

Kaleid oscope

MADELINE BLAKE
The Unbounded Body

CHLOE SPROULE
'Elle s'affiche!'

LAUREN FRASCA
Talking Trash

EVA MACIUKIEWICZ
*Countercultures
at Jasna Góra*

MOHIZ MUHAMMAD
*Aristotle on Moral Habits
in the Attention Economy*

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Contents

- i Letter from the Editors
- 1 “*Elle s’affiche!*”: Shame, Visibility, and The Anti-Epiphany in
Daisy Miller
CHLOE SPROULE
- 22 *Commentaries*
MOHIZ MUHAMMAD
LAUREN FRASCA
- 27 Ethel II [Artwork]
BHREAGH GODIN
- 29 Countercultures at Jasna Góra: Youth, Catholicism, and the
Capacity for Self-Expression in the Polish People’s Republic
EVA MACIUKIEWICZ
- 42 *Commentaries*
CHLOE SPROULE,
MADELINE BLAKE
- 47 Her Back to Me [Artwork]
YUANYI MA

- 49 Aristotle on Moral Habits in the Attention Economy: Outrage
as Incentive, Vice as Outcome
MOHIZ MUHAMMAD
- 68 *Commentaries*
CHLOE SPROULE
LAUREN FRASCA
- 75 Goodnight Little Lamb [Artwork]
BHREAGH GODIN
- 77 Talking Trash: An Ethnography of Street Garbage in
Montreal's Plateau
LAUREN FRASCA
- 94 *Commentaries*
MADELINE BLAKE
EVA MACIUKIEWICZ
- 99 Cupcake [Artwork]
JOELLE SCHRAG
- 101 The Unbounded Body: Grotesque Imagination & Typologies
of Play in the Renaissance Garden
MADELINE BLAKE
- 122 *Commentaries*
MOHIZ MUHAMMAD
EVA MACIUKIEWICZ
- 127 HERD [Artwork]
BHREAGH GODIN

Letter from the Editors

Kaleidoscope begins with the impression that while the various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences appear to probe some of the same phenomena in the world—ourselves, our communities, our practices, our imaginaries—the diverse discourses produced about said phenomena do not make this commonality legible. How can one reconcile the “actor” that forms the basic unit of rational-choice-theory models with, for example, the conflicted self understood by Freud? If this were merely an academic concern, it may not pose much of a problem. One could either commit oneself to a single or few supposedly correct and exhaustive discourses, or indeed embrace the irreconcilable fractures in discourse and its making of so-called reality. However, social coexistence compels us to navigate overlapping matrices that guide and constrain our lives. Each day, we encounter one another at once as consumers, producers, subjects, agents, ideology-bearers, social actors, selves, and Others. The problem here is thus only intellectual insofar as it is lived.

What *Kaleidoscope* presents towards this situation is not to promote the arbitrary and thoughtless compounding of knowledge from the disciplines, like the alchemists of old grasping in the dark for gold—a practice that can invite suspicion from the very disciplines it aims to integrate. What we commit ourselves to, instead, is an experience. Every author that contributes a paper to *Kaleidoscope* is tasked with penning

short commentaries to two of the papers published by their peers. Commenters are therefore far from experts in the matters on which they write, let alone in its methodologies; and this is precisely the point. The exercise here is to think about work whose methodology and subject matter are not one's own, to engage it not as an authority but as a reader and person situated elsewhere. An intellectual task, certainly, though as we have stressed, a human one. Likewise, the reader in their journey through these pages experiences a kind of kaleidoscopic disorientation (apologies, it was a matter of course) whereby these discourses are superimposed across time. Commentaries, in this sense, invite the reader into this space of humanness within and between these modes of knowing.

Of course, all of this constitutes no solution to the problem we have outlined. But it is something.

In this spirit, it is with great pleasure that we publish the first issue of *Kaleidoscope*. Formerly the *McGill Journal of Human Behaviour*, this journal was founded in 2021 with the stated goal of bridging academic approaches tackling the same fundamental problems about how people think and act. Our structural reimagination of the journal through the addition of commentaries, facilitated by the reconfigured authorial fellowships, builds directly from this founding mission. We thus owe many thanks to the past editors who committed countless hours to this project, most of all Celine Huang, who served as Editor-in-Chief when we first began working with the journal and entrusted us with leadership of *Kaleidoscope*. Celine has consistently provided us invaluable help and guidance throughout this process.

Of course, we extend deep thanks to the authors whose work animates these pages. We admire not only your willingness to participate in the collective project that is *Kaleidoscope* but, particularly through the writing of commentaries and the countless back and forths with our editorial team, help construct the foundations for our

future issues. We are equally indebted to our editorial team, namely Nev Hoycyk, Emily Brown, Nora Malhi, Maha Abbas, Sadie Barrett, and Madeline Brown-Vega. Their care and discernment both in the paper-selection and editing process—not to mention their endless patience with us—made this project possible. Likewise, we are grateful for our peer reviewers whose thoughtful feedback, as the authors can attest, enriched the scholarly work on display here. Not to mention Emma Lowry and Luna Dong, our design and communications team, who spearheaded the visual reinvention of Kaleidoscope.

Finally, we owe our greatest thanks to the many members of McGill's Arts Undergraduate Society (ASU) and the Arts & Science Undergraduate Society (ASUS). This journal is not only dedicated to you but was made possible by your collective generosity. We hope that you will find something in these pages that stays with you.

Sincerely,

ALEXANDER LAURIN
Co-Editor-in-Chief

CAMILLE ISTANBOULIAN
Co-Editor-in-Chief

“Elle s’affiche!”

Shame, Visibility, and The Anti-Epiphany in *Daisy Miller*

C H L O E S P R O U L E



This paper explores the mechanisms of shame, visibility, and willed inhibition in Henry James’s Daisy Miller: A Study by way of the foundational affect theorist Silvan Tomkins. By positioning Tomkins’s concepts of the “Shame-Humiliation” complex, affect management, and the taboo on looking as a critical interlocutor to James’s prose, I argue that the novella functions as an examination of the corporeal and social stakes of both shame and shamelessness. The analysis identifies two competing modes of affect management: the “Genevan strategy” of chronic inhibition and self-discipline, epitomized by Winterbourne, and the “primal innocence” of Daisy Miller, whose unflinching gaze challenges the universal taboo on looking, and whose direct pleasure-seeking so appalls the Genevans. Central to this study is the proposal of the “anti-epiphany”—the dark double of the traditional Joycean epiphany. I contend that Winterbourne’s failure to defend Daisy’s dignity against the “contagion” of social shame culminates not in self-transformation but in a psychological shrinkage. Rather than providing an

expansive spark, Winterbourne experiences a flash of recognition that provokes a retreat into ossified habits of inhibition. Ultimately, this paper posits that Daisy's death by Roman Fever serves as shamelessness being literally fatal in a repressive society, while Winterbourne's return to Geneva marks the definitive triumph of shame-fueled self-consciousness against which the figure of Daisy Miller was alluringly posed.

*Why are shame and pride such central motives?
How can loss of face be more intolerable than loss of life?
How can hanging the head in shame so mortify the spirit? . . .
Shame is an experience of the self by the self.*

— Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*

Introduction

Halfway through the twentieth century, psychologist Silvan Tomkins declared that the precise nature of the psychological state we call shame was “still to be determined.”¹ Quaint though it might seem, it was the technological advancements of “high speed moving picture cameras” that led him to believe a comprehensive understanding of the exact response was possible—if one could only get a camera fast enough to capture it.² The central thesis of *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, (his four-volume magnum opus spanning nearly 2,000 pages,) is that the systematic study of people’s emotional expressions, reactions, and interactions can reveal the basic structures of feeling common to all humans. His writing on shame, specifically, is full of forceful and lyrical (if not always well-supported) human truths. Consider his claim that shame “is felt as a sickness of the self,” or that self-consciousness is a kind of mourning.⁴ His commitment to reproducing in full the endless and contradictory motivations of human behaviour

is his distinguishing strength, even if he sometimes reproduces those contradictions on the level of argument. But his poetic style, I posit, positions him well as an interlocutor of literary representations of shame, specifically those interested in what the corporeal has to do with the social.

This paper takes up Henry James's novella *Daisy Miller* as one such study of shame. Deploying Tomkins's critical framework of the affect—particularly in terms of shame's powerful ambivalence, the varying strategies employed to avoid and mitigate it, its circulation via the visual gaze, and its role in structuring the Jamesian anti-epiphany—I argue that James's novella chronicles shame's ability to force an individual away from the precipice of self-discovery and back into the cage of self-consciousness, spoiling a would-be epiphany into its dark double. After briefly summarizing the novella and some core concepts of Tomkins's, I begin by proposing that *Daisy Miller* is largely preoccupied with the appearance of propriety and the exhilarating risks of visibility. Then, I chart the two main strategies of affect management corresponding to the two general classes of people that the novel pits against each other: that of the reserved and self-conscious Genevans, and that of the uninhibited and brash new-money Americans—the latter brought by Daisy to the extreme. This distinction recasts the story's central conflict, that is, Winterbourne's struggle to find “the right way of regarding Miss Daisy Miller,” as merely a symptom of the Genevan shame-response failing to recognize as innocence anything but its perfect social performance.⁵ Finally, I posit that Winterbourne's failure to recognize and later to defend Daisy's dignity against the fatal consequences of social humiliation provokes a shame-fueled drama of anti-epiphany—which I define as epiphany botched, a flash of recognition that causes the self to shrink inwards, close itself off from the world, and indulge in the continual looping and compounding of the shame-response. The anti-epiphany is a retreat from the world, a self-exemption from the possibility of self-transformation, wherein the self is condemned to live out its life in ossifying continuation of its old inhibitive ways.

A Summary of “Daisy Miller”

Subtitled “A Study,” James’s 1879 novella chronicles the ill-fated European tour of Miss Daisy Miller, a young, newly-moneyed American woman on holiday with her mother, Mrs. Miller, and her nine-year-old brother, Randolph. The narrative is recounted by Frederick Winterbourne, an older American man and seasoned expatriate who has been living in Geneva for some years. They meet by chance on a balcony at Vevey, a resort town in Switzerland. Winterbourne is immediately intrigued by Daisy’s charming looks and brash naïvete, though his aunt, Mrs. Costello, warns him that the Millers are socially common and he ought not risk associating his name with theirs. Despite these warnings, Winterbourne takes Daisy to the Chateau de Chillon unescorted—a significant breach of etiquette. He is delighted with her forwardness and lack of modesty, but ultimately perplexed as to whether her ignorance is childish innocence or a more deviant and knowing pleasure-taking. After a week of courting, he decides she is merely a young flirt, and leaves Vevey for Geneva. Daisy is distraught and makes him promise to visit her in Rome that winter.

Winterbourne travels to Rome, and hears rumors from acquaintances that Daisy’s behaviour has been indiscreet; that she goes out at night with men unchaperoned, that her mother has positively abandoned her. He meets Daisy unexpectedly in the parlor of Mrs. Walker, a leading socialite of the American expatriate community in Italy. She flirts with him briefly, then announces she is leaving to take a walk with an Italian gentleman, Mr. Giovanelli. Mrs. Walker is scandalized and tries to explain to Daisy why this excursion would be highly improper. Daisy, playfully, asks that Winterbourne chaperone her to the grounds of the Pincio. He does so and is handing off Daisy to Mr. Giovanelli, when Mrs. Walker arrives in her carriage to lecture Daisy about the utter impropriety of her behaviour. Daisy coolly replies that if her behaviour were truly improper, then she must be improper, and the rest of them ought to forsake her.

When Mrs. Walker hosts a party a few days later, Daisy arrives late with Mr. Giovanelli as rumours continue to circulate.

As Daisy is departing, Mrs. Walker snubs her by refusing to acknowledge her departure, effectively ostracizing the young woman from the expatriate society for which she, Mrs. Walker, is a sort of matriarch. From then on, Winterbourne sees very little of her, but continues to maintain that she is a brash but essentially innocent girl. Late at night, while strolling by the Colosseum, Winterbourne happens upon Daisy and Mr. Giovanelli together inside the arena and he begins to feel like a fool. He tells Daisy she ought to go home at once, didn't she know that Roman Fever was especially contagious at night? He chastises Mr. Giovanelli for not knowing any better, for risking Daisy's life with his incaution.

A few weeks later, Winterbourne hears that Daisy has been ill with the Roman Fever and has passed away. He hears, too, that while fevering Daisy had asked that a message be passed on to him. She wanted him to know that she was never engaged and never intended to marry Mr. Giovanelli. At her funeral, Giovanelli tells Winterbourne that Daisy was the most innocent person he ever knew. Finally, Winterbourne returns to Geneva with crushing doubt about his understanding of Daisy, regret that he had not done more by her, and the realization that he had lived too long in Europe.

Tomkins's Theories: The Four General Images, Shame, and the Taboo on Looking

Each person is equipped with a biological affective system that includes, per Tomkins, nine affective complexes that sometimes come in pairs to map increasing levels of intensity. These include two positive (Enjoyment-Joy, Interest-Excitement), one neutral (Surprise-Startle), and six negative affective complexes (Shame-Humiliation, Anger-Rage, Fear-Terror, Distress-Anguish, Distaste, and Dissmell). The existence of these complexes all but guarantees the development, writes Tomkins, of the following four "blueprints," "General Images," or put more plainly, strategic motivations that often compete with one another.⁶ For the feeling individual, the first goal is to maximize positive affect; the second, to minimize negative affect; the third, to minimize affect inhibition; and the fourth, to maximize one's power to

achieve the preceding three goals.⁷ That these strategies, not one of them “self-evident” or “tautological,” compete with one another for primacy accounts for much of man’s internal conflict, states Tomkins.⁸ The first and second images, for instance, represent the timeless human dilemma of pursuing pleasure without risking pain. Moreover, in pursuing positive affect too directly, one risks the indignity associated with hedonism and the distress of surfeiting on pleasure; yet a mandate against negative affect bars the individual from the rewards of overcoming discomfort, fear, or shame. Each balance struck between the two is a necessarily unstable compromise. Tomkins’s third image keeps affect inhibition to a minimum, given that repression leads to the welling up of “a residual form of [that] affect which is at once heightened, distorted, chronic, and . . . severely punitive.”⁹ Chronic suppression can interfere with the attainment of other images, as seen in the “person who has been unable to cry in distress, much of his life, [seeking] out opportunities to cry,” therefore violating the second image in favour of the third.¹⁰ Finally, the fourth strategy of total control jeopardizes the success of the preceding three, since its prioritization stipulates that it is better to emit a controlled smile than to erupt in wild laughter; better to bite back one’s tears rather than let them flow freely. Strategic repression risks, and not always mindfully, the dangers of inhibition. The minimization of shame, specifically, and the residual desire its inhibition produces are two parts of one particularly important course of action in the work of Henry James, fixated as he is on the self-defeating aspects of consciousness.

The response to “Shame-Humiliation,” one of the five negative affects, is “literally an ambivalent turning of the eyes away from the object toward the face, toward the self.”¹¹ The break of facial communication acts to reduce the two positive effects of Interest-Excitement and Enjoyment-Joy, but only ever incompletely.¹² The shame response therefore contains a kernel of interest and desire—such is the “peculiar poignancy” of the humiliated individual’s wish to still look and be looked at with interest and enjoyment.¹³ It is also the most reflexive affect and therefore the most closely linked with identity and

identification.¹⁴ Activated by indignity, defeat, transgression, or alienation, Tomkins claims that shame “strikes deepest into the heart of man,” for how else can “loss of face [seem]” to the pitilessly shamed “more intolerable than loss of life?”¹⁵ Its nature is also self-defeating and compounding. Being “both an interruption and a further impediment to communication,” in the shame response, “one has communicated one’s shame and both the face and the self unwittingly become more visible, to the self and others.”¹⁶ Generating the “torment of self-consciousness” and triggering a positive feedback loop of “heightened visibility,” shame is also self-defeating; it turns out that “one is as ashamed of being ashamed as of anything else.”¹⁷ Crucially for affect theorists and curiously for the student of Henry James, since “shame lives on the face, and within the face shame burns brightest in the eyes,” it generates and is generated by the visual gaze, governed by what Tomkins calls the “universal taboo on looking.”¹⁸

The taboo on mutual looking is first “a taboo on intimacy,” and second, a sensitivity to whatever “cultural constraints might be placed on the direct expression of affect.”¹⁹ It feeds off of the “unique capacity of the look-look with respect to the expression, communication, contagion, escalation, and control of affects.”²⁰ In this way, the “poker-face” minimizes exposure and contagion, while the open gaze maximizes vulnerability, intimacy, and the possibility of first-hand gaze-rejection and second-hand embarrassment.²¹ And yet, since the inhibition of affect comes with the perverse desire to breach it, there also exists a universal wish to look and be looked at.²² As such, each person who inhibits the expression, witnessing, or sharing of a given affect is nevertheless a “would-be voyeur” and “exhibitionist” of those same responses. *Daisy Miller* focalizes on the cosmopolitan class’s “exaggerated awareness of [...] being looked at and the terrifying and humiliating consequences of such visibility,” the lack of that awareness in the *nouveau riche* Americans, and the equally serious consequences of “not being looked at and of losing the attention of the other.”²³

Daisy Miller: A Study in Shame

The Contagion of the Look

The highly volatile experience of looking and being looked at structures the central dramas of *Daisy Miller*. From the abortive attempts at intimacy to the weaponized cold shoulder, shame spreads rapidly between its characters, carried by the vector of the visual gaze. It is even literally treated by the moneyed expat Americans as a contagious disease to be avoided by shielding oneself from public view, obscuring indecency with the careful placement of a parasol. From their first meeting, Winterbourne is preoccupied with attracting and holding Daisy's gaze. When, upon addressing her, Daisy "simply glance[s] at him . . . then turn[s] her head and look[s] over the parapet," Winterbourne wonders "whether he ha[s] gone too far."²⁴ Her breach of the look-look alerts him to a potential indiscretion, but he defends against oncoming shame by "decid[ing to] advance farther, rather than retreat," and so asks another question, this time "in a tone of great respect."²⁵ Another curt response leaves him "a little embarrassed," but he soon "ceas[es] to be embarrassed, for he [begins] to perceive that she [is] not in the least embarrassed herself."²⁶ He rationalizes the allowance of his boldness with the deduction that "look[ing] another way" was "simply her habit, her manner." As she "gradually [gives] him more of the benefit of her glance," he sees that "this glance [is] perfectly direct and unshrinking."²⁷ The taboos on looking, intimacy, and expression (of which Winterbourne and Daisy are, respectively, extremely and hardly aware), are activated, and the young man becomes "conscious that he had been very bold" and worries she might be "offended."²⁸ That his following remarks oscillate between eager forwardness and abashed overcorrection by way of excessive civility indicates a conflict between the goals of maximizing self-control and minimizing shame, on the one hand, and releasing inhibited positive affect, on the other.

Visibility is strategically harnessed by *Daisy Miller*'s agents to achieve the image(s) that suit them. For example, Mrs. Costello, Winterbourne's reclusive puritanical aunt, acknowledges that

dignity and indignity alike can be passed from one person to the next by mere proximity and interocular exchange when she refuses to “guarantee [her nephew’s] respectability” by letting Daisy “know” her, since there is no one is “to guarantee [Daisy’s].”²⁹ She manages who sees her and with whom she is seen in accordance with her desire to eschew shame-by-association, even if that means “know[ing] no one” at Vevey.³⁰ This effect scales to the gaze of the general public, as when Mrs. Walker proposes using visibility to mend Daisy’s reputation by “driv[ing] her about [the Pincio] for half an hour, so that the world may see she is not running absolutely wild.”³¹ By contrast, when hotel guests and tourists “all [look] at her very hard,” Daisy “avoid[s] neither [Winterbourne’s] eyes nor those of anyone else; she blushes neither when she look[s] at him nor when she feels that people [are] looking at her.”³² Daisy’s unflinching glance marks her as apparently unaffected by the possibility of contagion. Winterbourne, who “had been a little afraid that she would talk loud [or] laugh overmuch” and thus embarrass him, “. . . quite forgot his fears” and ends by “[sitting,] smiling, with his eyes upon her face.”³³ Here, Winterbourne’s fear of excesses of visual attention are hinted at but safely skirted, and Daisy’s willingness to break the taboo on looking encourages him to do the same.

However, as warnings pile up that her free circulation and “going round” will result in her “being talked about,” the taboo on looking reasserts its pressure on Daisy through paratactical connections between notoriety and the Roman fever.³⁴ When Daisy asks to walk with Giovanelli in the Pincio, Mrs. Walker replies: “I don’t think it’s safe, my dear,—‘Neither do I,’ subjoin[s her mother,] ‘you’ll get the fever, as sure as you live.’”³⁵ Whether they are using the disease as a proxy threat to frighten and deter Daisy, or whether they equate the dangers of public promiscuity with a public health exposure, matters little, as both support the notion of the visual gaze operating as a vector for social shame. When, later, Mrs. Walker snubs her at her party, Daisy doesn’t blush as she usually does but instead “turn[s] very pale,” auguring both her social death from notoriety and her literal death from “a terrible case of the fever.”³⁶ Later still,

when Daisy claims she has “never seen anything so pretty” as the Colosseum in the evening, Winterbourne retorts bitterly that she “will not find Roman fever very pretty, [for] this is the way people catch it. [He] wonders . . . that Giovanelli, a native Roman, should countenance such a terrible indiscretion.”³⁷ The paratactical implication here is that *indiscretion* is “the way people catch” the Roman fever, equating Daisy’s circulation with the circulation of shame and the transmission of infectious diseases.³⁸ This is finally echoed in Randolph’s childlike understanding of his sister’s illness: “it was going around at night . . . —that’s what made her sick!”³⁹ In this way, James brings the infectious connotations of glancing and looking described by Tomkins to their fatal extreme in *Daisy Miller*, illustrating the equally grave risks of the taboo on looking.

