuity as essential for psychological life. Yet they believe this is achieved alongside an ongoing experience of multiplicity and fluidity. In the words of Jody Messler Davies, one of the movement's most brilliant theorists, relational theory "has begun to conceive of self, indeed of mind itself, as a multiply organized, associationally linked network of parallel, coexistent, at times conflictual, systems of meaning attribution and understanding." More simply, what we call "mind" is arguably constituted by "multiple selves." Further, it is ideal if, as individuals, we can hold in tension the centripetal processes that make us feel cohesive – "the primarily memory-based connections that give us a sense of psychic integrity" – and "the dynamic processes that threaten to splinter our internal organization."³⁹

Davies suggests, for example, that within an analytic session, the analyst might say a few words that quietly invite into the dialogue an aspect of the analysand that embodies the analysand's childhood self-experience. The thoughts and feelings that then come forward can be so dissonant that they seem to belong to a separate self, one that has been dissociated in favor of "the rational, adult self" the analysand has "so carefully constructed." Davies writes of the delicate, often risky processes through which she helps analysands to bring the various jarring aspects of their self-experience into conversation with one another, so that the different personae can come to share "memories, overwhelming affect states, and seemingly irresolvable interpersonal conflicts."⁴⁰ It might sound as if I here describe an analyst's work with people with dissociative identity disorder. But the point is precisely that a certain amount of dissociation is ubiquitous in psychological life, and that at the same time it is fruitful to bring the various aspects of one's self-experience into a kind of shared awareness.

For readers new to relational theory, an excellent point of entry is *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition*, an anthology of 1999 in which Stephen Mitchell and Lewis Aron gathered essays by many of the founding figures of this school.⁴¹ Within the present space, I can continue to offer a glimpse of the potential stakes for our own discipline by describing, first, some ideas of the relational theorist Philip Bromberg, and then the uses to which the literary scholar Max Cavitch puts some of his ideas.

Like Davies, Bromberg thinks of human self-experience in terms not of a singular self but of multiple “self-states.” Citing findings from infant observation studies and psychiatric research, he remarks that

There is now abundant evidence that the psyche does not start as an integrated whole but is nonunitary in origin – a mental structure that begins and continues as a multiplicity of self-states that maturationally attain a feeling of coherence which overrides the awareness of discontinuity. This leads to the experience of a cohesive sense of personal identity and the necessary illusion of being “one self.”⁴²

Working with Bromberg’s ideas, Cavitch writes of the need to conceive of self-experience in terms of a “relation between identity and multiplicity.”⁴³ This dynamic, like the tension Davies describes between centripetal and centrifugal processes, represents precisely the middle ground that our own discipline occludes when it pits a “sovereign” subjectivity against a “fragmented” subjectivity. Just one of the implications for literary studies is that to the extent that our profession engages in social critique – something it often does very well – we might rethink our assumptions as to what it takes for a person to break free of the scripted sense of identity that follows from compliance with social norms.⁴⁴

I would argue in fact that relational psychoanalysis offers more powerful models than academic antihumanism does for the kind of personal transformation that can disencumber an individual from the weight of societal roles and expectations. Cavitch notes, for example, that the therapeutic work of psychoanalysis can be radical, in helping the analysand to relax the “disabling self-protectiveness” that has led him or her to dissociate whatever forms of self-experience might be subject to social “shaming.” Through the therapeutic dialogue, formerly dissociated parts of the self can be heard that from the perspective of the social mainstream actually look like “maladjustment.” Further, Cavitch remarks of Bromberg that “although he is well known for his work on affect *regulation*, it would clearly be an error to identify his work with the normative emphasis some of his fellow clinicians place on adjustment to the world as it is.” In reality, “socioaffective life is risky at best, and to live our lives in a way that *feels* like living requires feats of maladjustment as well as adjustment.” Cavitch movingly describes the role an analyst can play as a trusted other who provides a setting – “safe but not too safe,” in Bromberg’s phrase – in which nonnormative aspects of self-experience can be greeted.⁴⁵

