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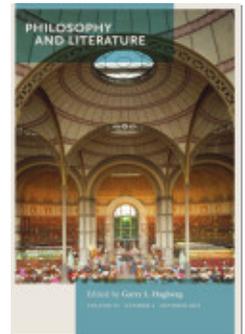
From the Margin a Silent Tick: On the Traces of Performative  
Judgment in Literary Works

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FROM THE MARGIN A SILENT TICK: ON THE TRACES  
OF PERFORMATIVE JUDGMENT IN LITERARY WORKS

**Abstract.** Ezra Pound struck out lines in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* manuscript that referred to the writing of bad poetry. His mentee Ernest Hemingway deleted a description of poor novel writing from *The Sun Also Rises*. What intrigues me is the possibility that these passages were cut as anxious self-reflections. I argue that self-critical voices accompany literary composition, sometimes make their way into drafts, and in happier cases are dropped prior to publication. Naomi Cumming's work in the philosophy of performative consciousness is central to this demonstration, which suggests that anxiety and risk are pivotal to the production of literature.

I

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING, CURIOUS passage from Terry Eagleton's otherwise appreciative review of Anne Enright's novel *The Green Road*. Eagleton describes the book's central focus, the Madigan family. He pays particular attention to the family matriarch, Rosaleen, "a solitary, self-lacerating, deviously histrionic woman, who hates her children and hungers for them." In "less dexterous authorial hands," Eagleton writes, Rosaleen might easily "lapse into a stage-Irish mother." But in Enright's, she is "brought magnificently to life." Enright's depiction of Rosaleen's daughter, Hanna, comes in for praise as well. But then Eagleton turns his attention to her sons. What of Emmet? "Enright never quite succeeds in realising this vaguely dissatisfied figure as sharply as she does

the womenfolk. *Rosaleen reflects that Emmet is a hard man to pin down, and his author may have something of the same problem, rather as she does with his brother*" (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

I want to offer two ways for reading the comment I have highlighted above. The first and most obvious way is to treat it as an instance of sarcasm. Eagleton is using Enright's own words against her, as a playful but not entirely friendly way of making a critical point. This is a common strategy in reviewing new literary works.<sup>2</sup> A second, less supportable, but more intriguing reading of what drove Eagleton to single this sentence out for our attention would hold that the sarcasm was in fact Enright's own. It represented the point at which Enright had started telling herself, via her character Rosaleen, and without even realizing it at the time, that she needed to do a better job with Emmet.

This second, less obvious reading is the one I want to follow up here. I will start by underlining how unsupportable it is. We have no way of knowing if Enright was unwittingly critiquing her own artistry, when writing out Rosaleen's thoughts about her son. If what I am suggesting is correct, not even Enright herself could have known that it was occurring. I am intrigued by this second reading all the same. My interest lies in the fact that one can find so many opportunities to detect similar cases in other creative works. I will set forth some instances from the Romantic period to the present in the writing that follows, prior to hazarding a theory of what might be going on, were even just one of these passages correctly read as an instance of authorial self-critique.

John Keats began *Hyperion* in October 1818, only to abandon it in April of the following year, three books in. Here is how the third of those books starts:

Thus in alternate uproar and sad peace,  
Amazed were those Titans utterly.  
*O leave them, Muse! O leave them to their woes;*  
*For thou art weak to sing such tumults dire:*  
A solitary sorrow best befits  
Thy lips, and antheing a lonely grief.<sup>3</sup>

Keats ceased work on *Hyperion* some 130 lines on. The fact that he wrote later to a friend, fellow poet John Hamilton Reynolds, suggesting Reynolds might like to put a cross next to those lines of the manuscript betraying "the false beauty proceeding from art," and a double line to mark "the true voice of feeling," indicates something of his dissatisfaction

with the results (*CP*, p. 460). Could the lines I emphasized above represent the point at which Keats started to sense that something was amiss?