Gallantry & Cruelty: The Genevan Strategy

The Genevan strategy of image-compromise, employed with struggle by Winterbourne and perfectly by Mrs. Walker, promotes Calvinist self-discipline and social propriety as defenses against excesses of visual attention or social shame. The Genevan strives to inoculate herself against the possibility of humiliation, even if that means never indulging in pleasures and severing herself from shamed individuals for fear of infection-by-association. The most offensive indiscretions are delicately referred to by Mrs. Walker as “going too far” or being “carried away”; under her framework, to pursue any positive affect too directly is to risk indignity and risk losing control, thus imperiling the second and fourth general images.⁴⁰ Mrs. Walker is the expert practitioner of this strategy. When the desire to minimize shame and maximize propriety conflict, as when Winterbourne reproaches her for chasing Daisy in the carriage, “[thinking] it a most unpleasant scene,” since “it’s a pity to make too much fuss about it,” Mrs. Walker retorts that “[i]t’s a pity to let the girl ruin herself!”⁴¹ After Daisy refuses to yield to her remonstrances, Mrs. Walker declares that “if [Daisy] is so perfectly determined to *compromise* herself, the sooner one knows the better; one can act accordingly,” and forthwith instructs Winterbourne to “cease [his] relations with Miss Miller . . . to

give her no further opportunity to expose herself.”⁴² The scene is, however, more humiliating for Mrs. Walker, who has “tears in her eyes,” than for Daisy.⁴³ Anticipating the indignity of being associated with such an “indelicate” woman, Mrs. Walker “turn[s] her back straight upon Miss Miller” at her party, weaponizing the refusal of the look-look to tank Daisy’s reputation in the zero-sum game of shame deferral.⁴⁴ This cruel abandonment represents the end-stage of the Genevan strategy, to be shamefully replicated by Winterbourne by the novella’s end.

The Genevan standard exists shakily in Winterbourne’s mind under the misnomer of “gallantry,” ostensibly his regent value.⁴⁵ Daisy has a different name for it, repeatedly accusing him of being “stiff.” His subsequent admission that “when [he] is angry [he’s] stiffer than ever” testifies to the rigidity of his bodily response and the white-knuckle grip he has over his affect responses.⁴⁶ Whenever Winterbourne cries that he “ha[s] lived too long at Geneva,” he is acknowledging that he is so acclimatized to the “dark old city” that he is “dishabituated to the American tone” and has gotten used to the restrictive effects of chronic inhibition.⁴⁷ He mistakes, for instance, Randolph’s announcement that his “father’s in a better place than Europe” for a tactful intimation that “Mr. Miller ha[s] been removed to the sphere of celestial reward.”⁴⁸ Unveiling one euphemism by means of another is an exceedingly Genevan method of avoiding distress and shame at all costs. His being “impatient” to continue engaging with Daisy once he learns that “anything might be expected of her” reveals the titillating desire that her breach in decorum elicits in him; again and again he capitulates to temptation, “perilous[ly] mix[ing] . . . gallantry and impiety.”⁴⁹ It is her apparent immunity to shame that beguiles him, and the subsequent realization that she is as vulnerable as anyone else that ultimately shatters his interest in her “mystifying manners” for good.⁵⁰

Passer ses Fantaisies: Daisy’s ‘Strategy’

What so perplexes and charms her admirer-cum-(failed)-champion is that Daisy’s strategy of affect management is the inverse of his; she is the exhibitionist to his voyeur, and thus

reconnects him to his own latent desire to ‘exhibit,’ and sparks his tabooed desire to “look and be looked at,” to indulge, even if only by surrogate, in those positive affects he has so thoroughly suppressed.⁵¹ Daisy lives for positive affect; for the pleasures of “society,” especially that of gentlemen; for “lovely dress[es]” of “muslin flounces”; for the pleasure of “a little fuss.”⁵² She reveals a more conscious knowledge than any other character that affect repression is dangerous, as evidenced by her response to Mrs. Walker’s injunction that she cease walking about with men, as it isn’t the custom: “Well, it ought to be, then! . . . If I didn’t walk I should expire.”⁵³ This exaggeration is truer than it seems: since she is not predisposed to inhibition, it might (and indeed does) kill her not to exercise her will. Moreover, she doesn’t rush to defend herself from further humiliation when she experiences shame (like the Genevans would) and doesn’t overprioritize the second and fourth affects. She doesn’t, for instance, share Winterbourne’s shyness in discussing that his aunt “doesn’t want to know her”: “Why don’t you say so? You needn’t be afraid. I’m not afraid,” she assures him, causing him to be “touched, shocked, and mortified” by what he “fancies” (at this point in the story, not knowing better) is “a tremor in her voice.”⁵⁴

A Want of Finish: Social & Primal Innocence

The affective dynamics of shame also come into play as Winterbourne labours to “make up his mind about Miss Daisy” and solve the question of her “innocence.”⁵⁵ He often proposes that she is innocent, as if trying the word out on her, yet always qualifies this statement with a rejoinder. He balances the word “innocent” with a slew of what are positioned as its antonyms: “unsophisticated,” “common,” “wild,” “uncultivated,” “crud[e],” “ignorant,” “indelicate,” “audac[ious],” “pueril[e],” “crazy,” “a flirt,” and “of the reckless class.”⁵⁶ Tellingly, the sum of these descriptors averages out not to an alternative to innocence, but rather a more essential version of it. Wildness and lack of cultivation, for instance, invoke the Edenic purity of nature unspoiled by man; unsophistication and crudity, likewise, refer to blameless barefacedness, inexperience instead of worldliness.

In their paper “*Daisy Miller* and the Metaphysician,” Frankie Wilson and Max Westbrook approach innocence developmentally, writing that “a social innocent is *too* self-conscious and gives excessive weight to the rules and powers of propriety and the dating game,” a classification which roughly correlates to the Genevan defense against shame and heightened awareness of visibility.⁵⁷ The “primal innocent,” on the other hand, “is just the opposite: there is no blushing or flirtatious self-consciousness, and social rules are not felt to be real. That which brings pleasure—sugar, dinner parties, or whatever—is desired, but what is real to the primal innocent is inclination.”⁵⁸ Primal innocence is, in this way, developmentally antecedent to the shame response, since *inclination* is ostensibly antithetical to inhibition.

This agrees with Daisy’s proposed style of affect management: to maximize the positive, not anticipate too sensitively the negative, and to eschew inhibition and control as an initiate in a social order who has not yet been given good reason to value reservation. Under this reading it tracks that innocence in *Daisy Miller* has an intimate relationship with shame. Primally, innocence describes a low sensitivity to shame, and socially, a performance of innocence defends against shame’s generation and contagion. When Mrs. Walker threatens that, should she promenade so carelessly, she will be “talked about,” Daisy responds, seriously: “I don’t think I know what you mean. I don’t think I should like it.”⁵⁹ Here, she displays that though she has an awareness of the markers of propriety, she rejects their validity and removes herself from their bind, not feeling them to be real—“If this is improper, Mrs. Walker,” she pursues, “then I am all improper, and you must give me up.”⁶⁰

Her value as yet indeterminate in his eyes, Winterbourne is charmed and perplexed by Daisy because he thinks she operates outside of the contagion of shame—that structure which so oppresses his own life—*until*, between the carriage scene and the party snub, he realizes that she is merely operating in a stage *before* shame—hence her “want of finish”—and is as vulnerable as anyone else.⁶¹ In other words, he comes to realize that the challenge he admired her for apparently overcoming (and that

he has been fighting his whole adult life) was in reality one that Daisy had not yet reached. It is only after he has seen her ashamed that he declares “that she ha[s] no more surprises for him.”⁶² His remark to his aunt that “Daisy and her mamma have not yet risen to that stage of—what shall I call it?—of culture at which the idea of catching a count or a marchese begins” implicitly registers his recognition of them as being of an earlier developmental stage than the old-money expats.⁶³ It is not that she is a shameless *inconduite*, but rather that she has not yet been inducted into the cohort of the shame-hyperconscious elite. But Winterbourne’s conflict continues: he still sees her as being of primal innocence and as a victim of the repressive structure that he suffers from, but he doesn’t have the strength to defend her from judgment. He admits as much when he expresses that “he [feels] very sorry for her . . . because it [is] painful to hear so much that was pretty, and undefended, and natural assigned to a vulgar place among the categories of disorder.”⁶⁴ But he ultimately caves to the outward pressure of a hundred scolding eyes. Marked by a modicum of jealousy, it “annoy[s] him to suspect” that she does not feel “all the cold shoulders.”⁶⁵ After waffling between the theories that, on the one hand, “she [is] too light and childish . . . too provincial to have reflected on her ostracism, or to even have perceived it,” and on the other, that

she carrie[s] about in her elegant and irresponsible little organism a defiant, passionate, perfectly observant consciousness of the impression she produce[s] . . . he ask[s] himself whether Daisy’s defiance comes from the consciousness of innocence, or from her being, essentially, a young person of the reckless class,

he ultimately chides himself for believing in her innocence at all.⁶⁶ “He [is ultimately] angry,” and feels that “holding oneself to a belief in Daisy’s innocence [is seeming] more and more a matter of fine-spun gallantry.”⁶⁷ Such is the moral backsliding produced by an imperative to minimize shame at all costs.

The Anti-Epiphany

The literary anti-epiphany is a caesura from the world, a tragedy in three acts. Act I is the missed opportunity, the cowardly inaction, the shameful inability to leave the comfort of established life patterns and risk being looked at for the rewards of being seen. It is the fourth image carried to the extreme; an individual who would rather die than lose face crumbles under the pressure of heightened visibility. Act II is their subsequent attempt to reduce that shame, bury it beneath plausible deniability, lash out angrily at its cause, and attempt to magick away the guilt with propped-up logic. It is also a performance for the benefit of the witness, a distancing tactic to mitigate the shame's contagion. In Act III, the pendulum swings. After a period of regretful torment, the inhibited shame resurfaces, prompting the belated realization that, actually, it was never too late to right the course—until now, that is. Finally able to acknowledge their mistake (only once, coincidentally, there remains no course of action to ever correct it) the subject of the anti-epiphany is semi-conscious of a great failure, yet resigned more than ever by the punishing shame of their quasi-attempt at transformation to continuing their old, sour ways. That they cannot even bear to look their failure in the face adds to the “peculiar poignancy” and bitter irony of their situation.⁶⁸ Like the epiphany, the anti-epiphany consists of a flash of recognition, a brief vision of the unveiled structure of reality, but unlike its enlightened counterpart, the subject of the anti-epiphany shrinks from this knowledge instead of rising to it. Instead of those epiphanic reports of “and from that moment, everything changed,” “everything,” in this case, remains awfully the same.

Winterbourne's Act I takes place between the grounds of the Pincio and the Palace of the Caesars—he receives (and squanders) two chances to intervene in the courses of both Daisy's and his lives and nears precipitously close to actionable self-awareness in both. First, when Daisy asks playfully if “Mr. Winterbourne think[s] . . . that, in order to save [her] reputation, [she] ought to get into [Mrs. Walker's] carriage,” a request which causes the man to “colour” and “hesitate greatly,” he reasons that he must

“speak in accordance with gallantry,” and “the finest gallantry here was simply to tell her the truth; and the truth . . . was that Daisy Miller should take Mrs. Walker’s advice.”⁶⁹ Daisy, for her part, laughs, exclaiming that she “has never heard anything so stiff!”⁷⁰ Gallantry, as I have pointed out, is Winterbourne’s unwitting referent for the Genevan strategy, and stiffness is Daisy’s nickname for the same. But gallantry is lost on Daisy, and its functional weakness against shame is thus exposed—to the horror of Mrs. Walker and the displeasure of Winterbourne. His second and final chance occurs in the gardens, when Daisy appeals to him for solidarity in her ostracization: “I shouldn’t think you would let people be so unkind! . . . I should think you would say something,” to which Winterbourne limply replies: “I do say something . . . I say that your mother tells me that she believes you are engaged.”⁷¹ His submission to the second and fourth images initiates him into the first act of the anti-epiphany.

Act II takes place at the Colosseum when, stopping “with a sort of horror . . . with a sort of relief,” Winterbourne is visited by a “sudden illumination . . . flash[ing] upon the ambiguity of Daisy’s behaviour, and the riddle [of her innocence becomes] easy to read.”⁷² Here, he experiences a false epiphany: it occurs to him and *relieves* him that Daisy “is a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect,” allowing him to release himself from that obligation he had already “taken pains” to neglect.⁷³ He buries his shame with self-righteous frustration, speaking “brutally” and “[feeling] angry with himself that he had bothered so much about the right way of regarding Miss Daisy Miller.”⁷⁴ In this Act, he also realigns his gaze with that of the scornful witnesses, looking upon Daisy as a sorry spectacle rather than a subject of identification.

Act III is gestured at by the novella’s final part. Winterbourne has regained all his reticence and composure, has hardened and cooled into all his pre-Daisy stiffness, but it is clear that he has intuited, however dimly, his error: “it was on his conscience that he had done [Daisy] an injustice.”⁷⁵ Tepidly and ambiguously, he admits that “she would have appreciated one’s esteem.”⁷⁶ His aunt misconstrues this as a lament for a missed romantic connection,

but this paper reveals it to be a coded expression of his desire to have conferred on Daisy shame's opposites: dignity, respect, the intimacy of the look-look—in short, to not have abandoned her to save his own face.⁷⁷ Though the extent to which Winterbourne can barefacedly approach this fact in his mind is unclear, James is unambiguous about how he copes with the novella's events: he goes “back to live at Geneva,” whence the same “report[s] that he is “studying” hard . . . and much interested in a very clever foreign lady” continue to emerge.⁷⁸ This line is the narrative's most damning condemnation: it was all for nothing—or worse than nothing, since his shame has overtaken him, and he is evidently “stiffer than ever”—this time, readers understand, for good.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Tomkins's affect theory, in accounting for the paralyzing feedback loops of shame, self-awareness, and desire, makes a substantial interpretive intervention in narratives like *Daisy Miller* that seek to study the over-weened and highly sensitive constitutions of the cosmopolitan class. This paper, having read with an eye for the interdependent systems of the shame response, lights upon the meaning-rich layer of visibility, strategy, and contagion in James's seemingly simple account of Americans abroad. I recast the standard question of Daisy's ‘innocence’ as a query into the relationship her detractors have with shame and the moralistic and epidemiological projections they cast onto what is essentially, in terms of psychological development, inclination. The power, ambivalence, and “peculiar poignancy” of shame also help to define an entire new structure to be identified in modernist short stories. In addition to being a quiet but forceful form of tragedy, the anti-epiphany reveals the textual limits of character development and self-realization, and therefore also implicates the ability of the short story to catalogue and instigate self-transformation in its characters and readers. For every Stephen Dedalus, arguably, there are scores of Winterbournes at once terrified and titillated by a chance to transgress, which they will, inevitably, squander. Winterbourne's timidity, punitive self-correction, cowardice, egoism, and repressed desire to look and

be looked at give him the fine texture of psychological realism—leagues more relatable to the average reader than anyone would like to admit.

Humanity is at the mercy of its emotions. Control, even if it works, never lasts. The motivations that guide our behaviour are largely involuntary and fundamentally contradictory, perplexing at best, debilitating at worst. Taking a broad view of literature, what emerges is a transhistorical catalogue of human feeling and the various strategies people employ to shape, reject, spread, mediate, repress, intensify, and prolong certain feelings over others. There are at least as many unique compromises as there have been people in the world. To study how one person interfaces with the felt experience of emotion is to polish one tile in a near-infinite mosaic of human behaviour. The more one studies affect, as Tomkins would surmise, the simpler structures appear, even as the navigation of those structures by humans explodes into millions of creative and improvisatory compromises. Shame is an especially potent site for the study of human behaviour. It is the affect most closely linked with one's identity, but also with one's sense of belonging in a community. Shame is reflexive; shame tells on itself. If nothing else, I encourage you not to look away from it.

Notes

1. Silvan E. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 135.
2. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 135.
3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 63.
4. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 135, 138.

5. Henry James, *Daisy Miller: A Study* (Duke Classics, 2012), 32.
6. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 67.
7. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 67.
8. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 68.
9. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 69.
10. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 70.
11. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 137.
12. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 147.
13. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 138.
14. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 136.
15. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 136.
16. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 137.
17. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 137.
18. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 144.
19. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 144.
20. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 144-45.
21. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 145.
22. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 145.
23. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 148.
24. James, *Daisy Miller*, 303.
25. James, *Daisy Miller*, 304.
26. James, *Daisy Miller*, 304.
27. James, *Daisy Miller*, 304.
28. James, *Daisy Miller*, 308.
29. James, *Daisy Miller*, 310.
30. James, *Daisy Miller*, 312.
31. James, *Daisy Miller*, 325, emphasis added.
32. James, *Daisy Miller*, 317.
33. James, *Daisy Miller*, 317.
34. James, *Daisy Miller*, 335.
35. James, *Daisy Miller*, 322.
36. James, *Daisy Miller*, 331, 337.
37. James, *Daisy Miller*, 336.
38. James, *Daisy Miller*, 336.
39. James, *Daisy Miller*, 337.
40. James, *Daisy Miller*, 320-21.
41. James, *Daisy Miller*, 325.
42. James, *Daisy Miller*, 327, emphasis added.
43. James, *Daisy Miller*, 326.

44. James, *Daisy Miller*, 330.
45. James, *Daisy Miller*, 326.
46. James, *Daisy Miller*, 329.
47. James, *Daisy Miller*, 311, 315.
48. James, *Daisy Miller*, 305.
49. James, *Daisy Miller*, 311-12.
50. James, *Daisy Miller*, 338.
51. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 147.
52. James, *Daisy Miller*, 306, 301, 315.
53. James, *Daisy Miller*, 325.
54. James, *Daisy Miller*, 312.
55. James, *Daisy Miller*, 310-11.
56. James, *Daisy Miller*, 307, 313, 310, 311, 320, 319, 327, 331, 325, 333.
57. Max Westbrook and Frankie Wilson, "Daisy Miller and the Metaphysician," *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 13, no. 2 (1980): 272.
58. Westbrook and Wilson, "Daisy Miller," 272, emphasis added.
59. James, *Daisy Miller*, 327.
60. James, *Daisy Miller*, 327.
61. James, *Daisy Miller*, 304.
62. James, *Daisy Miller*, 331.
63. James, *Daisy Miller*, 332.
64. James, *Daisy Miller*, 333.
65. James, *Daisy Miller*, 333.
66. James, *Daisy Miller*, 333.
67. James, *Daisy Miller*, 333.
68. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 138.
69. James, *Daisy Miller*, 326.
70. James, *Daisy Miller*, 326.
71. James, *Daisy Miller*, 335.
72. James, *Daisy Miller*, 336.
73. James, *Daisy Miller*, 336.
74. James, *Daisy Miller*, 336.
75. James, *Daisy Miller*, 338.
76. James, *Daisy Miller*, 338.
77. James, *Daisy Miller*, 338.
78. James, *Daisy Miller*, 339.
79. James, *Daisy Miller*, 329.

Commentary

This paper does something quietly violent to *Daisy Miller*: it strips the novella of its familiar moral delicacy and exposes the social mechanics that make Daisy legible as a case of impropriety in the first place. Tomkins is used well here. Once his four “general images” of affect are in view, Mrs. Walker’s closed carriage, Mrs. Costello’s exquisitely edited social circle, and Winterbourne’s own wooden self-possession all start to look like local variants of the same project, an anxious management of affect, a campaign to keep disgrace at bay.

What makes the essay stick, though, is what it suggests about modern recognition itself. The argument about Roman fever and notoriety as parallel contagions is sharp; shame moves through looks and whispers, and James lets that logic harden into plot when Daisy’s nocturnal wandering becomes literally deadly. Her “going round at night” circulates both germs and gossip. The distinction between social innocence and primal innocence is also well judged, and it opens up a question the paper only glances at, namely, how shame is supposed to function. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* treats shame as educative rather than virtuous, something that belongs to the young insofar as it checks desire before judgment has fully settled. Read that way, Daisy’s “want of finish” is not moral rot; it looks more like incompleteness, a preceding stage where inclination still runs ahead of inhibition, and where the shame economy has not yet fully taken root.

The real twist, though, comes with the account of the anti-epiphany, and this is where the paper feels most original. Winterbourne's three movements, from his failure of solidarity at the Pincio, through his spurious "illumination" in the Colosseum, to his decorous retreat to Geneva, reads less as a botched love story and more as a Proustian lesson in insight without amendment. That is, the cruel fact that insight does not reorganize a life. It registers, it stings, and habit closes over it anyway. Like Swann, who sees Odette with brutal clarity and goes on loving her, Winterbourne achieves a faint recognition that he has wronged Daisy and then drifts back to his clever foreign women and his studies. Set against Joyce's clean, converting epiphany, this Jamesian, almost Proustian pattern suggests that self-knowledge does not save us; it flares up briefly, is registered, and then quietly sinks, leaving the old scruples and inhibitions perfectly in place.