Without for a moment discounting the value of therapeutic conversations that grapple explicitly with forms of social oppression, Cavitch recognizes a “social radicalism” in “all of the best psychoanalytic writing, even where

there is little or no reference to economics, history, institutional life, or the state's oppressive and marginalizing disposition toward the vast majority of persons."⁴⁶ Nor does Bromberg, or Cavitch in turn, suggest that the analyst's office is the only place in which a person can find interpersonal resources for moving past a socially adaptive self-narrative, nor again that collective experiences are not often crucial for this work.

Cavitch is not the only theorist to draw on relational psychoanalysis in such a way as to suggest an alternative to the strict antihumanism of the theoretical past. Lauren Berlant's work, wonderfully eclectic in its range of psychoanalytic reference, draws on relational psychoanalysis as well as object relations theory.⁴⁷ Though Berlant's work has already profoundly influenced the conversation in our field, much could be learned if colleagues were to mine more fully Berlant's psychoanalytic bibliography, as well as follow Berlant's example in reading widely in the theories that are in fact most interesting to practicing psychoanalysts today.

The relational school altogether offers a variety of models that have the potential to enrich our own discipline's approaches both to intersubjectivity and to literary experience, in the wake of years of academic conversation that assumes the decentered nature of subjectivity. The kind of sensitive, difficult therapeutic work Cavitch describes is in fact a more practicable route to political and ethical self-transformation than the experiences of self-dissolution unrealistically posited by Marshall, or the identification with the death drive that Edelman, with comparable hyperbole, has advocated.⁴⁸

This discussion has focused on theorists of the middle ground, those interested in the expanse of life that is lived in between a fragmented experience of subjectivity and the illusion of entirely unified selfhood. Why, though, has literary studies gravitated toward a form of reasoning that occludes this middle ground? To repeat, this is a logic that presents us with a false choice between a congealed, static selfhood and (supposedly preferable) the abolishment of all inwardness and coherence. Who or what is served?

In an earlier essay, I attributed our discipline's revulsion against inwardness to the imperatives of the profession itself. Particularly in a time of circle-the-wagons institutional embattlement, our discipline behaves like a "greedy institution," one that thrives to the extent that it can coopt members' investment in their private worlds.⁴⁹ In the small space that remains, I consider a related possibility. If we academics are to be asked to renounce our affinity for the inner world, it is possible not just to shame but also to entice us into doing so.

The shaming is something I have touched on above; it occurs whenever the label "conservative" is applied to a scholar who affirms there is some value in

private selfhood or self-integration. A carrot, however, complements this stick. Scholars who align themselves with a school of thought that makes human inwardness look retrograde are surely assuming a bleak vision of life; but they are rewarded with the prospect of seeming inhumanly edgy and bold. Donald Carveth, whom I have mentioned above as an important contemporary theorist in a Kleinian vein, writes of the appeal of Lacan's ideas for readers who may find themselves in a state of narcissistic depletion. "In privileging lack as ultimately more real than plenitude," Carveth argues, Lacan offers the reader an experience of "narcissistic gratification," which can ward off "a deeper narcissistic depression." There is a certain thrill in taking "a view of oneself as possessing sufficient courage and realism to embrace, stoically, the 'tragic sense of life.'"⁵⁰

Something like "narcissistic depression" has chronically afflicted our own profession as a collective since the 1980s. The country's swerve to the right in that decade damaged the discipline's sense of connection to a wider society, at the same time that employment within the profession became precarious because of declining resources. This situation has only intensified in the era of adjunctification, when institutional policies create a vast underclass of instructors who take care of students' needs without the benefit of adequate wages, health insurance, or job security. In a word, our profession has been humiliatingly feminized, within the university and within the culture as a whole.