One of the recommendations Ezra Pound made, when he and T. S. Eliot met in Paris in January 1922 to discuss the drafts of the poem that would become *The Waste Land*, was that Eliot cut the first eighty-nine lines of part 3 (“The Fire Sermon”). Those lines, in heroic couplets, describe Fresca, a society lady who takes her breakfast, defecates while reading Samuel Richardson, receives a vapid letter from a friend, and then bathes. Louis Martz describes these rejected lines as “weak and in part offensive.”<sup>4</sup> Here is an excerpt:

Women grown intellectual grow dull,  
And lose the mother wit of natural trull.  
Fresca was baptised in a soapy sea  
of Symonds—Walter Pater—Vernon Lee.  
The Scandinavians bemused her wits,  
The Russians thrilled her to hysteric fits.  
From such chaotic misch-masch potpourri  
What are we to expect but poetry?<sup>5</sup>

Pound would have none of it. “One of the gashes through the lines runs so deep that the ink has bled onto the other side of the paper.”<sup>6</sup> The passage continues:

When restless nights distract her brain from sleep  
She may as well write poetry, as count sheep.  
And on these nights when Fresca lies alone,  
She scribbles verse of such a gloomy tone  
That cautious critics say, her style is quite her own. (*TWLf*, p. 26)

It may be a bit queer, but the possibility I want to raise is that Fresca was a disavowed image of Eliot himself, writing that long poem. Of course we cannot know.<sup>7</sup>

One of the effects of Pound’s cutting the eighty-nine Fresca lines was to focus our reading of “The Fire Sermon” upon what is now its key scene, the romantic encounter of “the typist home at teatime” with “the young man carbuncular” (Tiresias’s vision in the air all around them). Though retained, that passage also sustained cuts, including, notably, the removal of a quatrain pillorying the typist’s pretensions to artistic display:

A bright kimono wraps her as she sprawls  
 In nerveless torpor on the window seat;  
 A touch of art is given by the false  
 Japanese print, purchased in Oxford Street. (*TWLF*, p. 44)

Again I find myself wondering just who these pretentious women in that earlier draft of *The Waste Land* are really standing in for, these women given to the scribbling of poetry and other forms of cultural pretension?

Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* was drafted between July and September 1925, revised over that winter, and published in 1926. The novel is written in the voice of Jake Barnes, an injured American expatriate who lives in Paris, travels to Pamplona with his friend Lady Brett Ashley; her fiancé, Mike Campbell; her boyfriend, Robert Cohn; and their associates—only to find himself pained with jealousy over her various flings.

Hannah Sullivan discusses the way Hemingway edited the book in *The Work of Revision*, her superb historicization of the practice. In the first draft, Hemingway's famously laconic, first-person narrator, Jake, is not laconic at all, but "frequently rebukes himself for verbal excess, poor storytelling, and narrative confusion: 'I don't know why I have put all this down. It may mix up the story.'" None of these self-complaints made it into the printed text. "In the first draft of the novel," Sullivan continues, "Jake spends a lot of time musing on the best way to express things; in the final version he is more mysterious and laconic, *as if* not only parts of his own past but *some of his creator's compositional anxiety had been submerged*" (*WR*, p. 115; emphases added). The suggestion is that Hemingway was unwittingly voicing criticisms of his own writing, in the very act of generating it (but note the tempering force of Sullivan's "as if").

Sullivan's discussion of a passage of tortured self-reflection toward the end of that first draft seems even more confirmatory of my claim that self-critical voices can unwittingly accompany authors into their compositions. The visit to Pamplona has fizzled to a sorry end, the parties have gone their separate ways, and Jake has just composed a terse telegram to Brett indicating that yes, he will rescue her from her latest catastrophe: "There was nothing else to say. ~~I put the~~ What else was there to say? I printed LOVE JAKE and handed the concierge the wine. There I was, doing it again. Why not let it alone. I knew there was not any use trying to let it alone. I felt perfectly bad about it. I had certainly acted like anything but a man. . . . ~~I was not a man anyway. Oh stop that stuff.~~

~~There was not going to be any of that stuff~~ (WR, pp. 114–15). The draft passage sustained initial cuts, as indicated in strike-through here. It was then cut entirely. Sullivan's analysis is as follows: "In the first draft, Jake begins by trying psychologically to shut himself up, 'Oh stop that stuff,' but on rereading, Hemingway takes his character's advice and simply cuts it out so none of 'that stuff' remains" (p. 115). This seems rich corroboration of the claims I have been advancing.