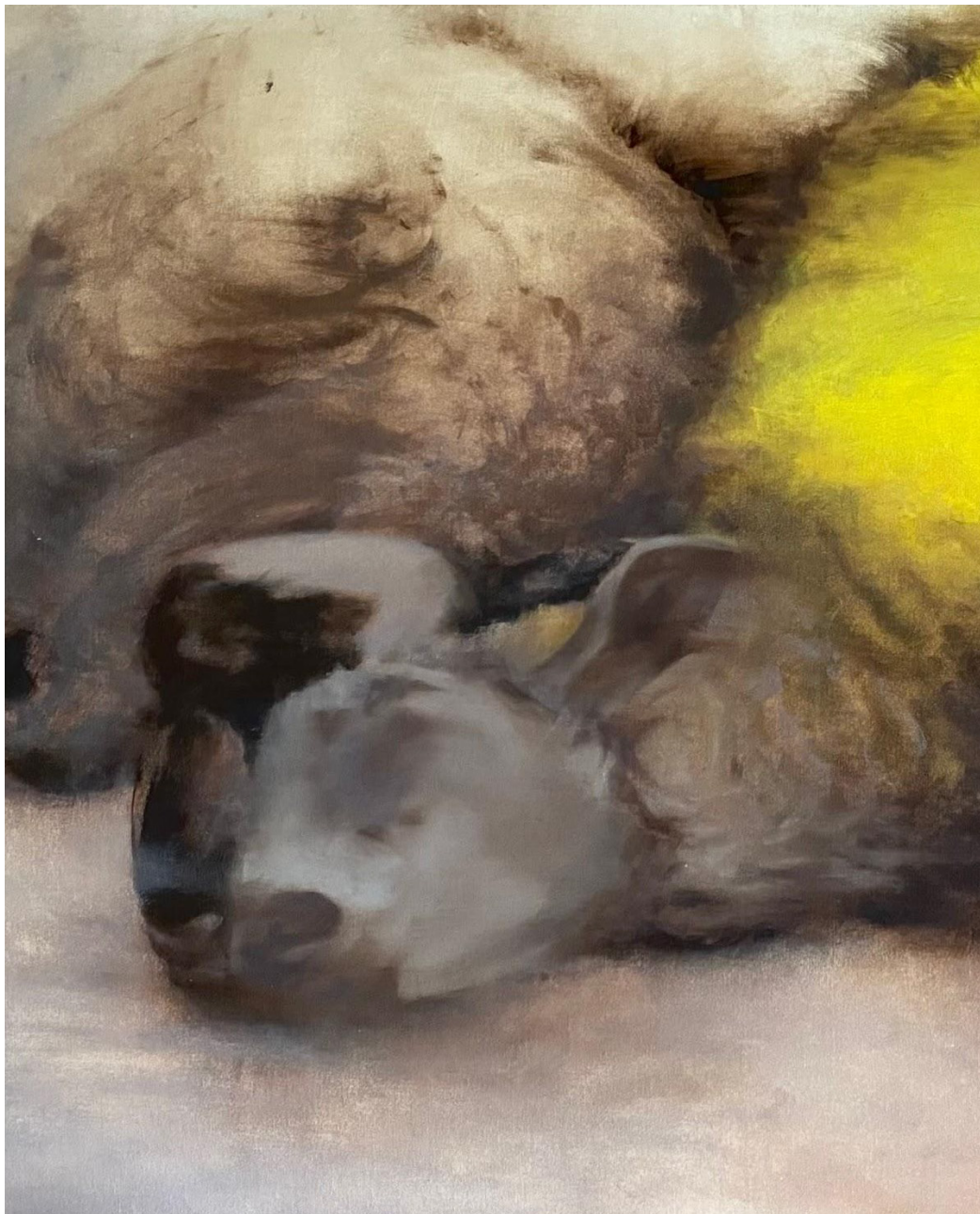
Commentary

The centrality of character in *Daisy Miller* and its affective analysis demonstrates how literature provides an invaluable site that gives form to the ineffable, unspoken, and repressed intensities of living amongst others. In James' narrative, the circulation of affect and practice of affect-management—often unconscious and occurring at the level of feeling rather than reflection—can be traced, highlighting how even the most complex relationships and minute events can have critical significance for examinations of human life.

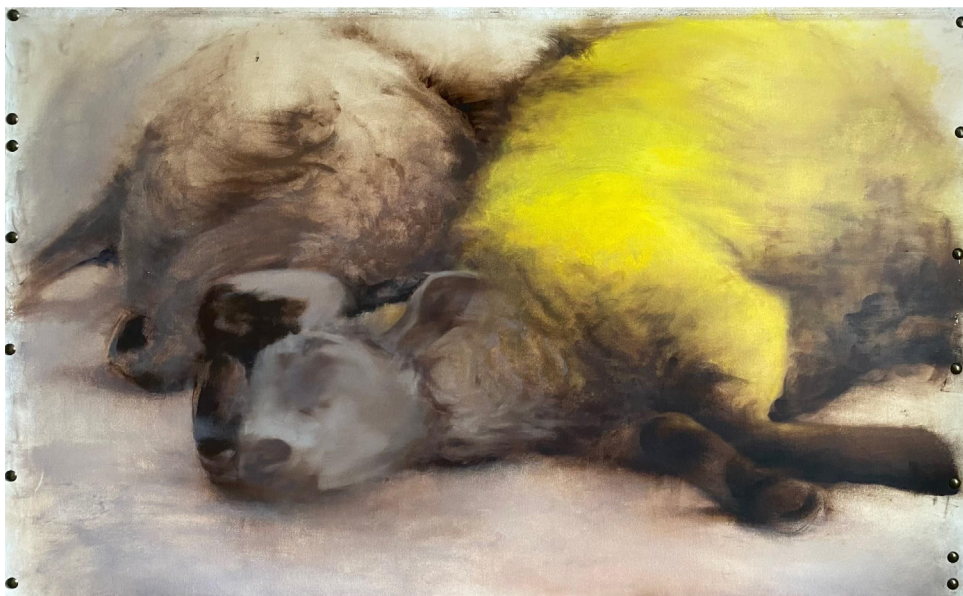
The relationships and self-reflexivity that structure the modernist short story form and its shame-laden “anti-epiphany” lucidly reflect contemporary sites of social life in the public sphere. Oscillations in self-control, the transmission of shame like contagion between bodies, and the propagation of inhibitory power from social forces to biological and environmental ones all punctuate psychic life, group formation, and the constitution of cultural norms and values. Generated between the self and the object of desire, between the self as understood by oneself and the self as it is seen by others, shame in *Daisy Miller* is an agent of not only suffering but group formation, cohesion, and stability. For example, through *Daisy Miller's* conflict between Americans and Genevans, affective experience and different forms of affect management are highlighted as contributing forces in the experience of social unity and difference. It is not simply that Daisy is out of line, but that her transgression disrupts a balance and challenges a set of cultural norms. From an anthropological perspective, what this highlights is that desire and enjoyment are

often implicated in larger questions of morality and normalcy that are culturally variant.

As *Daisy Miller* grapples with the affect that circulates between bodies and groups, the centrality of character and human relationship in literary analysis bears relevance for the use of affect theory in anthropology. Occurring before consciousness and sometimes outside of language, affective exchanges are an indispensable analytic site for understanding identity formation as well as theorizing about motivations and conflict. Although performed at the scale of individual character, literary analysis highlights affect theory's interdisciplinary potential, as it grapples with how desire, intimacy, and exchange make up social and structural currents that define what it means to conform to or resist an inherited set of norms and values, to belong to a group or fall outside of it.



Detail, Ethel II



Ethel II, 2025

Bhreagh Godin

Oil on Canvas, 64 x 36 in.

Countercultures at Jasna Góra

Youth, Catholicism, and the Capacity for Self-Expression in the Polish People's Republic

EVA MACIUKIEWICZ



Every year, thousands of Catholics travel to the historic shrine of the Black Madonna, housed in Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa, which has been a site of pilgrimage since the 15th century. In the second half of the twentieth century, under communist leadership with tense relations with the Catholic Church—which, by many accounts, represents one of Poland's most hegemonic, lasting, and defining ideologies—the practice continued in full force. As an expression of communal effort and authentic piety, the movement attracted not only Catholics devout to the institutional church, but countercultural hippie youth as well. This paper draws out the social, cultural, and political circumstances which account for this singular intersection of modernity, tradition, and dissidence. It situates this inquiry in the sixties and seventies, which was characterized by a degree of relative modernization in the Polish People's Republic resulting from a process of de-Stalinization throughout the Eastern Bloc after the late fifties, and the influence of the Global Sixties more generally. In exploring how young people in this context

embodied their relationship to Catholicism, this paper argues that pilgrimage offered a scaffold for genuine self-expression in an echo of civil society, demonstrating the way in which young people created a space for themselves between the two authoritative poles of church and state.

The cumulative impression of the pilgrimage Jasna Góra is kaleidoscopic: fixed in desaturated tones, the faithful trudge along country roads, waterlogged from late-summer rains; framed icons, crosses of varying sizes, multicolored rosaries, delicate cruciform pendants, and votive candle holders spill over a white tablecloth; nuns bandage worn feet; mothers pull children in strollers; clergymen, the cleanest-looking of the lot, sport their pristine vestments; pilgrims wash in the shallows of a stream. Incredibly, photojournalist Tadeusz Rolke's 1977 documentation of the sheer mass of Polish folk piety touching down in Częstochowa also depicts groups of genuine hippie youth: the men long-haired; one woman with a shorn head; lying atop one another, reading books or playing guitar; caught in an embrace; wearing peace signs and homemade clothing; wearing jeans (figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4). Here, at the yearly summer pilgrimage to the national shrine of the Black Madonna on Jasna Góra, young people assert their right to hallowed cultural space.¹ Rolke's image collection seems to posit a contradiction, in that these photographs show the counterculture of hippie youth—a movement typically aligned with anti-establishment sentiment—participating in an embodied, full-throated expression of one of Poland's most longstanding, hegemonic ideologies. This in turn prompts an exploratory question: how did young people living through the relative modernization of the sixties and seventies understand and enact their relationship to Catholicism?

This paper will explore how young people in the Polish People's Republic (PRL) navigated their participation in the

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4.
Częstochowa - Pilgrimage, 1977.
no. 4646, 4565, 4599, and 4640.

Photograph by Tadeusz Rolke. Muzeum Sztuki
Nowoczesnej w Warszawie.



institutions which sought to claim them, especially in relation to the boundaries of their identities and desires. While the state engaged in efforts to intercede in the nascent youth culture of the sixties, their appeals never totally mapped onto the subjectivities of young people. At the same time, the moral conservatism of the Catholic church constituted a stifling form of institutional rigidity at a time when young people were exploring a kind of circumscribed modernity marked by subtle shifts in sexual mores. While young people tended to implicitly resist the dictates of institutional structures both secular and Catholic, through the sixties and seventies more grassroots forms of religiosity provided a scaffold, albeit an imperfect one, for self-expression in an approximation of civil society. This paper ultimately argues that Catholic pilgrimage—as a political and social movement—represented a space between these two authoritative poles and facilitated a unique degree of expression for Polish youth.

A common refrain, both anecdotal and historiographical, holds that communism as a foreign imposition never took root in Poland due to the nation's longstanding ties to the Catholic church. History classes in the PRL, for example, could not avoid tracing the birth of the Polish state to King Mieszko I's conversion to Christianity. The persistence of this religious facet of national identity is especially salient given the time frame in question. In the seventies, the church increasingly adopted patriotic symbols in its efforts to stage itself as a bastion

of free speech in opposition to the state.² Youth represent an apt lens through which to view this dynamic, as both the Catholic church and the state recognized their potential to either construct or dismantle socialist society from below, and subsequently jostled for their loyalty. It was for this reason that, while the state was willing to make concessions regarding Polish society's enduring allegiance to Catholicism, it perceived organized youth involvement in the church as a distinct threat and suppressed it accordingly.³ If, as Timothy Garton Ash argues, the 'beginning of the end' of communism throughout the Eastern bloc was John Paul II's seminal 1979 homecoming pilgrimage around Poland,⁴ we can take this cue to consider the capacity that young people had to embody social and political change in and around this moment.

As part of their appeal to the country's youth, the state offered organizations that were expressly ideological—most prominently, a socialist youth union—and thus inadequate in meeting the social-emotional needs of these organizations' members. Poland's de-Stalinization preceded the global emergence of a new youth culture and allowed for young people to constitute a distinct component of public life. As Historian Jakub Muchowski argues, young people emerged not as a homogenous mass—per Stalinist habit—but rather as 'personal, idiosyncratic, private, and authentic' individual subjects.⁵ It was in this atmosphere of post-Stalin Thaw that the state in 1957 revamped its official youth branch into the *Związek Młodzieży Socjalistycznej* (ZMS). Even if the union departed from the assertive Leninist character of its predecessor, its stated function and activities were at once thoroughly political and inherently out of touch.⁶ The thesis statement of historian Joanna Sadowska's monograph on the union is tellingly bleak: 'the ZMS did not have any exceptional quality, and all of its characteristic features [...] were reflections of the general situation [...] it had to exist because the scenario implemented in the rest of the countries of the bloc required it to [...]'⁷ Contemporary assessments echo the same sense of stale utility: the pedagogical theorist Heliodor Muszyński would rank 'meeting the needs of its members' last in importance among the union's functions, below its socio-political and ideological-educational capacities.⁸

Unsurprisingly, members' stated motivations for their involvement in the union reveal a more personal set of desires. Findings from a 1973 sociological survey conducted by the Institute of Research on Youth Problems revealed that—contrary to the wishes of Polish United Workers' Party leader Władysław Gomułka—ideological concerns ranked low in young people's minds. Gomułka speaks for the Party when he envisions the ZMS as a mean of instilling in youth respect for the working class and making them aware of their role in building socialism; it seems that Polish youth, however, did not internalize this motivation as neatly as the Party would have liked.⁹ The most commonly cited motivation among members was the opportunity to have discussions on interesting themes. To feel 'needed and useful' ranked second, right above the desire to build one's worldview. Other popular responses fell within the realm of establishing the participant's position in their immediate social world, such as maintaining a good image among one's peers or teachers and/or becoming a role model to others. A sizable percentage admitted to the desire to pursue romantic and sexual encounters, avoid criticism, have fun, and gain material benefits.¹⁰ These candid answers, constituting a passive collective dismissal of the union's political and ideological functions, provide insight into what young people expected out of their social lives and what they hoped authoritative institutions would provide for them in exchange for their participation and loyalty. If the state had a particular desire to mobilize youth in pursuit of its socialist project, young people did not immediately comply.

At the same time, young people understood that the decision to align themselves with a certain type of organized youth activity held symbolic weight. Speaking to the variety of motivations for ZMS participation, Sadowska cites the testimony of Waldemar Kuczyński as a particularly evocative example: abandoned by friends who had left in 'packs' for universities, and pining for a girl studying at the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), he manifested his discontent by joining the ZMS. If he couldn't 'seduce' her, then—hoping to spite her—he would let himself be 'seduced' by something far from, even opposed to, the church as represented by the Catholic university.¹¹ Kuczyński's understanding reflects at once the perceived opposition between these two institutions and the way in which they intersected with

young people's emotional lives, exemplifying how the choices young people made in this regard were immediately personal and inescapably political.

While in many instances the church and state would appear to oppose one another, at other times their interests could obliquely align. Drawing on recent historiographical trends, Muchowski notes that the political liberalization of the Thaw did not necessarily coincide with liberalization in other respects; in fact, condemnations of Stalinism sometimes emerged from a sense of renewed moral conservatism.¹² Such discourses did not always follow a straightforward trajectory, however. Historian Małgorzata Fidelis argues that, while communist regimes in the sixties encouraged young women to indulge in the pleasures of 'moderate consumerism,' state-sanctioned public opinion would eventually backtrack to a reassertion of conservative values, especially in light of student protests in 1968, which threatened the Party's authority and led to the repression of activist circles and dissident groups.¹³ Thus, the 'modern girl' of this new consumerism was still tied to the demands of traditionalist morality, particularly with regards to sexual mores. This dynamic is evident in pages of *Filipinka*, an overwhelmingly popular magazine for young women, whose editors would stress to its readership their responsibility not only for their own sexual behavior, but that of their male peers. In a formulation of modernity specific to Polish socialism, 'conservative dress, nineteenth-century novels, and commitment to future motherhood and family,' was both 'Polish' and thus 'socialist,' while everything that threatened these values was deemed 'foreign' and 'capitalist.'¹⁴

During this period, Catholic authorities were debating the contemporary relevancy of a uniquely Polish Marian femininity, a notion which drew on a historical endurance of hardship. As historian Brian Porter-Szücs notes, this feminine ideal of the time was willing to sacrifice 'her own pleasures and dreams so that the nation might survive.'¹⁵ For young women in the sixties, this could mean the rejection of a new consumerist culture which threatened traditional values. In 1962, when Catholic intellectuals were voicing

Figure 5.
Częstochowa
- Pilgrimage,
1977, no. 4667.

Photograph by
Tadeusz Rolke.
Muzeum Sztuki
Nowoczesnej w
Warszawie.



concerns that the imposing metaphors dominating the Marian cult were alienating, and even frightening, to youth, the Polish Episcopate doubled down. In a 1971 pastoral letter, it encouraged a return to 'the dignity of the mother and motherhood' as a means of softening the hypermasculine and inhumane modern world.¹⁶ Thus, by the seventies, young women in particular faced ideological instruction from two superficially conflicting institutional poles. In both cases, young women's desires and sexuality were linked through authorities' attempts at restricting them with defensive rhetoric aimed at protecting the crucially national character of either socialism or Catholicism.

As revealed by the varied motivations behind their participation in the ZMS, in practice, young people tended to shirk these ideological impositions. While the Episcopate in the late sixties pushed for a rigid curriculum of Catholic sexual ethics through the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, historians Natalia Jarska and Agata Ignaciuk's analysis suggests that this kind of rhetoric failed to check the 'quiet sexual revolution' unfolding throughout the country.¹⁷ On the basis of collected testimonies from two generations of Poles who had grown up in the PRL, they note an increase in the acceptance of premarital sex and a decrease in the value placed on virginity.¹⁸ More anecdotally, Fidelis observes that even rural communities increasingly tolerated premarital sex, so long as it took place in accordance with village norms.¹⁹ At the same time, girls' councils offered health courses which facilitated access to birth control through the state's Society for Conscious Motherhood, which rural communities saw as a threat to both Catholic and local strains of morality.²⁰ Thus, in its policies, the state could take a more ambiguous stance on sexual morality, while the church's interjections were, on the whole, traditionalist and restrictive. As reflected through the rhetoric of *Filipinka*, however, the state had little interest in directing public opinion towards any kind of liberalized modernity, effectively preserving gender norms in accordance with the enduring status quo.

Though sticking to hegemonic discourse in its public stances on femininity and sexuality, the church positioned itself as an alternative culture when directly appealing to the youth. As part of a program to introduce new forms of worship, Catholic initiatives from the sixties to the eighties organized summer retreats for thousands of secondary school students.²¹ While the

state opposed Catholic student organizations in universities, the church involved itself in student life through parishes guided by the Episcopate at a national level and coordinated on the ground through religious orders.²² As historian Tom Junes argues, parishes such as the Kraków Dominicans fostered an ‘open-mindedness that distinguished them from the conservative church as well as the Communist establishment.’²³ More informal organizations, then, beyond the purview of both the institutional church and the state, provided a greater means of self-expression for participants.

These student parishes helped mobilize pilgrimages to Częstochowa, an activity which the state termed a prewar ‘fascist tradition.’²⁴ An October 1979 issue of *Spotkania. Niezależne Pismo Młodych Katolików* (‘Meetings. Independent Magazine Of Young Catholics’)—a periodical illegal for the fact that it provided a venue for Catholic opposition to the regime—contains a set of articles conveying the unique quality of student pilgrimage in a socialist state.²⁵ The contributor Jan Sadok, for example, constructs, with highly technical language, a kind of Catholic sociology of pilgrimage. As part of his explanation, he defines two symbolic poles—‘BELIEVER’ on one side, and ‘PARTY’ on the other—which together frame the dynamics of religious practice. According to him, these opposing positionalities have dominated the ‘pilgrimage movement’s proposed values, legitimacy, and norms of action.’ Those associated with the first pole are ‘bound by natural and revealed law’ (*prawo naturalne i objawione*), while those of the second align with the ‘legalized will of the party.’²⁶ Sadok goes so far as raising the issue to a matter of metaphorical national security, arguing that to honor the historical significance of Jasna Góra is to protect against artificial internationalism.²⁷ Sadok’s formulation, though notably abstract, demonstrates the stark ideological conflict that lends pilgrimage its specific political and cultural meaning.

As for the role that young people play in all of this, Sadok speaks to the ‘moral primacy’ of this issue in relation to an emergent youth culture. The anti-materialist themes (*hasła*) of this global youth movement, according to Sadok, are reflected in ‘Polish youth circles, which readily give them expression in the form of penitent pilgrimage.’ Even in quotidian church life, religious young people ‘don’t have the institutional means to express their deepest convictions, vitality, will to act.’ The

pilgrimage, then, becomes the most effective way out of this malaise.²⁸ Pilgrimage, in reaction to the world in which it takes place, thus assumes a special degree of emotional and oppositional potency, making it uniquely able to meet a set of needs unfulfilled by institutional means.

The narrative account that follows Sadok's analysis provides a first-person example of the meaning that pilgrimage could have for Polish youth. After state authorities had initially refused to secure train transport for KUL students who sought to meet John Paul II during the pope's homecoming pilgrimage, the students began to organize a walking pilgrimage from Kielce to Częstochowa themselves. Among them was a female student who contributed an article to the periodical about her experience. The narrator provides the text of a poster, representative of the students' mood: 'Friends! (*Koleżanki i koledzy!*) Workers and students of KUL! We should be there! There is a chance to meet the Holy Father on Jasna Góra [...] The authorities are silent in response to a request for a special train, but we will be there anyway [...] Pilgrimage participants have the opportunity to postpone exams. The route is not difficult.' This appeal underscores some of the naturally communal aspects of this undertaking. Only this kind of authentic effort could meet young people where they were—taking into consideration their exams, for example—and thus be justified in asking them to trust the organizers and endure hardship on the basis of a common interest in meeting the Polish pope. Seeing these efforts, the authorities relented and provided transport, but a particularly dedicated group—sixteen in total, the narrator among them—remained determined to embark on the walking pilgrimage.²⁹

Traveling through the southern countryside, the student pilgrims become a symbol to the people they encounter, enabling both the students and locals to engage in expressions of faith

and community outside institutional structures. People are eager to help: before starting their journey, a priest presents them with a list of two hundred families willing to house them; in a forest, they come across a tanner who shows them his hut and offers them a piece of leather in the shape of Poland, onto which the

Figure 6.
Częstochowa
- Pilgrimage,
1977, no. 4637.

Photograph by
Tadeusz Rolke.
Muzeum Sztuki
Nowoczesnej w
Warszawie.



pilgrims will trace their path to give as a gift to the pope upon meeting him; as they enter village houses and watch televised transmissions of the pope's journey in Poland, they discuss among each other and the villagers what this means for Poles more broadly; walking near tracks, they get a lift from a passing train, after the railwayman recognizes them as pilgrims and invites them aboard.³⁰ Together, these encounters reveal how pilgrimage opened up space for improvised acts of grassroots solidarity.

Crucially, the hours spent walking, paired with the emotional intensity of the effort, provide a space for open discussion and contemplation:

One can only think and talk about the pope's sermon [...] someone notices that in our time, incredibly tangled in the past, the faith of generation and the fulfilment of hope, everything fell on us so unexpectedly, that it is so wonder that we are not in a state to grasp it. [...] Krzysztof sees in the pope's words Polish messianism. Adam says, that just the opposite, the pope calls for organic work.³¹

These are not rote expressions of piety. This account exhibits a discourse, which traces young people's reconfiguration of historical understanding and their own place in this nascent movement. On the road, they are free to express themselves and can go as far as to raise concerns about the role that the pope, only recently appointed to the pontificate, has in guiding Polish society.