It is possible, then, that we have compensated by embracing theories that impart a fantasized masculinity in creating the impression that it is we in literature departments, among all intellectual communities, who have the grit to stare into the abyss. Our preferred theories appear to strip away all notions of a human need for "safe but not too safe" places – places where, in the presence of a trusted other, a person can let some of the disparate parts of his or her self-experience be seen, held, and known.⁵¹ It is only within what I have been calling the middle ground, between sovereign subjectivity and shattered subjectivity, that such places exist. Differently put, the middle ground is a relational space. It thus codes as a conventionally feminine space.⁵² It takes on a degraded status in the defensive posture of a profession attempting to assert its place in an institutional environment that cares less and less for what we do.

As it happens, this gender codification informs some remarks Edelman makes in the course of an extended dialogue with Berlant on the differences between the two theorists' understandings of the nature of subjective life. Edelman, who opposes the concept of self-cohesion, writes that when readers appraise his thinking alongside Berlant's, he is "likely to be cast," though "falsely (at least from my point of view)," as "theory's equivalent of Darth

Vader.” In contrast, he says, Berlant, because their version of affect theory may be taken to assert the value of “the subject’s being held (hence neither abandoned nor allowed to drop),” may be associated by readers, again too easily, with the “sustaining maternal hold” of the “good enough . . . mother,” a concept Edelman draws from Winnicott’s theories.⁵³ Though Edelman denies that the analogy with Darth Vader is apt, there is probably something exciting in seeing oneself as theory’s avatar of the dark side. Next to this image, the role of “mother” looks tame, even trivial within what is ultimately an adolescent economy of cool, as Susan Fraiman notes in a profound analysis of the same scholarly posturing.⁵⁴ Yet for purposes of actual living, how many academics believe, deep down, that it is not a good thing to find places in life where one can be “held” – “neither abandoned nor allowed to drop”?

To the extent that members of our profession use theory in the compensatory way I have just described, we are not helping ourselves at all. In fact, the profession’s fantasies about its own superhuman mettle weaken us as a collective, in creating the conditions for a culture of mutual shaming and fear. A place to start, then, in bringing new resources to literature and psychoanalysis is to ask, along with various colleagues I have mentioned in these pages, what our literary objects can tell us about the ways in which, for individuals in a particular social category or at a particular cultural moment, experience unfolds within the middle ground, where human beings live. Our discipline has been fraught with intellectual intimidation for so long that we can hardly predict where that new conversation might take us, once it gathers momentum.

We can also bring new theoretical resources to the question how literature itself can serve as an agent for psychological transformation. I earlier mentioned the pandemic of 2020, which has abruptly altered the conditions of life for human beings on this planet. During these months, I have noticed that colleagues in literary studies have turned often to works of social critique as we try to grasp the implications of the crisis for the political future of our country, as well as for global health. But many of us are turning with passionate interest to literary works as well. On social media, we share poems that move us; the poems seem to catalyze complex experiences of fellowship. What are these poems giving us, during these stressful weeks, that expository genres such as journalism, however crucial in their own right, do not?⁵⁵

As Cavitch notes, Bromberg thinks of literary experience as offering the potential for “an authentically relational experience of intersubjectivity between author and reader.”⁵⁶ This relational experience is enabled as well as sometimes strategically disabled by literature, and by art more

generally. But from a conventional antihumanist perspective, the very idea that the author's subjectivity meets our own through the text looks misguided, having settled almost into the status of an academic taboo. On the other hand, Freud himself, in the course of discovering truths within the matrix of literary and cultural contexts, could articulate his findings only by violating many of the taboos of his intellectual milieu. Surely it is one of the ironies of our own day that the revival of questions long relegated to the "humanist" past now offers openings for disciplinary renewal.