## II

But is Sullivan's reference to Hemingway taking "his character's advice" merely figurative? The tentative tone of her comments ("as if . . . some of his creator's compositional anxiety had been submerged") is notable. After all, finding "compositional anxiety" in literary drafts is a dangerous game to play, and not simply because neither we nor the author have any way of knowing for certain what goes on in said author's mind in the moments of composition. One also has to wonder about the teleological tendencies in our readings of subsequently edited manuscripts like Eliot's, or authorially repudiated poems like Keats's. I am referring to our prejudice for thinking that if something was cut or otherwise rejected in a celebrated work, it must have been in some way flawed and of incipient concern to its author. This is in fact one of Sullivan's key points. It is very hard, as she implies in relation to the generally triumphalist readings of Pound's editing (WR, p. 120–46), for us to see that on a different day he might have attacked *The Waste Land* drafts quite differently. In other words, the kind of diagnostic reading I have performed above might be more or less convincing when history itself seems to have decided something was wrong with the text: Keats was always going to find fault with *Hyperion* at that point (because he did), Eliot to feel anxiety over those passages he later cut (after all, he did cut them), Hemingway to be dissatisfied at just the points he edited. But would we hear the same tones of incipient self-critique had the author's own subsequent repudiation of those passages not inspired us to?

Consider, to put this in perspective, an 1820 response to Keats's odes, which for us are so difficult to fault: "In their dense shifting patterns we can trace every twist and turn of Keats's intense, restlessly enquiring mind"; in them, Keats "finally achieved a perfect fusion of thought, form and expression."<sup>8</sup> However, Josiah Conder, reviewing *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems* in September 1820, could find ample flaws. One ode was particularly irksome: "A Grecian urn throws him

into an ecstasy: its 'silent form,' he says, 'doth tease us out of thought as doth Eternity,'—a very happy description of the bewildering effect which such subjects have at least had upon his own mind."<sup>9</sup> No one detects any hint of self-critique in the description of the urn's effects on thought now. The very idea would be ridiculous. But would the readings of Keats, Eliot, and Hemingway hazarded above feel any more founded had literary history not alerted us to the rightness of finding problems there?

Let me boil the two concerns I have just mentioned—that we cannot know what was in an author's mind, and that we tend to find all sorts of confirming evidences of authorial anxiety in drafts labeled as "failed"—down to a question. Do the supposedly self-critical passages I have cited here really amount to anything more than projections on the part of the critic?

We might ask the same question of Eagleton's sarcastic reading of a single sentence in *The Green Road* ("Rosaleen reflects that Emmet is a hard man to pin down, and his author may have had something of the same problem"). Here is the sentence, in context:

Emmet was saving the world from a rickety little office in the middle of nowhere, and he had a girlfriend, no less. A drab looking Dutch thing, with good manners and clumpy shoes. She would do well to hang onto him, Rosaleen thought. He was a hard man to pin down.

And, not for the first time, Rosaleen wished her son some ease. The boy with so many facts at his disposal: that politeness edged with contempt, even at four, even at two. *Yes Mama, whatever you say*. The moment he came out of her, he opened his eyes and met her eyes and she felt herself to be, in some way, assessed.<sup>10</sup>

The birth of the critic, indeed. Whose self-reflection is really at stake, in Eagleton's Emmet-like sarcasm?

On the other hand, if it makes sense to give diagnostic credence to the seemingly self-critical strains in the examples from Keats, Eliot, and Hemingway cited above, why not to the following lines as well?

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of *this stony rubbish?* Son of man,  
*You cannot say*, or guess, for *you know only*  
*A heap of broken images*, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. (*TWLF*, p. 6;  
emphases added)

Eliot's questioning of "this stony rubbish" may well be metatextual, but it has always been taken as integral to *The Waste Land* all the same. Nor did Pound have any problem with the words I have highlighted, nor with the lines they bring into bewildering focus, as "this stony rubbish." No marks at all are found on this part of the typescript, which appears verbatim in our published editions. In other words, and as in the case of Keats's urn, it is far easier to hear self-critical tones in passages that history tells us have failed. Which leads one to suspect the whole enterprise.