Even taking into account that the pilgrimage movement allowed for a uniquely expansive degree of emotional expression, some pushed their desire for an alternative culture even farther. Fidelis describes hippie counterculture as 'a project of personal and communal self-creation against hegemonic ideologies' of the very institutions which fought for young people's attention.³² Especially after Edward Gierek's assumption of power as First Secretary of Poland in the seventies, and the relative degree of social and economic liberalization this brought on, young people at odds with both the church and the state increasingly chose to adopt only select aspects of the hippie ethos—becoming *hipisowanie*, as opposed to an actual free-loving drifter.³³ By virtue of its unique Polish context, this movement would exhibit distinctive intersections with Catholic religiosity absent in the

West. Considering the informal, folk aspects of Polish pilgrimage as a means of popular worship, it follows that hippies, or at least young people drawn to the hippie lifestyle, would begin to hold rallies around sites such as Jasna Góra.³⁴

Despite their differences, devout Catholics and hippies found a common enemy in the state. Crucially, however, the state could enact violence on hippies which it couldn't against the pious, as when a militia in 1972 beat hippies camped around the shrine with clubs (though, as one victim remembers it, the clergy nearby took no action to stop this). Further, many Catholics turned to hippie values as a way to explore alternative means of worship, while the institutional church remained deeply ambivalent towards the movement. Hippies in turn formed their own Catholic communes, based in abstinence and the separation of sexes.³⁵ Engagement with the hippie ethos thus constituted a more dramatic articulation of self-expression to be found in the spaces between the institutional church and the state.

Having explored the varied ways in which Catholic identity and religiosity functioned in the lives of young people in the PRL, the presence of hippies pictured in Rolke's Częstochowa no longer sticks out as an anachronism. Rather, their presence shifts the entire quality of the practice depicted, highlighting the extent to which pilgrimage, as a mass movement, challenges the socialist state and, more subtly, the institutional church in its failure to effectively counter it. The youth of the PRL, in whom both institutions had placed their hopes, are perhaps the best prism to draw this out. If the stated aims of official organizations like the ZMS failed to align with its members' actual desires, just as the authoritative conservatism of Catholic nationalism attempted to predetermine young people's self-expression, then only something between—or even beyond—these institutional structures, such as pilgrimage, could provide the requisite space for the genuine articulation of identity and desire.

Notes

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10. Sadowska, *Sercem i myślą związani z Partią*, 145.
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17. Agata Ignaciuk and Natalia Jarska, 'Premarital Sex in State-Socialist Poland: A Generational Perspective,' *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 2 (2023): 662; Małgorzata Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind*

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18. Ignaciuk and Jarska, 'Premarital Sex in State-Socialist Poland,' 657.
19. Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain*, 174.
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31. S. T. P., 'Pielgrzymka studentów KUL-u z okazji przyjazdu papieża Jana Pawła II do Polski,' 42.
32. Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain*, 128.
33. Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain*, 128, 149.
34. Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain*, 142.
35. Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain*, 136, 144, 147.

Commentary

Pilgrimage has never only been about religion, as this paper's account of Jasna Góra duly attests. It is perhaps more accurate to call its power a mystic or narrative one: path-finding in the metaphysical sense. A long trek is meditative and world-breaking, aided by networks of social support; food and lodging are often provided for free by community members, like the *albergues* of the famous Camino de Santiago in Spain. Spoken otherwise, pilgrimage is a unique social phenomenon with uses that range far beyond religious piety. How can we see it as a model for collective wellbeing, for literal social *movement*, for alternative ways of living together?

At a time when the world appears to be headed for a significant restructuring of its nations and institutions, this paper presents a heartening instance of found, or fashioned, culture. The pilgrimage to Jasna Góra, as I understand it, was a kind of improvisation or *bricolage*; a grassroots response to a dearth of structured experiences that were suited to meet the needs of the Polish youth. Think of the oncoming possibilities for our generation—how we might live with roommates forever, never owning a home; how social media is becoming not just central to but an unavoidable facet of our socialization; how lifelong careers are being displaced by a gig economy. Are there forces analogous to the Communist party and the Catholic church, ones between whose powers we are caught, ones whose demands on our time, attention, and loyalty we are seeking to escape? I am thinking of legacy media, of institutional philanthropy, of state-sanctioned life paths, of biopolitical models. Who benefits when we are atomized from one another? If these are to be our conditions, how might

we make a pilgrimage out of them? That is, how can we make do with what we have, fashioning out of less than ideal conditions a special experience that fits our needs for community, identity, and open discussion? Our needs, I think, are not at all different from theirs. Though it might ring of a sixties-era optimism that we can no longer afford, I believe that the word *counter-culture* still has something to offer.

This paper instructs readers, by way of a charming example, that a certain savviness and willpower go a long way to fulfilling one's needs. As a female student said in that illegal periodical: "the route is not difficult." I would hope we continue to think of the path to found community as a meaningful, if muddy, group pilgrimage.

Commentary

Photojournalist Tadeusz Rolke collapses the boundaries of youth and elder, freedom and religion, hippie and devout Catholic by crowding the pictorial frame with bodies that overlap and commune with one another. Even the formally dressed clergy are packed tightly together as a singular, impenetrable unit. The act of pilgrimage demonstrated by the hippie rallies that took place at Jasna Góra, then, not only encourages pious self-reflection but also opens up the possibility for radical self-expression and counterculture. It seems apt to pause here to consider Rolke's photograph further. As the author demonstrates, the fact that this menagerie of people is participating in a pilgrimage is not to be missed; they represent a collective formed by an autonomous expression of faith rather than the Soviet state's utopian vision of regulated movement, conceptualized through state-sponsored architects like Vladimir Milyutin. This model of collective movement stands in stark contrast to Soviet-era architecture's collective vision that sought to regulate, optimize, and discipline how populations move through space for the sake of productive efficiency rather than autonomy. Pilgrimage, it seems, endangers the socialist state's hegemonic and bureaucratic control of people's movement.

The desire to control the whereabouts of the populace is evident in several historical Soviet community prototypes, like Vladimir Milyutin's plan for a linear city divided into six zones segregated based on function: agriculture, industry, residential, recreational, railway, etc. Within this model, each zone would flow into the other based on practical (and enforced) movement. For example, the industrial zone feeds into the railway for efficient

exporting.¹ Although Milyutin's vision was utopian and never materialized, the ethos of controlled movement remained an impactful tenet of state control that seems ubiquitous throughout Soviet satellite states, including in the ideological forces opposing the pilgrimage to Jasna Góra.

Perhaps the way in which pilgrimage undermines state-enforced movement in favor of voluntary religious expression underpins why the practice was negatively regarded by the state as a 'prewar fascist tradition' (Maciukiewicz, 9). This ideological incongruence manifests itself not only through state discourse but in the compositional dynamics of Rolke's photographs. Rolke's images exceed the limits of their own frame, demonstrating the uncontainable nature of the act of pilgrimage and the anxiety it caused for PRL authorities.

Notes

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Her Back to Me, 2024

Yuanyi Ma

Charcoal on Paper, 12 x 10 in.

Aristotle on Moral Habits in the Attention Economy

Outrage as Incentive, Vice as Outcome

M U H A M M A D M O H I Z



This paper argues that engagement-driven social media platforms serve as environments for character formation. By rewarding speed, intensity, and outrage with visibility, algorithmic feeds train users to imitate and repeat patterns of emotionally-extreme expression, making reactive behavior feel normal and reflective moderation feel unrewarding. Using X (formerly Twitter) as a focal case, I draw on Aristotle's account of habituation, the doctrine of the mean, and practical wisdom to diagnose this dynamic as a systematic drift toward vice—that is, excess and deficiency, rather than virtue. I also develop an Aristotelian mimesis-based analogy: highly visible posts operate as public performances that supply scripts for how audiences should feel and react, which users then reproduce for validation. In conversation with MacIntyre, Nussbaum, Vallor, and recent empirical work on attention and online behavior, I argue that metricized validation transforms public life into a contest for visibility, displacing internal goods such as truthfulness, restraint, and genuine, deliberative exchange. I conclude by sketching reforms that realign incentives with virtue: calibrated visibility for accuracy and civility, modest reflection prompts, and guardrails that address

echo chambers while respecting free-speech by targeting distribution rather than viewpoints. Platforms already shape moral conduct; the question is whether they can do so responsibly.

Introduction

By the end of today, enormous volumes of content will be shared across major platforms, illustrating the sheer speed and scale at which social media now mediates everyday life. Since the early 2000s, these platforms have evolved from tools of communication into environments that shape attention, social identity, and public discourse. Their influence is not limited to interpersonal connection; social media increasingly structures how ordinary users encounter news, respond to controversy, and participate—directly or indirectly—in political life and public debate. On X (formerly Twitter) in particular, politics is a central use-case: 59% of U.S. users say keeping up with politics or political issues is a reason they use the platform.¹ This influence extends beyond connectivity into effects on perception and behavior. Platform architectures are designed to maximize engagement by prioritizing content that reliably evokes strong emotional reactions—especially outrage, fear, and excitement—creating an attention economy that systematically amplifies sensational and polarizing material.² A growing empirical literature also links patterns of heavy or emotionally charged social media use to worsened well-being for some users, especially in contexts involving comparison, harassment, or chronic exposure to conflict.³

Among major platforms, X is especially instructive because it is organized around rapid, public discourse. Its short post format, real-time circulation, and algorithmic amplification make it a central venue for news, controversy, and reputational signaling—exactly the conditions under which engagement incentives can shape moral habits at scale. Since its acquisition by Elon Musk in 2022, X has undergone visible shifts in content moderation and platform governance that have renewed public concern about the

amplification of extreme and divisive content.⁴ Combined with an engagement-oriented ranking system, these changes make X a useful case study for examining not only how platforms reflect public opinion, but how they shape it—by rewarding certain styles of expression and discouraging others.

This is where Aristotle becomes useful: if character is formed through habituation, as he argues, then a platform that systematically rewards certain emotional styles is not neutral—it functions as a skewed moral training environment.⁵ X's engagement-driven architecture makes emotional intensity a reliable route to visibility. Because the platform's environment publicly rewards posts that trigger rapid reaction—through likes, reposts, and algorithmic amplification—users are nudged toward expressive extremes rather than measured judgment. The central problem this paper examines is ethical and developmental: if character is formed through habituation, then a platform that systematically rewards outrage, impulsivity, and performative certainty will tend to train those dispositions over time. In Aristotelian terms, the platform functions less as a neutral channel for speech and more as an environment that encourages vice—excess and deficiency—at the expense of the mean.⁶

This paper uses that problem as a point of departure to ask a broader question about human behavior in algorithmically-structured environments: what happens to practical judgment when visibility is routinely awarded to speed, certainty, and emotional intensity? I argue that X's engagement-first design does not merely host objectionable content; it shapes conduct by rewarding and normalizing expressive extremes, thereby encouraging the habits Aristotle classifies as vice rather than the mean. I develop this argument by bringing Aristotle's account of habituation, practical wisdom, and the doctrine of the mean into conversation with contemporary virtue-ethical and social critiques, namely by MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and selected empirical work on attention and online behavior. I then propose reforms aimed at shifting incentives toward accuracy, restraint, and reflective participation—so that a platform already structuring public discourse can do so more responsibly.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and Human Flourishing

More than 2,300 years ago, Aristotle laid the foundation for a systematic ethical framework in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Within it, he is not primarily asking which actions are permitted or forbidden, but how people become the kind of agents who reliably react and behave rationally, especially in situations of social pressure, temptation, and pervasive social influence. That emphasis makes his framework especially useful for analyzing environments that repeatedly reward particular styles of attention and expression. For Aristotle, virtue (*aretē*) is a stable disposition: a settled way of feeling, choosing, and acting. He famously defines moral virtue as a state of character “concerned with choice,” lying in a mean relative to us, “as determined by reason.”⁷ The mean is not a mathematical midpoint. It is a context-sensitive standard that avoids the characteristic distortions of excess and deficiency—for instance, courage as the mean between recklessness and cowardice, or temperance between self-indulgence and insensibility. Acting virtuously, therefore, involves more than doing the outwardly “right” thing; it requires acting in the right way, for the right reasons, in the right circumstances.

Aristotle's account of virtue depends on a basic picture of the soul. He distinguishes a rational part (the part that thinks and can grasp reasons) from a non-rational part (the part that includes appetites, emotions, and impulses).⁸ Moral virtue is not the elimination of emotion, but the training of desire and feeling so that they can “listen to” reason—so that anger, fear, pleasure, and ambition become responsive to the right considerations instead of dragging us toward excess or deficiency. This is why habituation matters: it is the process by which the non-rational side of us is educated into harmony with rational judgment. The capacity that makes this possible is practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). Practical wisdom is the ability to perceive what is ethically salient in a situation and to deliberate well about what to do.⁹ It is not simply knowing general principles; it is the cultivated judgment that connects those principles to concrete circumstances. Aristotle also distinguishes moral virtues—traits that regulate emotion and action—from intellectual excellences developed through learning, but for the purposes of this paper, the crucial point is that practical wisdom guides moral virtue in real life, where situations are messy, and incentives pull us toward

extremes. Because virtue is a disposition rather than a momentary performance, Aristotle treats the moral life as inseparable from the environments in which we practice.¹⁰ When circumstances reward rashness, cruelty, or performative certainty, they make those responses easier and more tempting. When circumstances reward restraint and truthful deliberation, they make virtue easier to sustain. In other words, Aristotle's ethics already contains a powerful claim about moral psychology: character depends not only on what we believe, but on what we repeatedly do—and on what our surroundings repeatedly invite us to do.

The Role of Habituation and Eudaimonia in Developing Virtuous Character

For Aristotle, moral character is not primarily a matter of knowing the right definitions; it is built through habituation. We become a certain kind of person by repeatedly acting in certain ways until those patterns settle into stable dispositions.¹¹ Aristotle's point is almost craft-like: "for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them."¹² At first, acting virtuously may feel effortful or even unpleasant, but repetition trains both action and desire. Over time, the virtuous person not only does the right sort of thing, but comes to take the right sort of pleasure in it—finding satisfaction in what is measured and fitting, and feeling aversion toward what is base or excessive.¹³ This is why the environment matters so much. Habituation is never purely private. Families, schools, peers, and institutions supply examples of what "counts" as admirable, what gets rewarded, and what is treated as normal. Aristotle's picture of the soul helps explain this: our appetites and emotions do not disappear when reason arrives; rather, moral development involves bringing non-rational desires into a workable harmony with rational guidance. Good surroundings make this alignment easier by repeatedly presenting models worth imitating and by reinforcing practices of restraint and reflection; corrupt surroundings do the opposite, making vice easier and virtue harder.¹⁴

Because habituation works through repetition and reward, it also raises an ethical question about modern environments that are explicitly engineered to shape behavior. If a space reliably rewards impulsive or extreme expression, then it does not

merely *host* moral life—it helps *train* it. That is the bridge from Aristotle’s ethics to platform design. Aristotle ultimately frames ethics around *eudaimonia*—often translated as “flourishing” or “living well.” It is not a passing feeling, but an activity of living in accordance with virtue over a complete life.¹⁵ This matters for social media because the platforms do not merely offer pleasures; they structure what gets repeated, what becomes effortless, and what kinds of attention and response feel natural. If flourishing requires stable habits of self-governance and good judgment, then environments that train impatience, reactivity, or performative outrage can undermine the conditions for living well—even when users think they are simply “scrolling” or “staying informed.”

Social Media Incentive Structures and Their Ethical Implications

Contemporary social media platforms are structured around what is often called the *attention economy*: a business model in which user attention is treated as a scarce resource to be captured, sustained, and monetized. To maximize engagement, platforms rely on algorithmic ranking systems that privilege content likely to provoke rapid interaction, especially posts that evoke strong emotional responses.¹⁶ These design choices are not accidental. They reflect deliberate strategies for increasing users’ time on a platform by exploiting well-documented features of human psychology.¹⁷ One such feature is variable reinforcement: unpredictable rewards—such as a post occasionally receiving disproportionate attention—are especially effective at shaping repeated checking and posting, which makes the feed feel difficult to disengage from.

A key mechanism linking platform design to character formation is a cycle of social proof and imitation. When emotionally intense posts are rewarded with visibility, that visibility signals what “works” and sets a perceived norm for how one ought to speak online. Users then mimic the rewarded style—more certainty, more heat, more provocation—because copying it is the most reliable way to gain approval through likes, reposts, and replies. The resulting feedback (affirmation when one escalates, neglect when one moderates) functions like a reward and penalty, making reactive expression feel gratifying and measured expression feel pointless. In Aristotelian terms, repeated action

under these conditions settles into habituated dispositions: what begins as a tactic for attention becomes a stable tendency in how one perceives, feels, and responds.¹⁸

Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* helps explain why online copying is culturally powerful, not merely strategic. Like art in the *Poetics*, highly visible posts function as public performances that stylize events and supply scripts for feeling and reaction. When the platform repeatedly spotlights a tone—sarcastic contempt, performative certainty, moralized outrage—it makes that style appear like the appropriate form of public speech, and users reproduce it.¹⁹ Relatedly, platforms also generate emotionally charged feedback loops. Content that elicits strong reactions is more likely to be amplified, which increases repeated exposure to emotionally intense exchanges. Psychological research suggests that such systems disproportionately engage confirmation bias (the tendency to favor information that reinforces existing beliefs) and negativity bias (the tendency to attend more strongly to negative stimuli), thereby discouraging reflective judgment and reinforcing reactive modes of engagement.²⁰

Recent empirical work sharpens this picture. Luo, Sornette, and Lera²¹ show that emotional expression in online environments is driven far more by social feedback than by the underlying content itself. Studying live YouTube chats, they find that emotional responses are up to four times more strongly shaped by peer interaction than by the original stimulus. Positive emotions spread more easily, while negative emotions persist longer, producing asymmetric dynamics in which emotionally charged exchanges become self-reinforcing. Although this study focuses on live video chats, its core finding generalizes: platform-mediated interaction amplifies emotion through social contagion, not merely through exposure to provocative material.

Viewed through an Aristotelian lens, these incentive structures matter because they directly shape habituation. When visibility and affirmation are tied to emotional extremity, users are conditioned to respond quickly and intensely rather than thoughtfully. Over time, this trains dispositions toward excess—outrage, impulsivity, performative certainty—or toward deficiency, such as disengagement and apathy. In Aristotle's terms, such environments systematically skew behavior away from the

mean by rewarding patterns that feel immediately satisfying but undermine reflective self-governance.²²

This dynamic does not imply that users are powerless or that all online engagement is vicious. Rather, it highlights a structural ethical concern, where platforms cultivate certain habits more easily than others. While individuals with well-developed practical wisdom may resist these pressures, those whose capacities for reflection and discernment are still forming are especially vulnerable. The ethical consideration, then, is not merely about how users behave online, but how platform architectures make some forms of behavior easier, more rewarding, and more likely to be repeated.

Conflicting Values:

Social Media Metrics versus Aristotelian Eudaimonia

Within Aristotle's ethical framework, genuine well-being (*eudaimonia*) is internally grounded. It arises from the cultivation of stable dispositions guided by rational self-governance rather than external approval or fluctuating social recognition. To live well is not merely to feel affirmed, but to act in accordance with virtue over time, exercising practical wisdom in shaping one's desires, emotions, and choices.²³ Engagement-driven platforms stand in tension with this conception of the good life. By design, platforms such as X replace internal standards of excellence with externally generated metrics—likes, reposts, follower counts, impressions (the number of times a post is displayed to users)—that function as public indicators of worth. These metrics redirect motivation away from reflective ethical judgment and toward visibility. Users are conditioned to pursue short-term validation by producing emotionally charged content that performs well according to algorithmic criteria, and action becomes oriented toward maximizing engagement, rather than toward the rational pursuit of flourishing.

This shift matters because virtue requires sustained habituation. Engagement metrics disrupt this process by rewarding immediacy over endurance and reaction over reflection. The reinforcement provided by likes and shares creates feedback loops in which immediate affirmation becomes more salient than the slow cultivation of stable character. What Aristotle treats as ethical development is displaced by a cycle of validation that

trains users to prioritize attention and approval over rational self-command. Contemporary virtue theorist Martha Nussbaum helps clarify what is lost here. She argues that flourishing requires the capacity for reflective self-governance—an ability to assess one's reasons for acting rather than being swept along by emotionally manipulative incentives.²⁴ Engagement-driven platforms erode this capacity by systematically exploiting cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities, encouraging users to respond impulsively to provocation rather than to deliberate about what is worth saying or sharing. The result is not merely a change in communication style, but a weakening of the faculties required for ethical agency.

These pressures also bear on well-being in a more direct sense. Because engagement metrics tether a user's sense of worth to factors beyond their control, they can heighten emotional volatility and dependence on social approval. Research linking engagement-oriented social media use to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional instability suggests that metricized validation undermines the steadiness and self-possession central to *eudaimonia*.²⁵ Aristotle is clear that a life governed by external rewards cannot secure genuine happiness: flourishing must be rooted in internal virtue, not in the approval of others.²⁶ The addictive features of social media further intensify this conflict. Adaptive algorithms refine content delivery to maximize engagement by exploiting tendencies toward novelty, outrage, and confirmation. This dynamic can erode autonomy by conditioning users to remain engaged even when they recognize the platform's harmful effects.²⁷ From an Aristotelian perspective, such dependency reflects a failure of self-mastery: instead of cultivating moderation through reasoned choice, users are drawn into compulsive patterns that impede ethical development.²⁸

In short, engagement-driven platforms promote a value system at odds with Aristotelian ethics. Where Aristotle emphasizes internal goods, rational self-governance, and the slow cultivation of virtue, social media metrics reward visibility, immediacy, and emotional intensity. By reshaping what is rewarded and repeated, these systems habituate users toward vice rather than virtue, weakening the conditions necessary for *eudaimonia*.

X as a Case Study

X provides a particularly clear illustration of how engagement-oriented platform design can conflict with Aristotelian virtue ethics. Central features of the platform—likes, reposts, trending topics, and algorithmic content ranking—are engineered to maximize visibility and interaction by privileging content that provokes rapid emotional response. These mechanisms reward immediacy, certainty, and intensity, encouraging users to react quickly rather than to deliberate carefully. Public engagement metrics function as signals of social value, incentivizing users to craft posts that are likely to gain traction. Empirical research consistently shows that emotionally charged content spreads more widely than neutral or measured communication, especially when it expresses moral outrage or group-affirming hostility.²⁹ X's ranking systems amplify this tendency by promoting posts that generate high engagement, producing feedback loops in which expressive extremes are reinforced.