Notes

1. Marianne Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, Dickinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 14–15, 103.
2. Katherine Ding, "The Legible Face and the Illegible Body: Face-Work in Lichtenberg, Haywood, and Garrick," *ELH* 85, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 721, 718, 720. Ding's article has a somewhat "postcritical" tenor: like the work, for example, of Heather Love, it draws on the sociology of Erving Goffman, rather than on disciplines such as psychoanalysis that are associated with what, after Paul Ricoeur, is often called the hermeneutics of suspicion. But later in this chapter I speak of conceptual principles that prevail across a wide variety of critical approaches.
3. For those unfamiliar with the contours of antihumanism and posthumanism, a concise and accessible account appears in Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 13–54. Briefly, both paradigms include an idea that the human experience of cohesive selfhood is peculiar to modern Western societies, and is bound up with the ideology of bourgeois individualism. A further shared understanding is that the "self" or "ego" we experience in these societies is a pernicious illusion, which masks the fact that human subjectivity (in all eras) is nonunitary and incoherent – "decentered," "fragmented," "split," or, within a posthumanist lexicon, "distributed" or "assembled." Among the continental theorists whose antihumanist perspectives profoundly influenced the American academy in the last quarter of the twentieth century were Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and, within psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan. When I speak, in these pages, of *poststructuralism*, my reference is to the theorists of this founding generation and to disciples within the academy who share(d) their views. The term *high theory*, used later in this chapter, refers to an array of literary-critical perspectives that were heavily influenced by poststructuralism, and that flourished in the 1980s and the early 1990s. Academic antihumanism persists to the present time, but poststructuralist theory is no longer its commanding element. Since about the turn of the millennium, the decline in the relative status of poststructuralism has commonly been referred to as the "death of theory." See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Penguin, 2003).
4. Tara Brach, Facebook, March 17, 2020.

5. See for example the influential contributions of the psychoanalytic theorists Peter Fonagy, Jody Messler Davies, and Lewis Aron.
6. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You," in E. K. Sedgwick ed., *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37.
7. For *high theory*, see note 3.
8. For *poststructuralism*, see note 3.
9. For *decentered*, see note 3.
10. For a groundbreaking essay that covers this theoretical terrain as well as providing some historical review, see Lewis Aron, "Self-Reflexivity and the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 17 (2000): 667–89.
11. This last assumption, widespread in literary studies, goes back to Lacan's attack on midcentury American ego psychology, a psychoanalytic school that arguably did overemphasize the analysand's adaptation to existing social roles.
12. D. W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1965), 140–57. As a rough and ready measure of the incidence that here concerns me, a search on JSTOR for "Winnicott" alongside "true self," for the discipline "Language and Literature" from 2000 to 2019, yields only sixteen items. But alongside this datum, I'd note that the recent book of Eng and Han, discussed in note 44, makes innovative use of the concepts of the true and false selves.
13. Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 710.
14. Vera J. Camden, "'The Language of Tenderness and of Passion,' or the Place of Sex in Paradise: A Response to Gavin Miller," *New Literary History* 38, no. 4 (2007): 684–85. Camden here paraphrases and expands on a point made by Gavin Miller in the excellent essay to which she formally responds.
15. For a sensitive summary of developments within relational psychoanalysis that are relevant to this point, see Bruce Reis, "The Self Is Alive and Well and Living in Relational Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 22 (2005): 86–95. "Within relational theory the concept of the self continues to occupy a central role. It has survived the premature reports of its demise through a supposed postmodern dissolution" (86).
16. Susan Fairfield, "Analyzing Multiplicity: A Postmodern Perspective on Some Current Psychoanalytic Theories of Subjectivity," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 11, no. 2 (2001): 227. The phrases Fairfield here quotes, from Benjamin's *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), are in turn, as Fairfield notes, Benjamin's quotation from Margo Rivera, "Linking the Psychological and the Social: Feminism, Poststructuralism, and Multiple Personality," *Dissociation* 2 (1989): 28. The bracketed phrase is Benjamin's.
17. Fairfield, "Analyzing Multiplicity," 223.
18. Raul Moncayo, *Evolving Lacanian Perspectives for Clinical Psychoanalysis: On Narcissism, Sexuation, and the Phases of Analysis in Contemporary Culture* (London: Karnac, 2008), 264–65. See also Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*