A broader aesthetic point can be made here too. It is perfectly possible, and perhaps even the norm, for authors to present a negative image of a particular instance of writing or speaking in a literary work without it entailing burgeoning registration of some deficiency of their own.

### III

Or is it that Pound *did* hear a critical voice in Eliot's reference to "the roots that clutch," the "branches" that "grow / out of this stony rubbish," a critical voice telling him what was wrong with so many of the thousand-odd other lines Eliot had brought him, and for all we know suggesting strategies for attacking them? Perhaps I am back at my starting point after all, with those curious questions as to just what was speaking in Enright's ear at that point in her novel-writing; who Fresca really stood for; how pertinent it was for Hemingway to take advice from "Hem" (as Jake was initially called [*WR*, p. 115]).

The fact is that one finds case upon case of what looks like critical self-reflections in writings that authors will later come consciously to reject. I am not convinced that all we are hearing in such instances is our own fondness for the canon and/or our own ephemeral identifications. Here, for another instance, is the prefatory note to Robert Lowell's 1973 work *History*; the note indicates the work's relation to the poems Lowell published in 1969:

About 80 of the poems in *History* are new, the rest are taken from my last published poem, *Notebook*, begun six years ago. All the poems have been changed, some heavily. I have plotted. *My old title, Notebook, was more accurate than I wished*, i.e. the composition was jumbled. I hope this jumble or jangle is cleared—that I have cut the waste marble from the figure.<sup>11</sup>

Is Lowell's "more accurate than I wished" just retrospective sarcasm? Or was the sarcasm there in Lowell's original act of titling that flood of

poems *Notebook*, a sarcasm he himself would not have been in a position to hear at the time? Frank Bidart, Lowell's first reader through those years, later commented:

The aesthetic of *Notebook* had been very much connected to that whole desire for immediacy . . . that feeling that art can be much more connected to fleeting feelings, insights, perceptions, marginal half-thoughts and how all these bear down on one's life. . . . But I think that he was not at all happy with that aesthetic.<sup>12</sup>

My hypothesis, to repeat, is that at least some of these cases comprise disavowed self-appraisals, and deserve to be listened to as such. To what end? I will suggest two. The first has to do with the diagnostic usefulness of such moments for practical criticism. As noted, critical reviewers commonly hone in on the self-criticisms that authors of novels and poems seem to have unwittingly placed in their own texts. Nor, it is worth adding, does that typically sarcastic practice really suffer from the methodological problems canvassed immediately above. The point, for the critic, is not to know as fact what was going on in an author's mind whenever a text seems self-critical but rather to be alert to the possibility that something in these and/or the surrounding lines might be amiss. So one looks with particular attention there. After all, the aesthetic judgments a critic comes to, following up on these or any other presentiments, are not any more scientifically admissible than reflections on an author's presumed thought patterns. When it comes to aesthetic judgments, objectivity is simply not the point.<sup>13</sup> But those judgments involve acts of investigation all the same. The moments of seeming self-appraisal I have addressed in this writing constitute one of the means for that.

The second end, the one promised in my introduction, is more theoretical. Were even just one of the cases that I have proposed correctly diagnosed as a disavowed self-critique, it would offer interesting purchase on the phenomenon of literary production. How do writers think, in the moment of composition, and in whose voices? I will turn to a theoretical work that might help answer this question: Naomi Cumming's *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*, a work in the philosophy of performative consciousness that tackles the "problems of the self that are confronted by a performer" in concert settings.<sup>14</sup> Cumming thinks through the mechanisms of self-regard that stage performers must work with, and simultaneously keep at bay, in order to take the risk of doing

what they do. She helps us to see that literary writing is also, in a curious way, a form of live performance. Which is to say, it is a matter of risk. The incursions of anxious voices into the drafts—and even published versions—of literary texts betray that relation again and again.

#### IV

But prior to turning to a Cumming-inspired explanation for the traces of performative judgment I have detected in the works above, let me round off my picture of the phenomenon with a few positive cases, instances where self-satisfaction rather than self-criticism seems to emanate from the surface of the work.