To see how this trains behavior, imagine a user—call him Ben—who posts a measured, qualified take on a controversial news story. It receives little engagement and quickly disappears from view. Later that day, Ben reposts a sharper, more contemptuous version of the same point, framed to provoke opponents and flatter allies; it gains far more likes and reposts, and the platform circulates it to more people. The lesson is practical and immediate: moderation does not pay, escalation does. Over time, the pleasure of rapid affirmation and the “pain” of being ignored operate as a training system, habituating Ben toward excess (combative certainty, performative outrage) and away from the mean that would require patience, context-sensitivity, and self-control.³⁰ From an Aristotelian perspective, this environment promotes vices of excess at the expense of the mean. Virtues such as temperance, patience, and practical wisdom require restraint and attentiveness to context, yet these traits are poorly rewarded in a system that favors speed and amplification.³¹ Moderated, nuanced, or provisional claims often receive less visibility than assertive or polarizing ones, discouraging the cultivation of reflective judgment.

The platform's role in the spread of misinformation illustrates this dynamic clearly. Studies have shown that false or misleading content on X is more likely to be reposted than

accurate information, largely because it evokes stronger emotional responses.³² During periods of crisis, such as public health emergencies, sensational claims and conspiratorial narratives have repeatedly outperformed careful, evidence-based communication. Users who share such content are rewarded with immediate validation, reinforcing habits of impulsive dissemination rather than responsible deliberation. These patterns have been intensified by changes in platform governance. Reduced content moderation and increased emphasis on engagement have expanded the visibility of extreme viewpoints, further normalizing adversarial and hostile styles of interaction. Aristotle emphasizes that ethical development depends on shared practices oriented toward the common good; environments that reward antagonism and arrogance undermine the social conditions necessary for cultivating virtue.³³

Overall, X's design and incentive structures exemplify how engagement-driven platforms can function as environments of moral formation that conflict with Aristotelian ethics. By repeatedly rewarding emotional extremity and rapid reaction, the platform habituates users toward vice rather than virtue, eroding the capacities for moderation, practical wisdom, and self-governance required for human flourishing.

Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers

Any attempt to explain how platforms shape moral habits must also account for personalization. A filter bubble forms when algorithmic ranking and selective exposure narrow what a user regularly sees, often without the user noticing the extent of that narrowing. An echo chamber goes further: it is a social environment in which members not only encounter mostly like-minded content but also learn to distrust outside sources and treat dissent as hostile or illegitimate.³⁴ These dynamics intensify the habituation process already described. If the content most visible in one's feed is skewed toward outrage, contempt, or ideological certainty, then the platform's reward signals become locally self-confirming: what is amplified appears normal, and what is moderate appears naïve or disloyal. In Aristotelian terms, this matters because habituation depends on what repeatedly appears admirable and rewarding.³⁵ Filter bubbles and echo chambers

concentrate those apparent standards that one is exposed to, making vice-like extremes easier to adopt and harder to question.

This has direct implications for reform. Even well-intentioned metrics aimed at “reflective engagement” can misfire if they simply mirror approval within a homogeneous group. A community unified around harmful norms may still reward its members for civility, coherence, or patience while reinforcing vice at the collective level. Any virtue-oriented redesign must therefore include safeguards against bubble-driven self-reinforcement, rather than assuming that engagement quality alone tracks ethical quality.³⁶

Virtue-Based Reforms for Social Media Platforms

As it stands, social media platforms increasingly function as environments that shape character through engagement-oriented ranking systems that systematically reward emotional excess and reactive participation. An Aristotelian response to this problem should focus on redesigning the environment so that it *habituates* users toward better dispositions. This approach aligns with Shannon Vallor’s argument that digital technologies shape moral character by structuring habits of attention and response, making ethical design a matter of cultivating virtues rather than merely preventing harms.³⁷ The aim is not to impose a comprehensive moral doctrine, but to reduce structural pressures toward vice and to make moderation, accuracy, and reflective participation easier to sustain.

While deontological and consequentialist frameworks offer valuable guidance about rights and harms, an Aristotelian approach is distinctive in targeting the *formation of stable dispositions*: what kinds of emotional and deliberative habits a platform trains over time.³⁸ In this spirit, the following reforms focus on aligning incentives with the doctrine of the mean, so that extremes are neither systematically amplified nor treated as the default route to visibility.

Calibrating Visibility: Rankings That Reward Moderation and Accuracy

Current algorithms disproportionately amplify extremes by prioritizing content that reliably provokes intense emotion. A

plausible first reform is therefore to modify ranking systems so that *visibility is less tightly coupled to raw engagement* and more responsive to indicators of epistemic and civic quality. One approach is a platform-wide “quality weighting” that reduces the reach of posts whose engagement is primarily driven by inflammatory language, harassment, or highly misleading framing, while elevating content that exhibits basic norms of accuracy and civility. Crucially, “quality weighting” should not become a euphemism for suppressing legitimate dissent or controversial viewpoints. The point is not to eliminate disagreement, but to reduce a structural tilt toward performative extremity. To avoid arbitrary suppression, any downranking criteria should be transparent, contestable, and subject to independent auditing. Platforms could publish general descriptions of the ranking signals they use (e.g., penalties for repeated misinformation flags, boosts for links to credible sources, friction for rapid resharing of unverified claims), and provide users with accessible explanations of how distribution decisions are made.

A related model is to *supplement* rather than censor: instead of simply throttling contentious content, platforms can attach contextual information or alternative perspectives alongside posts that are likely to mislead or inflame. Research on misinformation interventions suggests that labeling and context can reduce the spread of false content without requiring blanket deletion.³⁹ Such interventions preserve user autonomy while counteracting the platform’s tendency to convert outrage into reach.

Designing Friction for Phronēsis: Prompts, Delays, and Choice Architecture

If virtue is partly a matter of trained responsiveness, then platforms should treat “speed” as ethically relevant. One reason engagement systems foster vice is that they reward immediacy: rapid reaction becomes the easiest path to attention. A second reform is therefore to introduce mild forms of *deliberative friction*—design features that interrupt impulsive posting and create space for practical judgment (phronēsis) to operate.⁴⁰ Here, choice architecture can be used in a limited and non-paternalistic way. Drawing on work on “nudges,”⁴¹ platforms might implement prompts that encourage reflection at key moments: for example, asking users to open a linked article before

reposting it, prompting a rewrite when a post contains highly aggressive language, or inserting brief “cool-down” delays for users who are posting repeatedly in a heated exchange. The goal is not to enforce agreement, but to make the *deliberative* option more available than the purely reactive option. These interventions should be designed to respect autonomy; users should typically be able to proceed, but the platform should no longer make impulsivity frictionless while making reflection unrewarding. In Aristotelian terms, the platform would be reshaping the “training environment” so that measured action is less costly and more likely to be repeated.

Beyond Raw Engagement: Reflective Metrics with Guardrails Against Echo Chambers

Because what gets measured becomes what gets optimized, platforms should also rethink their success metrics. If likes, reposts, and impressions remain the dominant feedback signals, then the platform will continue to reward whatever drives short-term reaction. A more virtue-aligned alternative is to develop a reflective engagement index that tracks whether interactions exhibit indicators of deliberative quality—such as sustained exchange, responsiveness to reasons, reduced hostility, and lower rates of rapid pile-on dynamics. However, as critics rightly note, echo chambers and filter bubbles can also generate “high-quality” engagement within a homogeneous group. If a community shares a harmful worldview, its members may reward one another’s content in ways that look “reflective” while still reinforcing vice.

This is also where a free speech constraint matters. The goal should not be viewpoint suppression, but distribution ethics: reducing the platform’s default tendency to convert outrage into reach. In practice, that means (i) treating reflective metrics as *one signal among others*, not a decisive stamp of “goodness,” (ii) applying stronger friction and verification requirements only in clearly high-harm domains (e.g., targeted harassment, public-health misinformation), and (iii) keeping decisions transparent and appealable. The platform can preserve a wide latitude for political disagreement while still refusing to algorithmically subsidize escalation as the cheapest route to attention. The point is not to pretend that platforms can algorithmically detect virtue with certainty, but to acknowledge the structural problem and

reduce the strongest incentives toward vice. Reflective metrics should therefore operate alongside transparency, auditability, and clearly stated error-tolerance: they are tools for reshaping incentives, not final arbiters of moral truth.

Structural Reforms:

Deliberative Spaces and Virtuous Community Practices

Finally, an Aristotelian approach should not treat the platform solely as an individualized feed. Virtue is cultivated socially: people learn patterns of attention, reaction, and restraint partly by participating in practices with shared standards.⁴² This is where MacIntyre is useful. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre emphasizes that moral development depends on communities and “practices”—cooperative activities with internal goods and standards of excellence that educate desire and judgment.⁴³ A platform dominated by individualized engagement incentives erodes those shared standards and fragments discourse. To counter this, platforms could build deliberative micro-environments designed for slower, higher-accountability interaction: moderated discussion forums for specific issues, structured comment threads that require responding to opposing reasons, or community spaces where norms of evidence and restraint are explicitly enforced. Rather than rewarding the fastest and most incendiary post, these spaces would reward coherence, responsiveness, and sustained inquiry—features that better support habituation toward the mean. Such community-oriented structures also help address the problem that large-scale feeds tend to collapse context and amplify performative behavior. Smaller deliberative spaces make it easier to sustain norms, to recognize repeated patterns of good faith participation, and to maintain continuity of accountability over time. If platforms can cultivate these “practice-like” spaces, they can support ethical development not only at the level of individual self-control, but at the level of shared inquiry and civic life.

Conclusion and Ethical Directions for Social Media

X’s incentive structures foster vice by prioritizing emotionally volatile content, reinforcing impulsivity, and undermining

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, which emphasizes moderation and virtue cultivation. By rewarding engagement-driven sensationalism and external validation, the platform discourages reflective deliberation, amplifies extreme viewpoints, and erodes communal bonds essential for moral development. From an Aristotelian perspective, this is not merely a communication problem but a habituation problem: the platform repeatedly trains users toward excess and deficiency rather than toward stable dispositions guided by reason.⁴⁴

The reforms sketched here do not assume perfect “virtue detection,” nor do they require suppressing disagreement. Instead, they aim to reduce structural incentives for reactive extremity and to make moderation, accuracy, and deliberative exchange easier to practice and repeat. Calibrating visibility away from raw engagement, introducing measured friction that creates space for *phronēsis*, redesigning metrics with explicit guardrails against echo chambers, and building practice-like deliberative spaces are all ways of treating platforms as what they already are: environments that shape moral conduct. Platforms already moralize conduct

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Commentary

The incentivization of content that is sensationalist, extreme, emotionally volatile, divisive, and/or deceitful on the platform X, formerly known as Twitter is highly distressing. Alternative approaches to these seemingly endemic problems, like Mohiz's invocation of Aristotle, feel live and crucial. The addictive and destructive vices intensified by social media are not unprecedented, and it would benefit us to welcome that fact.

Of this paper's mobilization of Aristotle's virtue ethics, the Doctrine of the Mean is particularly compelling, as it emphasizes the *moderation* in "content moderation." Social media is a new kind of addiction, one whose normalization and dopaminergic-engineering positions it to be as—if not more—sinister than alcohol, drug, gambling, or sex addictions. However, since these vices have been around for far longer, we might learn something from how humans have historically attempted to treat addiction throughout the history of civilization. I am particularly interested in how shame acts as a moderating force of the social realm.

The temperance movement against alcohol, for example, fed in part off the public embarrassment that drunken and aggressive husbands caused their wives. The subsequent era of Prohibition in the United States, and its association with women's rights movements, transformed that shame into legitimate social movements that, for better or for worse, produced significant legal and societal changes. It is therefore worth weighing how the weaponization of conspicuous propriety, repressive though it can be, might bring about social change.

Similarly, the gradual but ultimately effective campaign against tobacco companies in the second half of the twentieth century stands as a success story in public messaging. Could comparable strategies such as warnings or disturbing imagery be deployed to deter addictive or problematic use of social media? As cigarettes went from representing upper-class elegance to ill-advised debauchery, their scent became a mark of shame for those who smoked them. Would you hire someone for a job if they reeked of tobacco? Should that matter? Would treating social media as an addiction risk creating an underclass of ostracized users? And, if so, does that risk outweigh the positive force of public shame?

Following Mohiz's example, broadening our approach might help answer these questions. How might, say, Dostoyevsky's literary accounts of gambling addiction help us understand the rise of sports betting and prediction markets? Or, how can the long histories of prostitution, concubinage, and enslavement break open discourse surrounding OnlyFans and online pornography? The society has always been troubled; but the history of that trouble, I believe, is well worth mining.

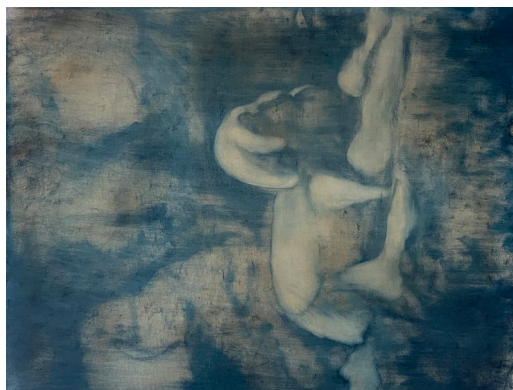
An anthropological perspective prompts us to question the underlying ontological principles guiding applications of Aristotle's ethics, particularly when these are complicated by the recognition that contemporary subjects not only interact with algorithms but are also shaped by them. Aristotle's ethics are grounded in reason and agentive choice, ideally striking a balance between two extremes. Applying this Ancient Greek ethical framework to a modern context therefore amounts to extending the Aristotelian ideal of moderation to social media. However, social media, as highlighted in the paper, has brought unprecedented change to human conduct in ways that disrupt the principles of agency and reason typically congruous with Greek ideals. Considering social media as a new mediating force in human culture—altering temporality and sociality, expanding the scope and scale of kin relationships, accelerating information exchange and communication, and reducing tolerances for delay or difference—situates it as a new context for cultural and social activity rather than an event within it. In the context of social media, anthropological analysis might invoke Aristotle's value system not primarily as a regulatory tool, but as a lens through which to examine the social, political, and cultural consequences of accelerated moral formation among increasingly impressionable subjects.

Induced into potential infinite, high-speed algorithmic environments, the contemporary moral subject experiences an accelerated sense of time and an increased susceptibility to external influence. The paper rightly emphasizes Aristotle's view that moral subjects are flexible and relationally constituted through their community and environment. The Aristotelian 'mean' is therefore contextual and dynamic, allowing it to be altered by social media. Yet this framework becomes significantly more complex when we consider the ontological and environmental instability of the moral subject under algorithmic conditions. On social media, fluctuation is ubiquitous: rapidly cycling feedback causes user, algorithm, and content to clash just as they become attuned, continually adjusting to one another. The field of ethical constitution is thus rendered unstable, putting virtues themselves at risk of instability. What counts as excess, deficiency, or the mean may shift rapidly as the user-algorithm relationship evolves. Put simply, contemporary subjects on social media are extremely open to algorithmic influence, continually adapting desires and behaviours in response to platform feedback. If agency and reason are partially outsourced, this raises a fundamental question for Aristotelian ethics: how can ethical evaluation proceed when its central object, a subject's character, is no longer a stable point, but a moving one? Moreover, if the fluctuating network of users that comprise the environment of digital life is itself unstable, this further undermines any fixed analytical grounding of deficiency and excess. What would ethical analysis look like if yesterday's 'excess' or 'deficiency' could become today's 'mean'?

Furthermore, a psychoanalytic perspective deepens our understanding of social media as a mediating force in human life. Rather than aiming to pathologize, psychoanalysis as employed in modern anthropological thought considers moral ideals and social norms as forces that both form and constrain subjectivity. The default condition of the psychoanalytic subject is that of contradiction and ambivalence in navigating the tensions and incongruities of these forces, often manifesting in compulsive or destructive desire-seeking behaviors. Given this, we might consider harmful feedback loops and reactivity, consequences

of current algorithmic structures, to be symptoms of pre-existing psychic patterns, exploited for engagement. In terms of ethical algorithmic reform, designing digital architectures that support virtue generate meaningful alternatives. However, such systems will likely evolve alongside, rather than replace, existing algorithmic environments. As with any form of human desire or attachment, algorithms redirect and refract patterns that reform alone cannot eliminate. The ethical challenge is therefore twofold: developing better platforms, and critically examining those already in use, in order to extend our understanding of the ontological and psychological forces that shape how subjects engage with them.





Progression, Goodnight Little Lamb



Goodnight Little Lamb, 2025

Bhreagh Godin

Oil on Canvas, 20 x 30 in.

Talking Trash

An Ethnography of Street Garbage in Montreal's Plateau

L A U R E N F R A S C A



Rue de Bullion, a street in Montreal's Plateau neighborhood, is a hot spot of garbage debris. Returning to a 500-meter block each week throughout the fall of 2024, I sought to investigate how garbage as a material object and the meaning we associate with it work together to inform the experience of being on the street: why and under what circumstances does garbage 'spilling over' from its demarcated space make people so upset? Seminal anthropologist Mary Douglas has theorized how categories which are tabooed and subsequently controlled are key to upholding the larger structures of a society. 'Dirt', or here 'garbage', is a culturally mediated object that is concentrated with symbolic knowledge. However, the embodied and symbolic transience of the street, composed of a myriad of interactions between bodies, collectives, and discarded objects, led to the engagement of Ben Anderson and James Ash's post-structuralist affect theory. Through participant observation and an interview with a resident of the street, C, garbage comes into focus as a symbolically and affectively potent object, both conditioned by and conditioning human relationships to the street. With attention to the diverse bodies, objects, and motivations that comprise the streets of Montreal, this ethnography is an invitation to think differently about the 'danger' of dirt and the charge of negative affect and imagine garbage as a diffuse and ongoing potential in and of city life.

Introduction

The following paper invites readers to think differently about garbage—to give more thought to the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of our reactions toward what we understand as ‘waste’ or ‘disgust’. To give shape to this analysis, I consider Mary Douglas’ structural analysis of garbage together with Ben Anderson and James Ash’s affect theory, tracing transgression and transience as forces belonging to both the symbolic and affective. As such, this paper bridges both structuralist and post-structuralist new-materialist frameworks which implicate the non-human and material as parallel actors in collective life. Engaging both frameworks allows an analysis that unsettles taken-for-granted certainties about the material—that garbage is gross simply because it is—without leaning on the symbolic as the only mediating force, digging deeper into the flows of the material and environmental and understanding their movements as implicated alongside human structures of meaning.

Committed to a three month ethnographic project on garbage, I decided to focus my research on a two block boundary of Rue de Bullion, a street in Montreal’s Plateau neighborhood. This area immediately stood out to me as potent, a hot spot of garbage debris. A resident of the street during the time of this ethnography, my research consisted of weekly walks up and down the sidewalks, documenting my experience of items, smells, sensations. I would wait, observe, and make note of any interaction I saw between people and my object of inquiry. Largely auto-ethnographic, this research also moved me to conduct an interview with my neighbor, whom I call ‘C’ throughout this paper. As I returned to my humble field, about 500 meters of de Bullion, each week I sought to investigate how garbage as a material object and the meaning we associate with it work together to inform the experience of being on the street. Specifically, I posed a tentative question: *why and under what circumstances does garbage ‘spilling over’ from its demarcated space make people so upset?*

This paper begins with a description of the field, drawing out the initial garbage observations and reflections about the street that led me to take up Mary Douglas’ work on the structural-symbolic formations of pollution and taboo and Ben Anderson and James Ash’s work on ‘affective

atmospheres.’ Following Douglas, categories which are tabooed and subsequently controlled are key to upholding the larger structures of a society. For her, “dirt,” or in my context *garbage*, is a culturally mediated object that is concentrated with symbolic knowledge.¹ Douglas helps to unsettle the normative assumptions that might arise in an inquiry into garbage, enabling me to attend to garbage not as something that simply is gross but acquired through transgression of a system of order. I demonstrate through ethnographic material that, in this way, garbage *can* be in its place, but is instead ‘out of place.’ However, in a transient space like the street, garbage’s power comes to exceed that of symbolic transgression. Composed of moving bodies and overlapping structures of meaning, the instability of the street led me to move towards the post-structuralist affect theory as a way to attend to how spaces are imbued with pre-symbolic feeling through complex interactions between bodies, collectives, space and objects comprising that space.

Putting these frameworks into conversation with my auto-ethnographic reflections, observations, and interview, I found that garbage on Rue de Bullion was an exceptionally rich site to explore how life forms and is formed by its environment. Sparked by the questions posed by C in our interview, I explore how the symbolic transgression of garbage on Rue de Bullion, analyzed alongside the framework of affective atmospheres, allows me to take up the disruption of the garbage-strewn street more ambivalently— as a potential that never quite settles or reveals itself in one direction.

The Street Garbage of Rue de Bullion

Both in the private and public sphere, garbage bins are defined by their use in holding the waste people produce. Outdoor garbage bins in particular have drawn my research interest, as streetside garbage collection is a distinctive characteristic of the city of Montreal. These outdoor bins are made of opaque gray or black plastic and stand roughly waist height. Most are cylindrical caverns with a snap-on lid and typically have handles on either side, so that they may be easily moved to and from their collection and storage spots (i.e., on the edge of the sidewalk, and within the boundaries of one’s residence, respectively). Residents often

draw their address numbers on the side of their respective street bins to indicate their proper belonging. Residents fill their bin throughout the week, then place it at the edge of their sidewalk before the scheduled collection, or ‘garbage day’.

To understand the spatial dynamics of my fieldwork, it helps to break down the layered composition of the street itself. Rue De Bullion is a domestic street in the Plateau neighborhood of Montreal, Quebec. In the zone where I conducted my fieldwork, the streetscape is primarily made up of a paved road, lined on either side with a raised portion of cement used as a pedestrian walkway. A couple feet wide, the sidewalk borders the street, lined with streetlamps, post-and-ring bike racks, and intermittent patches of soil holding trees and other plants. Rue de Bullion is made up of residences whose stairways and walkways meet the sidewalk and frame the one-way, north-going road; wide enough for traffic and cars to park on either side, the cement curbs into another set of sidewalk, trees, staircases, and residences. The interaction of these parts—whose boundaries are not very clear, of course—and their evolving relations with those who pass through it I consider, as a comprehensive system, the *street*.