- to *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), for example, the discussion on p. 89.
19. Cynthia Marshall, "Psychoanalyzing the Prepsychoanalytic Subject," *PMLA* 117, no. 5 (2002): 1208, 1211.
 20. For readers unfamiliar with the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary, a good introductory account appears in the entry "Symbolic/Real/Imaginary" on the website "The Chicago School of Media Theory," from the University of Chicago. <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/symbolicrealimaginary/>
 21. For a concise presentation of this critique, see Philip Cushman, *Constructing The Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History Of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 186–88.
 22. For a fuller account of the persistence of this idea, see Lisa Ruddick, "When Nothing Is Cool," *The Point Magazine*, December 15, 2015, <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/when-nothing-is-cool/>
 23. Among other issues, the antihumanist depreciation of the "autonomous individual" has dire implications for questions of human rights. For a penetrating account of the stakes, see John Brenkman, "Extreme Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (1999): 109–27. Brenkman presents, for example, what I see as an unanswerable criticism of Judith Butler's articulation, in *Excitable Speech*, of "a politics of the performative" that "does not affirm the principle of individual liberty." Rather, Butler "seeks to justify her stand" on free speech "via an ostensibly anti-individualist theory of the subject, language, and power" (125–26). Though Brenkman's article is now two decades old, and the moment of Butler's *Excitable Speech* has come and gone, the impasse Brenkman identifies in "post-Enlightenment, postmodern" approaches to questions of "rights and freedoms" remains a problem (118). Within the domain of literature and psychoanalysis, a stunning article by Kay Torney Souter, also from the turn of the millennium, describes how our profession's critique of the "bounded individual," indebted above all to Lacan, can simplify and even occlude certain "questions of ... human suffering." Souter, "The Products of the Imagination: Psychoanalytic Theory and Postmodern Literary Criticism," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 60, no. 4 (2000): 348, 343. Souter's essay is capacious in its range of psychoanalytic reference, making particularly sensitive use of the theories of Winnicott, Benjamin, Wilfred Bion, Klein, and Fonagy.
 24. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 51.
 25. Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
 26. Amber J. Musser, "Surface-Becoming: Lyle Ashton Harris and Brown Jouissance," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 28, no. 1 (2018): 37.
 27. For *death of theory*, see note 3.
 28. Andrew Rose, "The Unknowable Now: Passionate Science and Transformative Politics in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital Trilogy*," *Science Fiction Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 264, 268, 276.
 29. The book-length work is Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