I take my cue from one of Keats's near contemporaries: "Oftentimes . . . in perusing French tragedies, I have fancied two marks of admiration at the end of each line, as hieroglyphics of the author's own admiration at his own cleverness."<sup>15</sup> Recall how Keats suggested Reynolds might want to append approving marks to certain of the lines in the *Hyperion* manuscript. Coleridge suggests that some authors come close to doing it all by themselves. Thus he lends a certain credence to my thesis that self-evaluative voices at times rise to the surface of the literary text. Except, in the cases he has in mind, those voices are speaking in the positive, in admiration of their author's achievements! I will cite just two examples, from a very large field.

One can only guess what Pound took issue with in the following passage from part 2 of Eliot's typescript ("A Game of Chess"). What we do know, however, is that he struck these six words through and wrote "had is the weakest point" in the margin alongside them:

Above the antique mantle was displayed  
 In pigment, ~~but so lively, you had thought~~  
 A window gave upon the sylvan scene,  
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
 So rudely forced . . . (*TWLf*, p. 10; emphasis added)

Compare the version Eliot published:

Above the antique mantle was displayed  
 As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
 So rudely forced . . . (*TWLf*, p. 137)

In the original, the addressee is told that “you had thought” the painting above the mantel was actually a window, it was “so lively.” Note how the published version erases our apparently positive evaluation of the painting’s effects. What we are offered instead is simply a window view, and the choice to evaluate for ourselves, if we wish, whether what shows over the following lines has been richly conveyed or not. Eliot has edited out those “two marks of admiration.”

Eagleton attacks Craig Raine’s novel *Heartbreak* with a gusto that can hardly have been welcome:

“Tears,” the narrator tells us obscurely, “come with a non-negotiable, fixed-rate, moral currency—as do Hitler (negatively) and Shakespeare (positively). . . they are like diarrhoea.” “We need,” he adds, “a poetics of crying.” There is talk of the “semiology of innocence.” We learn with a mild frisson of amazement that “all art is sincere and artifice,” as well as that Shakespeare is a genius despite some of his stuff being a bit iffy. There are pregnant pronouncements such as “The myth of our attractiveness survives its self-destruction”; *in the margin the reader is silently invited to inscribe a large approving tick*.<sup>16</sup>

I turn to the philosophical implications the materials I have marshaled would bear, were even just one of these examples correctly identified as an instance of unwitting self-critique, or praise, there on the very surface of the literary text.

## V

Cumming is not a literary theorist but a musicologist. To explain the turn to her work at this juncture, I note that literary studies does not seem to have come all that far past Keats, when it comes to the question of authorial agency. I have in mind the famous letter to Richard Woodhouse in which Keats defines “the poetical Character” via the paradox that it “is not itself—it has no self.” It is late October 1818 and Keats has begun writing *Hyperion*, later to be called *Hyperion: A Fragment*. A poet, he continues, “is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s creatures” (*CP*, pp. 448–49). In context, Keats’s comment may be rather more whimsical than we tend to make out.

But if we do take his sentences for theory, the idea that poems emerge in the absence of a controlling self seems at once vitally illuminating of the polyvocal texture of such works (and of novels as well) and yet inadequate to so much other experience. Do literary writers really compose without thought as to the social value of their performance?

I cite Keats critically here, but not from any desire to join the contemporary detractors of Romantic notions of creativity. To the contrary, I think Keats presages both Sigmund Freud and Mikhail Bakhtin as setting the very terms of the debate. But something seems insufficient here all the same.

Let me put it this way: no one actually wants to meet the author. More precisely, an absence of self-evaluation on the part of its empirical author is a key characteristic of the literature we most esteem. This even seems to be true of the postmodern literature we most admire—after all, one can become a character in one's own book without giving a report card on it. And perhaps what we really mean when deriding a literary text as "safe" (or even worse, "academic") is that its author's desire to be seen as a worthy practitioner of his or her craft is all too apparent there. One could find numerous ways to demonstrate that this is a valid characterization of critical practice, from the quasi-Kantian Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Keats's own era to the Orthodox believer/Marxist Bakhtin at the start of our own, and through to contemporary Australian critic Michelle Borzi.<sup>17</sup> We want to experience a Keatsian polyvocality on the page, free of its author's desires to be seen to have done well. But—and this is the nub of the question—is that really how such work gets written, in an absence of self?

The truth seems to be that an evaluative self is always on some level present in the compositional act. But also that in a key sense it isn't. That self can only be productively present by trusting to what it cannot control.