A street can be considered an inert system. Although unmoving, as the street takes on different attributes depending on time and inhabitants, it becomes transient. It is, at once, where some people live indefinitely, where some pass through daily, and where some walk once and never again. Moreover, the street is also an entity at an intersection of the public and private, making it a domain of a myriad of actors; tenants, landlords, garbage workers, pedestrians, and the municipality. People may call the street “their street” insofar as it operates in relation to their personal life; and yet others may address the street subjectively, as it operates as part of *a* or *the* city.

Looking down a street on garbage day, one can see how the outdoor bin rests on an unstable boundary. The streetside garbage collection takes place on the curb—physically, this is apparent—but its curb is also that between private life, city operations, and public or neighborly responsibility. At this threshold, as these spheres condense and overlap, the ensuing contradictions pull garbage into multiple directions at once, propelling it into liminality. It is between space and possession: the bin holds household waste, but is also out for all to see; it was

someone's, but now no one's; it is the resident's responsibility, but also the city's.

What is significant about Rue de Bullion is that the time and space of its liminal phase— the time of ambiguity, and potential—is overstayed, overstepped, and never neatly resolved. That is, the norms of garbage day are transgressed. Garbage is constantly and ubiquitously *not where it belongs*: it is spilling out and over the bins, exceeding the curb, and taking up space outside of its demarcated time. Trash often is placed out several days before the scheduled collection or just after it, thus missing collection until the following week. Other times, it is placed out in manners which the city will not collect (e.g., torn, unbagged, etc.). As garbage spills over bags and bins, remaining scattered across the street, sidewalk, greenery, and front steps of de Bullion, it has a profound impact on the street.

On September 12th around 6:30 PM, approximately ten hours after the city employees collected garbage from my research zone, I observed it to be in a state of disarray.

The left side of rue De Bullion (100 meters of the research zone):

- Broken glass
- McDonalds paper bag
- Cigarette packs
- Styrofoam
- Various plastic wrappers
- Bread tag
- Plastic knife
- Used tea bag
- Receipts
- Gray garbage bin, no lid
- White kitchen garbage bag (full) split on the side
- Black garbage bin, upside down
- Ice cream tub
- A chipped ceramic mug
- Black garbage bag (full) leaking unknown liquid

Garbage Out of Place

Overcoming an image of garbage as something which is inherently and naturally disgusting is the first step to allow for an inquiry that interrogates the sociality and potential generativity of

garbage as it exists on Rue de Bullion. Though garbage's potency is undeniably embodied, garbage on de Bullion can also be seen to express through Mary Douglas' structuralist framework an underlying symbolic system. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas analyzes the social category of dirt, demonstrating how the object is not inherently so, but assumes the quality by being "matter out of place"—because it has transgressed a boundary of where something should or should not be in a cultural system of order.² An arbitrary category rather than an essential quality, dirt is mediated by the norms of cultural systems acquiring meaning through binary opposition in a chain of signifiers. Thus, an object can be dirty in one context and not another, as cultures consider different phenomena dirty.

September 18th, approximately 4:30PM

I am sitting on a bench next to a garbage bin on Prince Arthur. It is covered by a giant mound of garbage bags. Flies swarm overhead. My goal today is to sit and watch people walk past the pile. The sun is out, warming the black plastic. Occasionally, a light breeze blows the heavy scent of hot waste in my direction.



Figure 1.
Banana Peel.
Photograph by
Author. 2024.

As I sat, beginning my fieldwork, the first interaction I observed was between a man and this overflowing garbage bin. He furrowed his brow, as he eyed the pile up and down. His expression was not directed towards anyone else, and disgust only briefly flashed across his face while he walked by. I presume this was an automatic reaction—much like the grimaces, “eugh”s, and sudden recoils I had experienced myself throughout my field work when leaning over a soggy McDonalds take-out bag, a plastic bag leaking brown liquid, or an indiscriminate mush of “food stuff.”³

October 2nd, approx 5:45PM

I see a bike post crawling with maggots. The longer I look, the more I see. The pole is completely unusable, blocked by bags and



Figure 2.
Two Clean
Bags. Photograph
by Author. 2024.

surrounded by spilled food waste. The sight of these maggots elicits pronounced discomfort within me, producing an almost visceral, skin-crawling sensation.

A good deal of my fieldwork was marked by disgust: itchiness and nausea often evoked by glimpses of particularly graphic piles of trash on the sidewalk.⁴ However, not all waste was as strenuous to behold. I found I could “admir[e] the cleanliness” of certain parts of the street, and celebrate neat, upright, and well-tied, garbage bags.⁵ I noted: “When I walk past a [...] sealed bag on the curb, I don’t even think twice, I often don’t even want to note it down”, it feels like a “neutral object.”⁶ It was only the debris *outside* bags and bins which made the street feel dirty.

For garbage to implicitly trigger a conscious response, to affect my experience of the street, something about it had to be split open, or strewn about. Garbage had to be out of place, provocative and loud, in order to evoke a negative response—both *in* me (that is, disgust) and *from* me (disdain).

September 18th, approximately 4:40PM

Two young women, apparent friends, walk by. One, nearest to the pile, sarcastically exclaims, “mmm yum!”, while contorting her face into a wrinkle-- half grimace, half smile. The other jokingly gags and makes an exaggerated “blegh!”. They continue jesting in French, which I cannot make out. Despite a language barrier, the expression of repulsion was unmistakable.

Street garbage is already a precarious object, quite literally ripe to take on these threatening qualities of ambiguity and disorder. As waste disposal operates on the street of Rue de Bullion, the way garbage takes up space in the street system is just as unregulated. It is given space to exist on garbage day, but we expect it to be transformed and cleared away. Thus, as garbage spills over, taking up too much space for too long, it oversteps its place in the middle and imposes an offensive presence on the street’s atmosphere. Garbage that falls

outside its designated place thus acquires the quality Douglas describes as “danger”—the negative charge attributed to dirty objects—not because they pose an inherent threat, but because their transgression of established patterns disrupts a system of order.⁷ Although a garbage bag or bin holds objects that, through their amalgamation, assume an abject ambiguity, they nonetheless have a necessary function for collecting and disposing of unwanted items. Thus, the concealment and disposal of waste is orderly. A plastic bag placed out on the curb collection is not threatening while a split bag or felled bin *is*.⁸ These out-of-place objects are transgressive precisely because they occupy the potentiality of the ambiguous ‘in-between’ position for too long, thus acquiring the power to threaten the order a symbolic system exists to maintain.

Garbage in the Atmosphere

The transience of the street, constituted by multiple human agents that invoke and oscillate between disparate frameworks for relating to and being responsible for the street, complicates Douglas’ structuralism that is dependent on stable, shared classifications. Taking affects as pre-representational and pre-conscious potentialities—or changes in feeling and perception that circulate between bodies—Ben Anderson’s concept of the “affective atmosphere” offers a way to think about the diffuse, collective spaces that shape and organize life yet cannot be simply coalesced into a stable, ascribed meaning in the symbolic.⁹ Atmospheres are present in any experience of an environment: it is our underlying sense in and of a space.¹⁰ In this framework, the transitory characteristic of the street can maintain its ambiguity and multiplicity. Alongside a site of symbolic exchange, one can attend to the street as a diffuse backdrop for collective thought and life.

What is interesting about “affective atmospheres” as an analytical tool is that they are “a condition and [are themselves] conditioned.”¹¹ That is, where Douglas’ structuralism recognizes the dynamism and conflict posed by anomalies—the disruptive power of matter out of place—affect theory opens the organization of life into an intersubjective cycle. Atmospheres “have effect and are effects,” where encounters between human and non-human bodies are both a backdrop and force. This



Figure 3. temporary resident, have a degree of separation from its waste.
Green Space. Yes, when garbage is in my home, it is my responsibility; my
 Photograph by
 Author: 2024.

is both an analytical challenge and possibility, as it ultimately draws attention to the implicit and the non-representational.¹² Atmospheres are shaped through encounters between bodies.

I am not on the front lines, so to speak, of garbage on De Bullion; I, as a temporary resident, have a degree of separation from its waste. Yes, when garbage is in my home, it is my responsibility; my roommates and I hold the chore of its maintenance. However, once I drag my bin across the sidewalk so that it rests on the edge of the curb beside the road, it is released from my ownership—that is, I don’t have to worry about it anymore. In order to better understand how garbage was felt by a long-time resident, I requested to interview C.

October 10th, approximately 10:15; snippet of my interview with a neighbor

A few minutes into our walk, C is explaining how even the garbage workers, paid well with benefits by the city, find garbage pickup duties to be below them. “They don’t want to walk around without fancy machines!” she remarks in an annoyed tone. She details the municipal process of outsourcing street pick up to homeless, previously incarcerated, or other ‘hard up’ people. “But this is what makes a real difference!” she says, highlighting a change on the street when the garbage is removed. Before I can reply, she loudly cries out, in exasperated, but lighthearted conclusion: “garbage is unglamorous! garbage is not fun!”

According to scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Winfried Menninghaus, there is a class-based divide between what counts as disgusting and what is framed as moral and aesthetic.¹³ This insight helps clarify the associations I observed in conversation with my interlocutor, which illuminates how the very concept of lower classes, excessive consumption, garbage production, and dirtiness, accrue meaning through a structural-symbolic system. While these associations are explicitly verbalized here, aversion towards the street ultimately moves the bodies of residents and passersby through negative affect. An object out of place demands

to be felt—noticed, reacted to, and possibly acted upon. The same process which delineates “dirt” thus imbues it with affective power. Objects, charged with meaning according to the norms of a culture, contribute cyclically to the feeling of a space, the symbolic order coming to exceed itself, maintaining social norms and class dynamics at the atmospheric level, moving and directing bodies through sensation rather than value.

Crucially, this is not to downplay how garbage hits the body in potent forms. Extending Douglas’ insights through Anderson unites the symbolic with the embodied without using mediation to simply explain things away. For an atmosphere to also be a condition means that it is a force external to bodies, it *affects*. In other words, we can rethink responses to garbage as non-inherent in the same way that human systems of meaning are not the only forces structuring collective life. Rather, meaning and affect form a cycle, uniting the symbolic and embodied, where material, non-human objects are powerful—even before a system of meaning ascribes them to be so. In an affective framework, non-human objects, materials, and environments are just as significant in shaping one’s experience in the world as socio-cultural structures. Garbage is thus less arbitrary and more situated—its potency asserts itself over the street. In this cyclical relationship, it is both condition and conditioning that order and reorder relationships to the street.

September 9th, approximately 12:00pm

I walk up to my front door, returning from class. A folded green slip is sticking out of my mailbox. Looking to my right, small flashes of green decorate the mailboxes of most entryways I can see. I open the flier as I step through my doorway--“sortez-moi au bon moment” reads over a printed graphic of an anthropomorphized garbage bag. Above the image, is neat script handwritten in blue sharpie:

“garbage → Thursday A.M

poubelles → jeudi matin.”

“Please help keep the neighborhood clean”, punctuated with a heart.

This message was anonymously communicated to residents of the neighborhood. Through an analog instrumentality,

it disseminates concern on a local scale. I took notice of this gesture, recognizing that it must have been made by someone living here, someone not impressed with the appearance of the street. On the morning of September 11th, I responded to this message, slipping my own note into a mail slot. My neighbor C opened the door just moments later, prompting us to exchange introductions and share our concerns about the garbage on De Bullion.

As a homeowner here, C spoke in an emotionally-charged tone, seeming exasperated with the situation. Seeing garbage strewn throughout the street made her upset; C told me she was “discouraged” and “unhopeful” about the condition of the street. The ongoing misconduct on the street communicated to C that this was simply the norm in the area. Living among young residents was, as she described, living in a “city of slob.” She expressed how the situation, dire and ongoing, had pushed her to consider selling. Informed by a relation of disgust, beholding this garbage was driving her away from living on De Bullion. Here, the way the garbage-strewn street elicits negative affect, discloses other negative associations about the community, and pushes C to desire moving is all caught up in both the symbolic and atmospheric.

Potency and Potential

On the sunny October morning of our interview, I asked C why she thinks Montreal manages garbage so poorly. We sauntered beside each other on the sidewalk for almost two hours and eventually found ourselves running errands on St. Laurent street. This was not the conventional ‘interview’ I had imagined in my head: sitting across from each other, questions asked and answered in sequence. Instead, our time together flowed casually and amicably, as I jotted quick notes on my phone. Despite my being the researcher, the relaxed tone of our conversation activated a disposition in me akin to walking with a little-known relative, a respected but friendly elder. C had an outspoken and unapologetic personality, often joking and raising her voice in a sarcastic way. For the most part, I was passive, listening intently to her thoughts as she naturally led the conversation.

Sometime after exiting a cafe, I expressed my musings on the seemingly dyadic relationship between behavior and

environment. Paraphrased here, I questioned: “Is it that the city shapes people to act this way, or people’s actions that shape the city?” In response, C raised an interesting question: “How could a municipality change an ingrained culture of negligence?” She said loudly, although in a sort of lighthearted-annoyance:

“it has always been dirty! We have never been able to get a handle on it! [...] New chapter, same book!”¹⁴

At the end of our walk, C posed two hypotheses: (1) The ‘romanticized grungy street’—garbage might contribute to the plateau’s reputation of coolness, authenticity, and artistry; (2) ‘garbage as resistance’—the dirtiness of the street might be an unconscious resistance to gentrification and suburbanization.

Anderson and Ash’s framework is suited to how the threatening and the charged can also be diffuse. They write: “atmospheres are irreducible phenomena: neither wholly separate from the relations that form them, nor wholly determined by those relations. Emphasizing the irreducibility of atmospheres directs us to their strange, ambiguous causal powers.”¹⁵ The atmosphere cannot be reduced to its parts; the couple walking down the street, the garbage collector in an orange vest, the cracks on the sidewalk, the rotting compost and broken bottle—these all contribute to a shared understanding. While there may be a dominant element, such as the undeniable situation of excessive garbage on the street, where an effect follows from this determinant, the street as an atmosphere maintains something more diffuse and ambivalent. Atmospheres reveal themselves in the bodily sensations they evoke, later qualified by associations of emotions or movements towards actions. It is in this simultaneity, how the “atmosphere emerges in, is reflected in, and is enacted,” that they are so uncertain in how they come to weigh on their constituent-inhabitants.¹⁶ Atmospheres change, arriving at threshold and tipping points as affective agents come and go, transform and are transformed.¹⁷ To this, Anderson and Ash propose the atmosphere be approached and researched as an “affective proposition,” an unfinished and ongoing backdrop of life.¹⁸



Figure 4.
Pile.

Photograph by
Author. 2024.

C seems to postulate, then, that the affective atmosphere of garbage 'out of place' on de Bullion is without fixed properties while also being undeniably potent; in other words, the atmosphere cannot be pinned down.¹⁹ C's question and corresponding two hypotheses posit garbage as a regulatory object, a means of maintaining or modulating Montreal's identity. But, as the street brings together diverse bodies and objects, it is implicated in the co-constitutive ambiguity of affective atmospheres and unmoored from stability. Taken not only as an atmosphere, but one composed of moving bodies bringing overlapping, disparate attitudes, the threat of 'the out of place' becomes more ambivalent. Different bodies are hit differently, keeping meaning open to flux. The affective intensity of walking down Rue de Bullion is an overwhelming experience. For some, this disruptive atmosphere may move them to turn away and towards a more sanitized space. But the indeterminate nature of the street means it might also be caught in different bodies that are moved by that intensity in an inverse direction. For them, while the garbage-strewn street is still intense and transgressive, that may be felt as 'grungy,' 'raw,' or 'authentic'—ultimately altering the atmosphere as the shape of their desires come to form it. Liminal, transient, and charged, garbage on de Bullion is therefore both no one's and everyone's.

September 26th, approximately 6:45pm

I was taking pictures of garbage piles and pieces of debris on the street. As I leaned over the sidewalk to snap a flash photo of an empty cigarette pack, I noticed a pedestrian slow down. Self-consciously noticing him noticing me, we made eye contact. He says nothing, looking at me.

"Oh, I'm studying garbage in Montreal for a school project." He replied, "Garbage? In Montreal? There's a lot there." Slightly embarrassed but assured by his immediate understanding, I replied "Yeah! It's for anthropology!" and ha-ha"ed awkwardly as I motioned towards the litter surrounding us. "Good. Good on!" He said as he continued down the sidewalk.

This anecdotal exchange began inquisitively but quickly took on a light irony. Without exchanging much more than a few couple sentences over the span of about ten seconds, our conversation extended from my behaviour, to a joking criticism of our city and the recognition of this widespread phenomenon. Our mutual understanding not only gave the man adequate precedent to strike conversation but also material for banter. More so, the ‘punchline’ we experienced was implicit, gestured to, but largely unspoken: an inside joke between strangers.

It becomes clear how the symbolic transgression and affective potency of garbage, situated in the diffuse and transient environment of the street, come together to impute garbage with its power and suspend its potential. Transgression makes it powerful, as does affective potency; but combined with the transience of the street, it also makes it a force that exceeds individuals. That affect and affective atmospheres are understood to lie before, beside, or beyond the “representational registers and structures of meaning” allows the transgression of garbage ‘out of place’ to be analyzed more ambivalently.²⁰ This is a potential that is uncertain—here gestured to as a vehicle both for and against gentrification—but a potential nonetheless. As the cycle of meaning and affect is both charged and suspended, shared dispositions towards the ‘out of place’ allow even complete strangers to understand something about each other and their city, anticipate and postulate while it continues to unfold.

Conclusion

This ethnography invites a rethinking of garbage, prompting deeper reflection on both what we feel and why we feel it. That garbage on de Bullion is more felt and contentious than on other streets makes more visible the symbolic and affective flows which are elsewhere harder to trace. Moving from Douglas to Anderson and Ash, this ethnography first focuses on the transgression of the structural dynamics of street garbage, identifying that garbage is not always dirty but easily and overwhelmingly becomes ‘out of place.’ Then, the affective lens allows a re-centering of the material, as its potency and precarious place in the street system ripens this transgression. As well, the notion of ‘atmospheres’ makes it possible for the danger of dirt and the charge of negative affect to be understood as a more diffuse and ongoing

potential, extending the role the ‘out of place’ has in structural-symbolic analysis through a more contemporary post-structural lens. Teasing out the ambivalence of the ‘out of place’ and its powerful charge—suggesting that this ongoing force might be destructive, conservative, or liberatory—ultimately traces a shift in anthropological attitudes towards questions of how human as well as non-human forces continue to organize collective life.

Affect theory poses an interesting material alternative to discursive arguments, especially in its post-structuralist and new-materialist manifestations that place human experience and forces in a continuum rather than in separate, untouching spheres. Although this essay gestures towards ontology, it is focused on human bodies and how they express and attribute meaning to these forces, thus stopping short of explicitly engaging with ontological analysis. I hope its implications might be taken as a call for a further inquiry into garbage through such a framework, setting aside the symbolic and focusing ethnographic attention towards the ways garbage asserts agency and makes itself manifest.

Notes

1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 50, 44.
2. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44.
3. Author's fieldnotes, September 12; October 2 and 14, 2024.
4. Author's fieldnotes, September 18; October 2, 2024.
5. Author's fieldnotes, October 3, 14, and 16, 2024.
6. Author's fieldnotes, October 3, 2024.
7. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 45.
8. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44.
9. Ben Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 77–81. doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005.
10. Ben Anderson and James Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," in *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research*, ed. Phillip Vannini (New York: Routledge, 2015), 34–51.
11. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 35.
12. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 35.
13. Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
14. Author's fieldnotes, September 11, 2024.
15. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 42.
16. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 42.
17. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 47.
18. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 40.
19. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 37.
20. Anderson and Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," 34.

Commentary

The phenomenological experience of street garbage is uncomfortable because it exceeds its proper limits, leading to an atmosphere of unease and disgust. Building off of how Frasca's essay compels us to treat something commonly thought of as undesirable as a 'being' with agency, I am struck by the parallels between her application of Anderson and Ash's "Atmospheric Methods" and the discussion of Bakhtin's "grotesque body" in my own essay. As the author notes, when garbage is contained within the home or within a neatly tied bag, it exists merely as an afterthought. When garbage begins to rot and seep out onto the sidewalk from its vessel, it becomes disconcerting and 'dirty' within this context. As referenced in my paper, Bakhtin's understanding of the early modern characterization of the body also harks to an affective experience of liminality and boundaries: fascination with the body centered around its 'grotesqueness,' or the way it exceeds its own limits through base and uncouth expulsions.

Street garbage left unmonitored and uncontrolled operates in a similar way, calling attention to the porous boundaries and overflows of our current cycle of consumption and waste. Frasca investigates how our society determines what is excess and how our negative responses to it are culturally constructed moral and aesthetic judgments. Similarly, early modern art and literature maps these judgments onto the body, associating the grotesque with representations of those living at the margins of society. Paintings like *The Peasant Dance* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, for example, depict themes of lust and gluttony in the

lower classes through crowded tables of ale and faces contorted with inebriation. Frasca's documentation of people's adverse reactions to street garbage attests to a lasting continuity in humanity's moralizing attitude toward anything that exceeds its limits, reminding us that contemporary urban waste reproduces older logics of othering and containment under new material conditions. How our social systems determine said limits is, as Frasca demonstrates, a multi-disciplinary affair under which cultural symbols are constructed and evolve over history and time.

Commentary

Before traffic lights, before zoning laws, before the *Tribunal administratif du logement*, before noise regulations, and before waste collection systems, collective living in Montréal was governed—at least in the city’s first hospital and convent in the seventeenth century—by a manual. *Règles et constitutions pour les religieuses hospitalières de s. Joseph*, published in 1686, is a detailed script for life in the Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal as a nun in the order that would administer the hospital for the next three hundred years.¹

The order, it seems, made no concessions for matter—or action—out of place: along with an endless litany of devotions, the sisters’ hours were accounted for from five o’clock in the morning to nine o’clock in the evening—the precise moment when they were meant to fall asleep.² The script demands that not a single quarter of an hour be spent in “idleness or useless conversation,” that one must not undertake “superfluous” work, only that which is beneficial to the “Community or the poor,” the sick under their care.³ Under a vow of silence, words become matter out of place, too: as silence provides the most ideal condition for the attainment of a saintly interior life, any word uttered above hushed tones or spoken out of turn is disruptive not only to one’s own salvation, but to that of others.⁴ We can imagine that, just as detritus on the streets of Montreal accrues meaning by virtue of those collective behaviours and perceptions that determine its “place,” dictates against unnecessary or excessive speech laden those words that *were* spoken with a weight they may have never otherwise borne.