30. For example, see Peter Fonagy, “Thinking about Thinking: Some Clinical and Theoretical Considerations in the Treatment of a Borderline Patient,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 73, no. 4 (1991): 653.
31. Charles Brenner and Ralph Greenson are two of the most notable of these “ego psychologists.” See, for example, Charles Brenner, *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973) or Ralph R. Greenson, *Explorations in Psychoanalysis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1978). Psychoanalysts have since revised the ego psychologists’ vision of a “one-person psychology.” See for example, Stephen A. Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
32. Marshall, *Shattering*, 2, 13.
33. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.ii. 257.
34. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 73.
35. Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 28, 37. A fine analysis of the same false binary is that of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook. *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). As Whitebook writes, “Critics of the ego, like Adorno and Lacan, . . . tend to hypostatize pathological, rigidified forms of ego formation into the ego as such. As a result, they are left only with a choice between two poisons, namely, violent unification or no unification at all” (p. 14). Whitebook’s work, altogether illuminating, has hardly been recognized by literary scholars. An exception is Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 284.
36. Amy Allen and Mari Ruti, *Critical Theory Between Klein and Lacan: A Dialogue* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), xi.
37. Allen and Ruti, *Critical Theory*, 20. The quoted words are Allen’s.
38. See especially D. L. Carveth, *The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience* (London: Karnac, 2013).
39. Jody Messler Davies, “Multiple Perspectives on Multiplicity,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 8, no. 2 (1998): 195. For a work within literary studies that makes powerful use of Davies’ theories, see Dawn M. Skorczewski, *An Accident of Hope: The Therapy Tapes of Anne Sexton* (New York: Routledge, 2012), especially 27–35.
40. Davies, “Multiple Perspectives,” 201, 205.
41. Stephen A. Mitchell et al. (eds.), *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
42. Philip Bromberg, “‘Speak! That I May See You’: Some Reflections on Dissociation, Reality, and Psychoanalytic Listening,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 4, no. 4 (1994): 541. The article was written in 1994, but subsequent works in relational psychoanalysis do not, to my knowledge, contradict the generalizations Bromberg here makes as to the salient scientific understandings.
43. Max Cavitch, “Dissociative Reading – Philip Bromberg and Emily Dickinson,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 43, no. 4 (2007): 683.
44. In remarking that critique is something our profession excels in, I am not referring to those forms of critique that hinge on the theory of decentered subjectivity. My objections to the latter should be clear from the foregoing discussion. But literary studies abounds in modes of social critique that do not rely on that

theoretical tradition. For a somewhat fuller discussion of the distinction I here draw, see Ruddick, “When Nothing.” For an outstanding example of specifically psychoanalytic inquiry that contributes to social critique but without positing an altogether decentered subjectivity, see David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Working at an intersection of clinical practice and literary criticism, Eng and Han draw particularly on the theories of Klein and Winnicott, alongside Freud. They also occasionally cite contemporary relational theorists.

45. Max Cavitch, “Irregulars,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 49, no. 3 (2013): 414. Italics in the original.
46. Cavitch, “Irregulars,” 411.
47. See for example Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
48. Edelman, *No Future*, 9.
49. Ruddick, “When Nothing.” In that essay I borrow the phrase “greedy institution” from the sociologist Lewis Coser.
50. Donald L. Carveth, “Some Reflections on Lacanian Theory in Relation to Other Currents in Contemporary Psychoanalysis,” unpublished paper presented to the Toronto Psychoanalytic Society (March 1987): 28–29.
51. For a related argument, see the rich analysis in Camden, “Language of Tenderness.”
52. For a psychoanalytic account of the ways in which “patriarchal culture has historically given different contents” to the categories of masculinity and femininity, see Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, xvi, 35–78.
53. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 58. Edelman’s comment regarding the ways in which readers may read or misread Berlant’s theories is mediated through the figure of Eve Sedgwick, who according to Edelman offers a version of affect theory that is in fact more invested in the “maternal hold” than Berlant’s is. But I refer readers to Edelman’s commentary itself, so that amid his sometimes obscure formulations they can decide where they think he takes the overlap between Sedgwick’s ideas and Berlant’s to begin and end.
54. Fraiman anatomizes the ethos of “cool masculinity” as it expresses itself within popular culture as well as within scholarly thought. Susan Fraiman, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Fraiman compares academic cool to the mentality of “the modern adolescent boy in his anxious, self-conscious, and theatricalized will to separate from the mother.” As she adds, “it goes without saying that within this paradigm the place occupied by the mother is by definition uncool” (xii).
55. Rita Felski inquires into the “uses of literature” in a series of works that challenge the maxims of the critical past. See, along with the extremely influential *The Limits of Critique*, her earlier *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), and the recent *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). Felski’s work has been crucial in inaugurating a “postcritical” turn in literary studies. The subfield of literature and psychoanalysis is poised to make interesting contributions to this postcritical conversation.
56. Cavitch, “Dissociative Reading,” 687–88.