Cumming's first and only book was published in 2000, just after her sudden death from a stroke at the age of thirty-eight. *The Sonic Self* tackles the question of musical meaning from the vantage of performance and reception. The reason I turn to it here is for the illuminating way Cumming, herself a concert violinist, expatiates upon music theorist Jonathan Dunsby's claim that "a fear of losing" one's artistry as a performer "is built into the core of Western musical life" (*TSS*, p. 31). For what Cumming offers, in discussing the pertinence of such a fear to the production of music in concert settings, is a model of performative subjectivity that indicates with acute nuance just where the self and its

anxieties sit within any performative act. In effect, she updates Keats—in a different, but still musical domain. What is more, as well as trying to draw insights from her twin practice—as music theorist on the one hand and concert violinist on the other—Cumming wants to think through her role as a philosopher theorizing these things on the page. This will lead her to the conclusion that writing must on some level be a form of risky stagecraft as well.

Cumming's initial response to the question of whether a fear of losing one's artistry as a performer is integral to playing live is to cite performance theorist Richard Schechner's discussion of the way self-reflexivity accompanies a certain type of stage acting. Schechner's discussion does not prove ultimately satisfactory, for either her or us, but it does open the terrain. "How," Schechner asks provocatively,

is what the elephant does [in a circus performance] different from what Laurence Olivier does when, in blackface, as Othello, raging "Down strumpet!" he takes up the pillow to murder Desdemona? The difference is that Olivier's knowing half knows he is just acting and as such controls his gestures so that he does not injure the actress playing Desdemona. Even more, Olivier feels and does not feel rage against that actress. Olivier is absorbed in the task of "performing-the-actions-that-communicate-to-himself-and-to-his-audience-the-emotions-required." The whole bundle is necessary in order to understand this kind of acting. (*TSS*, p. 35)

Schechner adds that to posit knowing and feeling halves of the self is still not enough, to explain Olivier's or any other actor's work. In addition to knowing and feeling, an actor must also have a locus of control. Schechner refers to it as the "I." During all of Olivier's raging, and amid the various strategies by which he has learned to give it conventional form as theater, "the 'center' of the performer, the 'I,' stands outside observing and to some extent controlling."<sup>18</sup>

I imagine the relevance of this description of acting to the materials gathered above will be apparent: for we might now want to say, along Schechner's lines, that during any compositional act (that Keatsian play of voices on the page) the center of the writer, the "I," "stands outside observing and to some extent controlling." We might furthermore want to say that the cases gathered above represent some malfunction in this system, instances where an "I"'s anxious desire to succeed in his or her performance as writer has become so insistent that it has assumed a presence in the text. As an approximation this is not bad, and does

broadly indicate where we are heading. But is that “I” really there all the time (observing and controlling)?

I turn to what Cumming finds inadequate in this “picture of the detached and self-aware ‘I,’ distinct from the thinking and feeling parts of the actor.” Noting that Schechner “does not purport to be offering a philosophical account of consciousness,” Cumming suggests that his theory “needs to be fleshed out more systematically” to do service on that score. At the same time, she does want to recuperate what is of value in it; after all, what Schechner tells us can even be corroborated:

The seeing “I” who takes on a monitoring role, and is implicit in the act of performing, may commonly be recognized by an actor engaged in reflection, after an experience. It is known in looking back that a degree of control was enforced by the “self,” even though the self who was fully engaged in the act of monitoring could not, in the process, also reflect on its own activities. The “I” (eye) at its center is blind—as Victor Frankl put it so neatly. *I am* in an act of which I cannot be self-reflexively aware until it is over. *I am* in a moment of risk and its monitoring, as the subject of more than one level of consciousness. (*TSS*, p.36)

The way this gloss updates Schechner’s explanation of Olivier’s practice is subtle, but decisive. For there *is* something like an observing “I” present in Cumming’s account. Only she prefers to call it by that rather-less-ocularcentric term, the “self.” And inasmuch as she refers to that self as an “I,” she insists, with Frankl, that “the ‘I’ (eye) at its centre is blind.” In other words, the performative self, in her figuring of it, is not really present to itself until after the fact. What Cumming is stressing through this reframing of Schechner’s discussion is the insistence of an unavoidable element of risk within selfhood itself. Performance involves trusting in your own self’s ability to take control. But you yourself are not in control of *it*. (Perhaps that self is multiple. . . .)