Life in the Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal was, of course, far more communal (and far more crowded) than life in the Plateau today—but we still have to live together, in some capacity. Though we have no way of knowing the extent to which such prescriptions were followed, this glimpse into how communities define matter out of place provides a space to reflect on how the parameters around what is undesirable and what we should control shift with changing contexts, sociabilities, and time.

Notes

1. “History,” Musée des Hospitalières de l’Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal, accessed December 30, 2025, <https://museedeshospitalieres.qc.ca/en/history/>.
2. Henri Arnauld, *Règles et constitutions pour les religieuses hospitalières de s. Joseph* (Bernard La Mothe-Tort, 1686), 100, 109.
3. Arnauld, *Règles et constitutions pour les religieuses hospitalières de s. Joseph*, 111.
4. Arnauld, *Règles et constitutions*, 89.



Cupcake, 2025
Joelle Schrag

Mixed Paper, Watercolor, Paste, 26 x 16 in.

The Unbounded Body

Grotesque Imagination & Typologies of Play in the Renaissance Garden

M A D E L I N E B L A K E



*This paper examines how the garden sculptures and underground grottoes at the Villa di Pratolino, a late 16th-century estate outside of Florence, combined monstrous subject matter, material ambiguity, and mechanical innovation to elicit pleasure and humor for its audiences. As Mikhail Bakhtin illustrates in his text *Rabelais and His World*, 16th century art and literature is preoccupied with the grotesque, which he defines as a body that exceeds its own limits to the point of vulgar excess. Through visual and material analyses of Giambologna's colossal Apennine statue at the Villa di Pratolino, this paper explores how Bakhtin's themes of bodily degradation, monstrosity, and ribaldry are depicted within the Renaissance landscape. Further, the villa's underground grotto complex and its automatons are conceptualized as creating a ludic environment in accordance with sociologist Roger Caillois's typologies of play. This analysis ultimately seeks to situate Pratolino away from the traditional conception of the Italian Renaissance garden as a site of aesthetic pleasure and rather as a multi-dimensional built environment that encapsulates an early modern fascination with the 'Other.'*

Introduction

In contrast to the traditional conception of the Italian Renaissance garden as a *locus amoenus*, or peaceful place, the Medici gardens at the Villa di Pratolino also functioned as a playground for practical jokes, ribald humor, and grotesque imagery. While the various fountains, waterworks, and automata of the site have ceased to function or even exist in some cases, these structures once activated the park beyond being a pastoral retreat and turned it into an eccentric program of wonder, spectacle, comedy, and thrill. A visitor at Pratolino once remarked that the park was assembled “using all the five senses in its embellishment,”¹ inspiring the need for Pratolino to be interpreted in a way that underscores the vibrancy it sought to embody throughout every aspect of its design.

Beginning with an overview of the park’s history and structure, I aim to illustrate how the multitude of aesthetic inspirations and incongruent themes represented throughout Pratolino’s statues, fountains, and grottoes calls for a greater variety of scholarly interpretation than has previously been brought to bear on the site. I will then ground my analysis of the park as a ludic environment through two distinctive features of Pratolino: Giambologna’s Apennine Colossus and the villa’s underground grotto complex. Viewing the Apennine Colossus in relation to philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body, I will reveal how the early modern fascination with the grotesque is embodied through the sculpture’s formal sense of materiality, as well as its cavernous interior. Through primary accounts of Pratolino’s grottoes, I will examine the function of these sites for pleasure and humor utilizing sociologist Roger Caillois’s typologies of play. Pratolino’s structures ultimately break down the barriers between human, nature, and the machine, resulting in a landscape that inspires not just the tranquillity of aesthetic appreciation, but also sensual pleasures and corporeal humour. On a grander scale, integrating Bakhtin’s emphasis on everyday, low culture of the early modern period alongside Caillois’s study on the ubiquity of play throughout human culture provides the opportunity for a nuanced contribution to the development of European landscape architecture. The history of art and architecture, as a discipline traditionally concerned with the

visual, tends to flatten its subjects into two-dimensional scenes of passive contemplation. Early modern built environments are treated like static ruins, rather than imagined as dynamic gathering sites for history's most influential players. Unfolding the story of Pratolino via its ludic properties ultimately strives to imbue the site with its original humanity. Just as beauty may be thought of as a universal ideal of human civilisation, so too might the pursuit of laughter.

Pratolino: Origins

The history of Pratolino begins with its patron: Grand Duke Francesco I de Medici. The Duke's ambitions for Pratolino, meaning 'little meadow,' began in 1569 and were executed by Bernardo Buontalenti, a stage designer, architect, and artistic multihyphenate who was also the Duke's lifelong companion.² Known for his unusual, melancholic personality, Francesco alienated himself further by marrying his Venetian mistress, Bianca Cappello, on the unfinished grounds of Pratolino in 1578, just two months after the death of his previous wife.³ By the time of the estate's completion in 1581, it served as the ideal secluded retreat for the controversial couple.

The land itself was situated six miles north of Florence, surrounded by arid Tuscan landscape that lacked a proximate natural water source.⁴ The impracticability of this location called for water to be rerouted from a river five miles away, leading one of the park's visitors to comment that "their water costs them more than their wine."⁵ As is typical for Medici gardens of this era, water plays a crucial ornamental role throughout Pratolino. In addition to irrigating the garden's variety of flora and activating the visual spectacle of the garden's fountains, thematic allusions to the generation of water are demonstrated in many of Pratolino's major sculptures.

Unfortunately, the park's reliance on an unsustainable water supply system ultimately led to its ruin. While a semblance of Pratolino's original grandeur survived through the 17th and 18th centuries after the Duke's death, the estate fell out of fashion and was eventually converted into a formal English garden in the 19th century, with the original villa deconstructed and the enormous water expenses suspended.⁶ As such, scholarly literature on the park has largely relied on maps, illustrations, and primary accounts

of the garden as a supplement for the aspects of the site that have been desecrated. Despite these constraints, it is essential to consider Pratolino as a three-dimensional, planned environment rather than as a randomized series of objects lacking situational or functional context. Social historian Edward Wright warns against reducing the study of Italian Renaissance gardens to “objects of the aesthetic gaze, distancing the viewing subject to an external Archimedean point from which gardens appear as problems in design, decoration, iconography, and classical influence.”⁷ To provide a sense of scale and spatial context to Pratolino’s structures, I have created a ‘story map’ that leads viewers from the upper section of the garden to its lower sections through a side-by-side comparison of the object and its position within the garden.

Pratolino was designed with the Medici villa at the center, splitting the park into an upper and lower portion that blurred the lines between the natural landscape and manmade artifice, as well as humorously contrasted classical references with the uncouth. At the uppermost portion of the park sat a fountain with a statue of Jupiter, which has since been moved to the Boboli Garden (fig. 1). During its time at Pratolino, the statue held a collection of lightning bolts in his left hand, effectively calling attention to the generation of water in the sky as it travelled down the garden’s slope from the upper portion into the lower.⁸ Occupying the center of the upper park is the Apennine Colossus, personifying the Apennine Mountain range neighboring Pratolino. This enormous sculpture stands three stories high and served as a cavernous structure that contained its own grottoes.⁹ The giant is positioned crouching as he suffocates a monstrous head spurting water into the pond below (fig. 2). Claudia Lazzaro comments that this imagery, like the Jupiter statue, evokes associations with water generation as “the Appennino presses more water from the cavities of the mountain into

To access the story map:
<https://arcg.is/Pi9be>

Figure 1.
Baccio
Bandinelli,
Jupiter seated,
1547-1548.
 White marble,
 260 cm. Boboli
 Gardens.



Figure 2.
Giambologna,
Apennine
Colossus,
1569-1581.
Photographer:
Rogers, Elizabeth
Barlow. [https://jstor.org/stable/
community.
14715633](https://jstor.org/stable/community.14715633).



Figure 3.
Giambologna, *Thetis*, 1580-1585.
Terracotta with gilding, 58.7 cm.
Victoria and Albert Museum.



the pond before him.”¹⁰ Many elements of the interior of the colossus are also reminiscent of what was expected to be found in a mountain’s cave, including scenes of mining and metallurgy painted on the walls.¹¹ There was also a fountain depicting the sea goddess Thetis decorated with shells, pearls, and crystals (fig. 3). Medici court chronicler Francesco de’ Vieri, who wrote about his experiences visiting Pratolino in 1587, claimed that the grotto’s imagery of water, metal, and stone demonstrated how these materials originate from within the earth’s cavities.¹²

Additionally, the room within the sculpture’s head allowed ample space for the duke to sit comfortably and cast a fishing line out into the pond below through one of the Apennino’s eye sockets.¹³ The surface of the Apennine Colossus, as well as many of the grottoes throughout the park, was composed of *spugna*, a calcified, sponge-like form of limestone that Giorgio Vasari described as “a kind of coagulation of earth and of water [...] which never can be dry so long as they lie under water—they are full of pores which give them a spongy and perforated appearance, both within and without.”¹⁴

Spugna was an essential decorative material for Pratolino’s grottoes, as it could mimic the moistened, dripping effect of stalactites and essentially transform an artificial grotto into appearing ‘natural.’ The interior of the Grotto of Cupid in the lower park exemplifies this effect, in which a man-made structure utilizes a natural, almost ‘living’ material to artfully imitate a natural structure, blurring the boundaries between the natural and artificial (fig. 4). The majority of Pratolino’s grottoes were contained underneath the villa, accessed



Figure 4.
Grotto of Cupid interior.
Parco Mediceo di Pratolino, Facebook Post. 2021.



Figure 5.
Stefano della Bella (from *Descrizione*), Two views of the Grotto of Pan and Fame, by Stefa, 1733-1755.

through an entrance at the end of a central walkway that stretched all the way down the lower half of the park. This extravagant walkway “was lined on both sides with angled jets that made arching parabolas of spray under which one could walk and that—with the sun in the right direction—created artificial rainbows.”¹⁵ A statue personifying the river Mugnone, located at the base of the Apennines, stands at the entrance to the grotto complex pouring water from a jug (fig. 5). While most of the garden’s attractions were not intended to be experienced in a particular order, the underground grotto complex led visitors on a specific path deeper into the cavern, culminating with Francesco’s private dining room. These grottoes were full of fountains, statues, and water-powered automata, and the linear path that visitors would follow through the complex allowed Francesco to plant servants in discreet locations to unexpectedly activate the water-games and automata that constituted an integral jocular element of the experience.¹⁶

Moving through to the lower park, Giusto Utens’s painted lunette reveals the sense of ordered nature that was ubiquitous in Pratolino’s design (fig. 6). Linear pathways are present, but many of them do not appear to lead to any significant location and instead submerge the visitor deeper into the park’s artificial ‘wilderness.’ Built on a slope, large amounts of water cascaded down the length of the park via a meandering series of

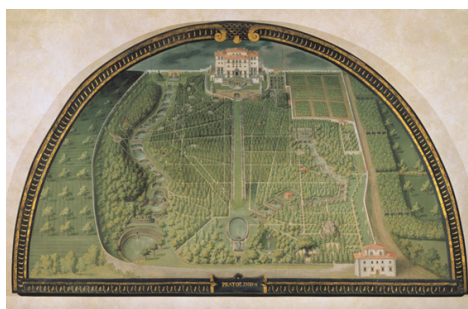


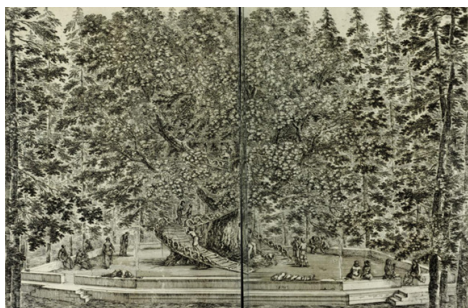
Figure 6.
Giusto Utens, View of the Villa Medici Pratolino, 1599.
Tempura on canvas. Museo Topografico ‘Firenze Com’era’, Florence.

pools. Edward Wright offers a functional interpretation of these garden features, suggesting that they were instrumental in the elaborate rituals associated with hunting sport.¹⁷ The pathways through the forest were intended for hunters on horseback to circle and corner their prey, and hunters would spear their game at the cascading pools at the edge of the park. After the hunt, the lord and his close entourage could dine within the giant oak tree house at the bottom of the site, continuing to indulge in the sense of ruggedness and primitivism that hunting evokes.¹⁸ De' Vieri's description of the tree house supports this conjecture, as he comments that it represents "the roughness of the first humans who lived on acorns, that is, on food prepared without art."¹⁹ The tree house thus resembles both untouched nature and man-made artistry, or more accurately, the artistic ability of man to recreate so-called natural effects (fig. 7). Proximate to the tree house was an artificial mound constructed as an allusion to Mount Parnassus, adorned with statues of Apollo, the Muses, and Pegasus. Hidden within the mound was a water organ whose music could have been enjoyed by the diners in the tree house.²⁰

Concluding this journey through the park is the Lavandaia, a fountain depicting a young boy urinating on a washerwoman's laundry.²¹ This structure offers an amusing alternative to the abundance of classical mythological imagery in the garden, as well as a distinct parallel to the other garden features that reference water generation. The fountain's depiction of low, everyday culture demonstrates an interest in corporeal humor that can be elucidated through primary accounts of how visitors interacted with the physical structures within the park. The gardens at Pratolino were constructed by a variety of engineers, hydraulics specialists, sculptors, and gardeners. As such, the park combines natural elements with elaborate sculpture and

waterworks, catering to Francesco I de' Medici and Bianca Cappello's penchant for trickery and play. Compiling the diversity within the structures at Pratolino into a singular narrative or theme is not only implausible but also counterproductive. As landscape historian John Dixon Hunt resounds, "the history of gardens is ultimately

Figure 7.
Stefano della
Bella (from
Descrizione),
Fountain of



a question of what meanings we look for [...] Gardens are rarely—like a sonnet or a miniature—the work of one person, and therefore they conserve the traces of multiple motives and ambitions.”²² Aspects of the park that reference metallurgy and metamorphosis may have been inspired by the duke’s interest in alchemy and material transformation, while the water-activated automata of the park’s grottoes are reminiscent of Buontalenti’s dramatic stage machinery.²³ A multitude of inspirations informed the diverse array of spectacles within the garden, constituting the need for a variety of scholarly interpretations. The following discussion of Pratolino as a ludic environment seeks to offer an additional, user-centric perspective on the garden that interprets its structures through both visual qualities and conventions of utilization.

The Apennine Colossus & the Grotesque

While the garden is commonly perceived as a paradisaical retreat for its users with imagery intended to provoke aesthetic contemplation and feelings of tranquility, many significant features of Pratolino directly contradict this typical interpretation. The Lavandaia degrades the normative pleasant associations of a fountain through its rendition of bodily functions and childish mischief. A visitor’s sanguine stroll through the park would often be rudely interrupted by a hidden jet of water attempting to soil them. Perhaps the most visually disruptive structure of Pratolino was also its most ambitious—the Apennine Colossus. This gigantic sculpture infringes upon the boundaries of what is considered natural, artificial, or a monstrous amalgamation of both, while also eliciting associations with crude and excessive bodily function. Apennino encapsulates the early modern period’s fascination with the grotesque body through its material ambiguity and multiple references to bodily fluid and ingestion.

Commenting on François Rabelais’ 16th century tales of two giants, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the early modern preoccupation with vulgar imagery as a conception of the body that “ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths.”²⁴ The porous *spugne* that Apennino’s sculptor, Giambologna, generously applied to its

surface is exemplary of this grotesque effect. The sponge-like stone is not just used to render the giant's scraggy beard but deliberately encrusts the surface of his body, transforming the sculpture into an ambiguous depiction of material metamorphosis. Apennino reads simultaneously as a mountain sculpted in the image of man and a man being petrified into stone. Charles Avery describes one of Giambologna's early models for the sculpture as being crafted from lumps of damp clay roughly embedded with the artist's fingerprints and writes that "the final sculpture was to preserve much of the rough, elemental effects of the sketches in clay... supposedly emerging from living rock, like an apparition amidst some stalagmites."²⁵ Stalagmites were understood as "petrified waters" to early modern viewers, neither liquid nor totally solid.²⁶ Giambologna's use of *spugne* to create artificial stalagmites that hang from the giant's beard and hulking frame essentially freezes Apennino in between states of matter. The artist's design was intended to disguise the man-made qualities of the giant by giving it a body as craggy and 'alive' as a real mountain's surface.

Furthermore, it is likely that the constant moisture being piped to Apennino's surface would have spurred the growth of moss on some areas, enhancing the statue's imitation of nature. This collision between nature and art that propelled Italian Renaissance garden structures into an eternal state of metamorphosis has been commented on by Humanist scholar Jacopo Bonfadio. Providing insight into how this ambivalent sense of materiality would have been interpreted by 16th century observers, Bonfadio describes the garden as a type of "third nature" (*terza natura*), which resembles a symbiotic partnership between human intervention and the natural landscape that develops until the boundaries of what is distinctly one or the other are blurred.²⁷ Similarly, Bakhtin characterizes the grotesque body as one that "is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects."²⁸ Apennino's porous, *spugne*-lined surface enabled its portrayal of a hybridized composite of nature and humanity, enlivening its static structure into a seemingly endless state of material metamorphosis. The inchoate ambivalence of its formal characteristics, caught between multiple states of matter and bodily form, renders the sculpture grotesque.

While the exterior qualities of the Apennine Colossus, most of which are still observable today, demonstrate the sculpture's grotesque and unbounded nature, it is also necessary to consider how the giant was once activated through waterworks and that visitors of the past were once able to enter the giant's cavernous interior. These features' references to bodily fluids and ingestion deepen the giant's association with the grotesque by depicting a corporeality that refuses to be contained within the flesh. To constantly moisten the surface of the colossus, miniature pipes would trickle water down from Apennino's head onto its body and the pond below, "giving the impression he was continually sweating and weeping."²⁹ The acts of sweating, urinating, defecating, eating, and copulation were all considered grotesque acts that occur at the borders between the body and the external world. Bakhtin illuminates the possible origins of this unsavoury reference to the elimination of sweat from the body's orifices, noting that classical myths portrayed the Earth pouring its 'sweat' into the sea.³⁰ Given that the colossus represents the Apennine Mountains, this conjecture unites Lazzaro's conception of Apennino alluding to myths of water generation with the grotesque interpretation of Apennino's leakage as the expulsion of bodily perspiration. Art historian Luke Morgan adds that "the representation of bodily fluids in Renaissance landscape design foregrounds the body as a living, breathing, organic entity, not unlike, in fact, the garden itself."³¹ Apennino's dormant body is thus invigorated with life through the humanizing act of sweating. Apennino is also not the only figure spurting water in this scene: he pushes down on a grimacing monstrous fish-head to unleash a cascade of water from its mouth into the pool below. This fountain, evoking the sensation of vomiting or spitting, is another display of the grotesque body's emission of fluid. Giambologna did not sculpt the monster in its entirety, reducing the figure to its gaping mouth and vile expulsions. Statues depicting the engorged mouth were not uncommon in Italian Renaissance gardens and relate to the Rabelaisian imagery of "a body in the act of becoming."³² The grotesque head is simply an enlarged convexity that perpetually dispels its own essence into the ground below. It "exceeds its own limits" and is continually enacting the cycle of creation and degeneration.³³

Apennino continues this grotesque cycle within its hollow interior, where visitors could walk through a series of murals depicting “shepherds, mining, and metallurgy,” as well as a fountain of Thetis adorned with coral and shells.³⁴ Many of the statues within Apennino’s grottoes were moving automata, effectively bringing artificial life to the grottoes’ *mise en scene*. While some of this imagery, such as the mining, follows what one would expect to be found within a mountain, the grotto imitating a sea cave and the wall painted with shepherds does not logically follow this narrative. Some aspects of the interior of Apennino’s body thus seem to be paradoxically designed to mimic exterior or underwater spaces, merging landscapes and subverting natural order. Additionally, the inclusion of automata within the body of a giant sculpture presents another example of illusion and artifice within Apennino’s inverted chambers. Above all, the ability of a visitor at Pratolino to physically walk through the confines of the giant’s body elevates the structure’s associations with the grotesque from purely visual to experiential. The act of gestation is a central preoccupation of the titular giants in Rabelais’s work, with Pantagruel’s mouth containing “a buccal underworld” of multiple kingdoms within it.³⁵ In these passages, Rabelais underscores the base acts of swallowing, chewing, digestion, and defecation. While Pratolino’s visitors did not enter the Apennine giant through its mouth, they still similarly passed through its internal cavities and discovered an entire world painted on its interior walls and brought to life through automata. As “the grotesque body has no façade, no impenetrable surface [...] swallow[ing] and generat[ing], giv[ing] and tak[ing],”³⁶ Apennino absorbs visitors into its grottoes and allows them to experience an artificially constructed imitation of the exterior world within its belly. Ultimately, Apennino as a structure “swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world.”³⁷ Containing a built environment of humans, automata, and natural imagery within its caves, the colossus is also effectively swallowed by nature, as flora creeps through to cover its moist, sponge-like exterior. Apennino’s material ambiguity, seeping pores, and cavernous body continually reference the body’s imperfections and boundaries, casting the giant as a grotesque hybrid existing on the borders of what is considered constructed and natural within the garden. By examining how the gigantic

sculpture was imbued with life through its natural, sponge-like encrustations and excessive perspiration, as well as its ability to “swallow” visitors into its inner cavities, Apennino can be considered a visual and experiential exemplar of the early modern fascination with the grotesque and the connection between the human body and natural phenomena.

The Grottoes & Typologies of Play

Another defining structure of Pratolino that subverts the trope of the garden as a *locus amoenus* is its most hidden feature: the underground grotto complex buried at the centre of the park underneath Francesco’s villa, in which visitors would encounter thrills rivalling those found at today’s waterparks. While these grottoes were adorned with sculpture, many of which referenced classical mythology, passive aesthetic contemplation of these objects was actively discouraged through the use of waterworks and mechanical animation. The artistry of the grottoes’ design was frequently intended to shock and disturb, rather than to provide a peaceful and occluded retreat. The grottoes did effectively induce feelings of pleasure, just not the type of sedate, mindful leisure that is commonly anticipated when viewing the garden as an idyllic haven. Instead, the disorderly and ribald features of Pratolino’s grottoes constructed a ludic environment for visitors to playfully engage with. In his 1958 text *Man, Play, and Games*, sociologist Roger Caillois identifies six factors that define the context and roles of play: *free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and make-believe*.³⁸ Each of these factors can be used to describe how visitors interacted with Pratolino’s grotto complex, demonstrating its purpose as a ludic environment. Additionally, he defines four distinct typologies of play, two of which are pertinent to the grottoes’ experiential itinerary: *mimicry* (role-playing) and *ilinx* (thrill-seeking). The artificial wonders of moving automata and the incessant, unpredictable downpours of *giochi d’acqua* (water games) within the grottoes evoked pleasure and humor through a combination of *mimicry* and *ilinx*, ultimately complicating the interpretation of the garden as a site for relaxation and leisure.