Something is startling here. It reminds me of the strangeness of the narrator/actor’s remark, in Konstantin Stanislavski’s *An Actor Prepares*, that when acting, “habit makes a large part of your attention automatic.”<sup>19</sup> Isn’t attention meant to be conscious? On the other hand, something quite routine is at play here too. Anyone who rides a bike regularly knows exactly what automatic attention is. What “I” is there, as one unthinkingly and even gracefully rounds a corner at speed? The “I” was there at the point of learning to ride, certainly, but otherwise only really arises when something goes wrong, or—which is often the

same thing—when one decides to assume “a reflexive awareness of one’s own patterns of choice, and the beliefs that govern them” (*TSS*, p. 11). Most of the time there is simply no “I” there and one gets home fine.

But how? How does the self exert control over itself and its performance, if not in the fashion Cumming critiques: the “I” as an “empty figure, standing apart from all signified content,” there at a self-reflexive remove from the knowing and feeling it otherwise engages in (*TSS*, p. 36)? Actually, Cumming takes exception to the implication that knowing and feeling are all that necessarily distinct, as well. In either case, the performer is engaged in the production of communicative signs. A self emerges in the process.

Cumming makes the case by glossing Charles Sanders Peirce’s attack on the idea “that introspection can reveal purely ‘inner’ states without any signified content at all.” She comments that even if such inner states existed, the live performer would have no use for them (*TSS*, p. 59). For though it is true that concert musicians are appraised by critic and audience alike for their capacity to communicate “personality” in the rendition of a musical score, this is not due to their “first having some special personal qualities and then projecting them through the instrument, in a sound with some mysterious ‘depth.’” It is a matter, rather, of their “producing sounds that will create that illusion.” Cumming cites violinist Kató Havas: “How often do we come across a violinist who, as a human being, has no artistic qualities, has in fact less sensibility than the average person, but who has such a beautiful tone that we are unable to resist its spell, the moment he begins to play” (p. 22).

The converse is also, sadly, true. For the fact of the matter, Havas continues, is that “a warm and beautiful tone has nothing to do with talent or individual personality.” It is simply a matter of “putting the right pressure, on the right spot, at the right moment!” The “impression of musical personality” that results from such “culturally entrained” and communicative physical acts is what Cumming refers to as “the sonic self”: “It is not a previously existing element of personality, but a creation that comes into being with sound” (*TSS*, pp. 22–23, 17, 23). So, *mutatis mutandis*, is the self riding that bike. Or the one writing that novel or poem. Each has their being in the act.

None of this is to imply that “the sonic self” is a fake. It would be truer to say that the performer has to *be* that sonic self—in the angle of the bow on the strings, in its distance from the bridge, in the vibrato, in the emotions that all these actions have been culturally established to communicate—for the work to come off, and specifically for it to have

“life.” What is more, Cumming thinks that the musician’s inherence in the play of signs can stand as “allegory” for subjective experience more generally. Where we are, in conversation, in our bike riding, in our loving, or in any other activity, is nowhere other than in the way we do it:

The problems of the self that are confronted by a performer may be seen as an allegory of those confronted by anyone engaged in a performative act. What is it, really, that you are losing when you take the risk of an act whose outcome is uncertain? Can you really be losing your “self” if your selfhood is formed in activity? If you are constituted in your acts, your performances, you are per-forming yourself through them. Your “self” will appear in the act. You do not yet know fully who you are, but will discover yourself in the act of taking a risk, as I discover—or perform—myself in taking the risk of writing this. The cost of creating new meanings is only the risk of losing the “self” if that selfhood is imagined as a static thing. (TSS, p. 42)