Francesco I de Medici and Bianca Cappello’s fondness for practical jokes hardly originated with the surprise *giochi d’acqua* at Pratolino. Morgan describes Bianca Cappello organizing a similar

type of festivity in a garden within Florence, in which a group of the couple's friends convened and fell into a disguised trapdoor, where "awaiting them at the bottom were servants dressed up as devils, who were, however, soon expelled from the garden and replaced by beautiful girls wearing perfume, fine jewels, and little else."³⁹ This type of humorous deception proliferated in the gardens at Pratolino, as exemplified by the tricks that innocent visitors to the Grotto of Cupid would experience. Upon entering, guests were sprayed with water shooting out of a bronze statue of Cupid.⁴⁰ If they avoided Cupid's cold streams of water and wished to sit and contemplate the beautiful statues filling the room, they would trigger a splash of water from above.⁴¹ The intensity of the *giochi d'acqua* only increased within the main grotto complex underneath the villa, which consisted of several individual rooms. With the personified river Mugnone framing the entrance of the complex, guests would then peel off into the corners of this primary grotto to marvel at automata of Pan playing pipes and Fame blowing a trumpet.⁴² Descending underground via two *spugne*-adorned staircases, visitors would enter the largest room in the complex, the Grotto of the Deluge, aptly named for heavily drenching its guests. This space served as a foyer hosting entrances to multiple smaller grottoes. Passing through a grotto featuring a giant stalactite, guests would entrench themselves deeper into the complex, passing through yet another room before reaching the Grotto of Samaritana, a secluded dining space for the duke's most esteemed company. The fantastical imagery and elaborate waterworks within the grottoes were a spectacle that travellers from around Europe eagerly experienced and shared accounts of.

While the grotto complex has since been reduced to archeological rubble, primary accounts of the joyful 'perils' experienced by the park's visitors are instrumental in determining what the imagery within these rooms looked like. Examining these accounts in relation to Caillois's defining criteria of play, it is then possible to categorize the multisensory experience of the grottoes into two typologies: *mimicry* and *ilinx*. These typologies assist in distinguishing a narrative of the grottoes that emphasizes their vital function as a spectacular and subversive form of entertainment within the park. The grotto complex accords with Caillois's definition of play, meeting all six of play's defining features: *free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed*

by rules, and *make-believe*.⁴³ Guests *freely* opted to step inside the grotto complex, despite their knowledge of the duke's inclination for *giochi d'acqua*. As a *separate* space, parties of visitors would flow through the grottoes within the confines of an enclosed location and finite time frame, in contrast with how they might stroll through the rest of the park. A central component of the grottoes' charm was the *uncertainty* of where and when statues would move or spray water. This process was entirely *unproductive* and only pursued for the sake of pleasure, thrill, and curiosity. While the humor of *giochi d'acqua* would not have been considered proper under usual circumstances, the air of secrecy surrounding the underground expanse allowed for a new set of "conventions that suspend[ed] ordinary laws."⁴⁴ Finally, the visual spectacle of fountains, classical mythology, and moving automata situated the grottoes within a fantastical context, in which visitors would *make-believe* a "free unreality." Pratolino's underground grottoes functioned as a type of 'playground' in which this unreality unfolded through automata and *giochi d'acqua*, the effects of which can be delineated using Caillois's typologies of *mimicry* and *ilinx*.

Caillois defines *mimicry* as an act of continual make-believe in which an actor presents himself as something he is not, while "the spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the decor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself."⁴⁵ Visitors at Pratolino would have experienced this typology of play when viewing the automata dispersed throughout the grottoes. French traveller Michel de Montaigne, who visited Pratolino between 1580 and 1581, remarked that, within the complex, "not only is music and harmony made to sound by water power; statues move and doors open, animals dive and drink, and other similar results are caused by the same force."⁴⁶ While Montaigne admired the beauty and spectacle of Pratolino's entertainments, he also appeared acutely aware of the hydraulic mechanisms that activate them. Historian of science Jessica Riskin asserts that these types of hydraulically engineered statues would have already been present in many of the noble estates he explored during his travels.⁴⁷ As such, Montaigne's appreciation likely did not derive from the novelty of Pratolino's automata but instead from their amusing simulation of living beings. In order to fully

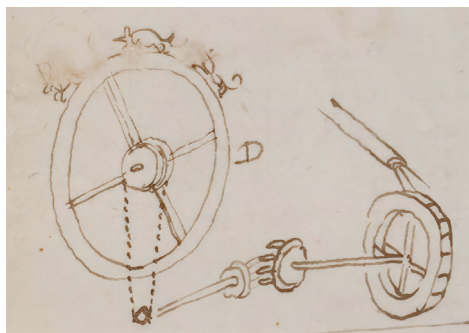


Figure 8.
Heinrich
Schickhardt,
Sketch of
machinery in
dining grotto,
1599-1600.

Stuttgart,
Württembergische
Landesbibliothek.

immerse themselves, viewers might have suspended their disbelief and perceived the automaton's mimicry as "real" in the same way one might when watching a theatrical performance. Ironically, when spectators paused to admire an automaton, they themselves mimicked the static posture of a typical statue.⁴⁸ This comedic reversal of roles was a playful act of mimicry encouraged within the grottoes. Additionally, humor would have been found in the incongruent movement of machinery: "it is neither continuous and smooth like human beings, nor still and immobile like stone and bronze."⁴⁹ Indeed, much of the automata within the grottoes operated via techniques that were compelling but not realistic enough to always provoke legitimate disbelief in early modern viewers. For example, an illustration by German engineer Heinrich Schickhardt demonstrates that a particular automata scene of hunters in the dining grotto simply spun continuously on a turntable (fig. 8). More complex examples of automata may have evoked stronger reactions of wonder, such as a moving statue in the dining grotto depicting a woman emerging out of a doorway towards a fountain, filling up her bucket, and retreating into the doorway to empty her bucket.⁵⁰ The exact mechanics that operated this spectacle are still elusive, so it remains difficult to determine what degree of realism it achieved and the type of reception it would have received from observers. Nonetheless, guests at Pratolino would have derived pleasure and humor from its array of automata that playfully mimicked the actions of living beings and classical imagery.

The *giochi d'acqua* were another indispensable feature of the gardens at Pratolino and coincide with Caillois's final typology of play, *ilinx*. This type of play involves an individual achieving a state of vertigo, gratifying "the desire to temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception, and provoke the abdication of conscience."⁵¹ Seeking an adrenaline rush, enjoyers of this type of play will deliberately engage in risk-taking behaviours or at least pursue activities that artificially produce feelings of 'vertigo.' Some of the grottoes at Pratolino were constructed with large, artificial cracks in the ceiling to purposely

appear ancient and unstable, with one visitor commenting that he felt fear upon entering a room “lest great stones should fall upon your head.”⁵² While most of the unanticipated soakings throughout the grottoes were momentary, Montaigne describes a scene that borders on terror within the Grotto of the Deluge in which the room abruptly fills with water and as people flee up the stairs “a pleasant trick will make the water stream from two of the steps in a thousand jets which drench you till you reach the top.”⁵³ The impression of artificial danger within Pratolino’s grottoes was a pleasurable experience according to these two guests, who appreciated the unexpected thrill of needing to evacuate the space and the trepidation of stepping into an alarmingly decaying room. Visitors who experienced the intense waterworks of the Grotto of the Deluge understood the experience as artificial but still adopted the same suspension of reality demonstrated in mimicry in order to heighten their enjoyment. Caillois describes this phenomenon between mimicry and *ilinx* as “an inexorable, total frenzy which in its most obvious forms appears to be the opposite of play, an indescribable metamorphosis in the conditions of existence.”⁵⁴ Pushing the concept of play to the extreme, the grottoes’ simulated danger succeeded in exhilarating its audience. Viewed as a whole, the abundance of *giochi d’acqua* and automata within the grotto complex complicates the understanding of the Italian Renaissance garden as an Edenic landscape conducive to contemplation and relaxation. Instead, the mechanics within the grottoes achieved a range of emotional reactions from flippant laughter to riveting exhilaration.

Conclusion

As a landscape constructed according to the whims and inclinations of a broad spectrum of personalities, Pratolino lends itself to a diverse array of interpretations. Some of its structures appeal to the conventional image of the garden as a *locus amoenus*, like the harmonious birdsong that played from the water organ within Mount Parnassus. Guests at the villa could pass the time by fishing in the park’s ponds or strolling down the fountain-lined walkway in the park’s lower axis. The garden was, above all, an enclosed place of leisure hidden from the bustle of the city below it. Gardens could be places of healing not only because of their abundance of nature, clean air, and quiet, but also for their

excitement. As Moryson commented before his visit to Pratolino: “I will only say that mirth is a great preserver of health, and sadnesse a very plague thereunto.”⁵⁵ Pratolino’s wide assortment of imagery and themes sought to provide several possible avenues for those in the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment. While the Apennine Colossus’s sweating, *spugne*-encrusted surface may not be the most picturesque statue to have stood on the park’s grounds, its association with the grotesque body renders it an object of utter awe and fascination for some early modern observers. Awakening the park’s structures through waterworks and machinery, Pratolino’s underground grottoes ensured that none of its guests left without experiencing its hydraulic effects up close. Immersing visitors within a world of play, these grottoes permitted the imagination to momentarily suspend reality and enjoy the unexpected perils of getting doused by mechanized onslaughts of water. Ultimately, the presence of the grotesque and the playful within Pratolino expresses the functionality of the park’s most irreverent structures and should be seriously considered within discussion of Pratolino’s poignant history.

Doing so stresses the need for historic landscapes to be considered beyond their fleeting aesthetic value and instead through their status as surviving relics containing traces of historic customs. Rather than reducing the park only to those of its structures still visible today, we should consider how it was activated in the past for practical jokes and ribald humour, blurring the boundaries between what art history as a discipline typically defines as high and low culture. Pratolino reveals such juxtapositions to be an integral feature of Italian Renaissance landscape design. While the discipline of art history has traditionally characterized the late Renaissance through its development of orderly artistic conventions, it is notable to examine how many artists and architects actually subverted rather than affirmed these trends. Pratolino embodied a cultural fascination with the monstrous, the unexpected, and the playful that has endured long past its descent into ruin.

Notes

1. Michel de Montaigne, *The journal of Montaigne's travels in Italy: by way of Switzerland and Germany in 1580 and 1581*, trans. and ed. William G. Waters (Wellcome Collection, 1903), 43.
2. Philip Steadman, "The 'Garden of Marvels' at Pratolino," *Renaissance Fun: The Machines behind the Scenes* (UCL Press, 2021): 279.
3. Katie Campbell, "Pratolino," *Cultivating the Renaissance* (Routledge, 2021): 146.
4. Claudia Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden: From the Conventions of Planting, Design, and Ornament to the Grand Gardens of Sixteenth-Century Central Italy* (Yale University Press, 1990), 114.
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Commentary

Villa di Pratolino, in this paper, refuses the *locus amoenus* script. The contrasting standard, calm, classical, primarily visual, starts to feel like an etiquette imposed after the fact. The insistence is blunt: Pratolino does not sit there like a landscape painting. It has timings. It has tricks. Everything conspires to keep you from becoming a pure eye: water, pipes, stone. The “five senses” line is the giveaway; this is a garden you register the way you register weather: by being in it, in time.

Mikhail Bakhtin helps with the Colossus, without forcing anachronism onto the site. You can see the point on the surface. Spugna is porous, moisture-loving stone; it makes the statue look unfinished on purpose, always on the verge of becoming something else. The Colossus reads as mountain and man at once, leaking into its surroundings, inviting growth and refusing the clean separation of nature and artifice. The eye-socket fishing detail is almost too perfect. It shrinks myth into habit and makes “contemplation” look naive; the garden is designed to be used in ways that collapse aesthetic distance.

Once the paper has made that sensory argument, the grotto complex pushes the same insight into social life. Roger Caillois is useful here because the primary accounts describe a bounded zone of play, where uncertainty and bodily disruption are part of the pleasure. Automata invite a theatrical half-belief, *giochi d'acqua* produce vertigo, and the visitor's composure becomes part of the scene. The sharper implication, supported by the detail of servants stationed to trigger effects, is that this play is hosted. Someone is turning the valves, someone decides when

the joke begins, and the guest is expected to call the soaking fun. Pratolino's low bodily comedy is not a folk eruption; it is curated from above, a way of manufacturing wonder and bonding, and also of exposing bodies lightly, on cue, through laughter.

Commentary

A leading cause of death for young adults and an almost ubiquitous presence in cities, tuberculosis once seemed a near-inevitable condition of corporeality in late modern Europe.¹ The infected were not just patients afflicted with a particularly fatal and contagious disease but also inhabitants of consumptive bodies that necessitated their own spaces and communities.

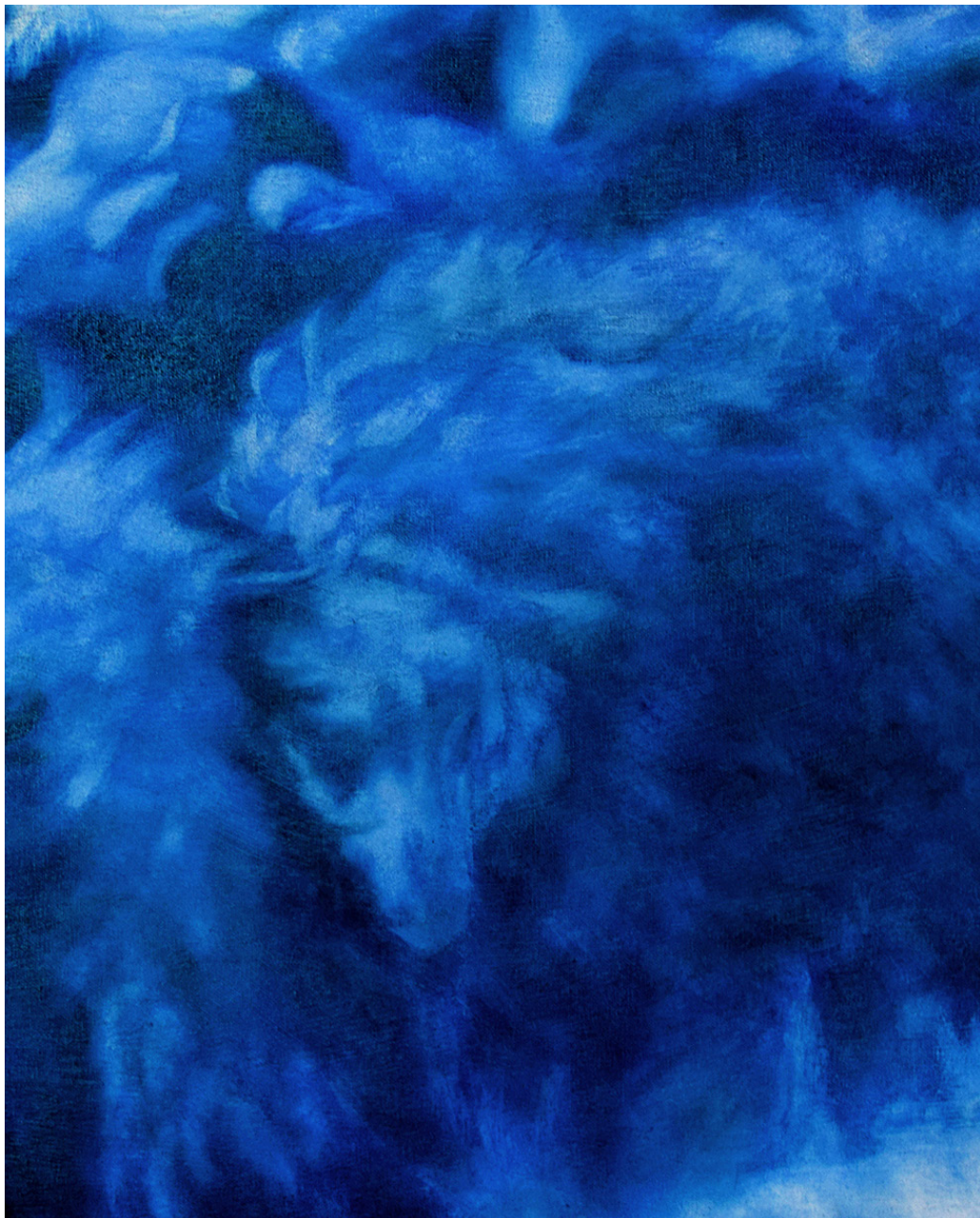
We can see in the tuberculosis sanatorium an iteration of what animated the sensory and affective experience of the Villa di Pratolino. In 1854, German physician Hermann Brehmer opened the first institution of this kind in Görbersdorf, a remote village in Prussian Silesia. Here he deployed a novel method of treatment predicated on an intake of cold, clean mountain air, frequent walks, ample rest, and a nutritious diet—a marked contrast to more visceral regimens of bloodletting—which in practice turned all of a patient’s daily activities towards the task of healing, a process that could last months to years. Brehmer’s holistic vision of convalescence unfurled beyond the spa facilities at the kurhaus, transforming the village into the stomping grounds of both ill and wealthy, complete with guesthouses, pavilions, and a forest park featuring imported fauna and statues.²

Grand Duke Francesco I de Medici and Brehmer represent something of the same impulse, radically transforming the natural world towards an at-once corporeal and social conceit, striving to entertain and amuse while offering restorative solace. Both highly contrived environments contain and influence bodies, prompting their users to reflect on their relation to nature and the grotesque. Sanatorium literature, chief among them Thomas

Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Olga Tokarczuk's answer to it, *The Empusium*, is likewise rooted in the condition of convalescent bodies in these spaces, reflecting the porous barrier between the natural and the artificial as embodied by the monstrous Apennine Colossus. The element of witchery implied in both novels' titles points to the environment's capacity to escape from its human architects' desires—enchancing, intoxicating, and even killing the body placed in its care. Just as the Renaissance garden eludes corporeal and aesthetic complacency, the sanatorium, owing to the nebulous boundary between the natural and the artificial, betrays an unruly capacity to do so much more than simply heal.

Notes

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Detail, HERD



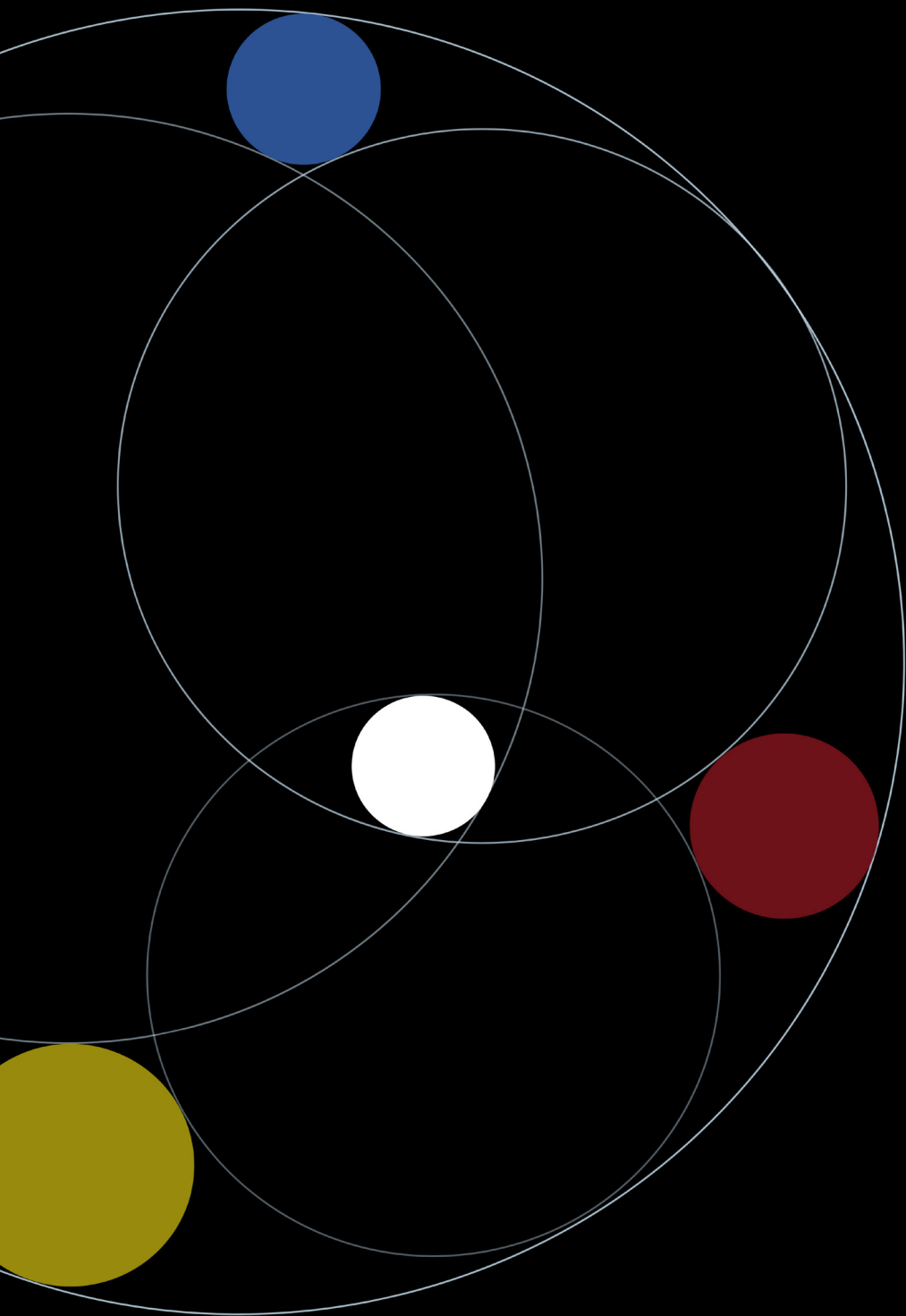
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