Cumming adds that the “very act of playing with the nuances of notes can allow the violinist to discover new expressive possibilities, or nuances of emotion in the music.” She might thus “recognize ‘herself’ as extending her expressive range” (TSS, p. 30). This is not to be taken lightly. Cumming is suggesting that taking the risk of performing can change your very being: “to discover a new brand of string that offers more resonant sound . . . is to open up the delight of new possibilities.” “Why try to make the sounds ‘express’ an inwardness you do not have? If you play with their sharpening or reverberant forms, you will not lose their expressive power, but discover that sounds can lead you to ‘express’ a self you have not known” (pp. 128–29). This is something like what Keats does, in becoming the identity of anyone he meets in “a room with People,” or taking up whatever theoretical whim comes to him in the moment (a poet “has no identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body”), and running with it when writing that letter to Woodhouse in October 1818 (“But even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself: but from some character in whose soul I now live”). That letter concludes:

I am sure however that this next sentence is from myself. I feel your anxiety, good opinion and friendliness in the highest degree and am,  
 Yours most sincerely,  
 John Keats (*CP*, p. 449)

Those signs are out of one’s ultimate control.

But for this same reason, accidents can occur. As far as violin playing is concerned, “small changes in timing or tone production can tip expression towards being too conventional or unconvincingly overblown,” and this will be the case “even when that change is not fully intended or fails to match my conception of the movement’s emotional tone.” Moreover, fashions change, and differences grow between interest groups. The “sonic self,” which in one place achieves the “convincing balance between energetic freedom and respectful conformity” to a given style (such as Romantic or Baroque), which critics applaud, can in another place amount to a failure “to convey an affective engagement with the music.” In short, “Signs can take on a life of their own, becoming displaced from the meaning intended for them” (*TSS*, pp. 37–39). But where else are we but in those moments? Whence anxiety.

I return to the cases cited earlier. For as well as equating performative selfhood with risk, Cumming offers a way of figuring something like the intrusive authorial self, whose judgments I have documented (or imagined) over these pages. She refers to the potential problem of a performer’s “overinvolvement with an idealized image of what is to emerge” from a performance (*TSS*, p. 77). She describes two ways this might happen in musical performances. The first is when the violinist, as virtuosic “I,” seeks to draw attention to “his” (sic) own virtuosity; but in doing so “he has drawn it away from the work” and so “failed to create a musical statement that will point to his interpretive identity.” Again, the only place that self can really live is in the dynamic play of the signs it emits and entrusts itself to. Failing that, all one has to offer is an idealized image of the one who might produce such an effect: the great artist.

The overly conformist performer, on the other hand, offers a fetish of a different sort: for “her” (sic) obsession with “getting things right” amounts to a failure to recognize that the work “does not have ‘life’ if the performer fails to risk herself for it. Only by taking the risk of spontaneity, in playing with nuance, can a performer give the work a liveliness that will also convey her own interpretive character.” The self-conscious “I,” whether projected or respectfully muted (and prominent for that very reason), has no “interpretive character.” It has failed to take a risk, instead presenting its audiences with a “static object” (*TSS*, pp. 41–42). That “static object” is an “I” that tries to be outside of time.

If the self-criticisms I detected in the literary works above really were disavowed by their authors, the drive to embody that self-regarding “I”

must be in part unconscious as well. “The ego,” Freud states, “is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it.”<sup>20</sup> It merges at the point of anxiety. Which can hardly be dispensable. So one dispenses with it.

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1. Terry Eagleton, “Small Hearts,” *London Review of Books* 37, no. 11 (June 4, 2015), online.
2. Colin Burrow’s observations on Alice Oswald’s “Severed Head Floating Downriver” in his review of her book of poems *Falling Awake* is another example of a critic finding self-critical currents among the voices in an author’s own published fictions. Colin Burrow, “On Alice Oswald,” *London Review of Books* 38, no. 18 (September 22, 2016), online. See too Josiah Conder’s contemporary review of Keats’s odes, cited below. This is, to repeat, a critical commonplace, and has been for a long time.
3. John Keats, *Hyperion*, book 3, verses 1–6, in *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Keats*, ed. Harold E. Briggs (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 245, emphasis added; hereafter abbreviated *CP*.
4. Louis L. Martz, *Many Gods and Many Voices: The Role of the Prophet in English and American Modernism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 141.
5. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harvest, 1971), p. 26; hereafter abbreviated *TWLf*.
6. Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 138; hereafter abbreviated *WR*. She is referring to *TWLf*, pp. 22 and 24, which contain photographic reproductions of recto and verso, respectively, of the first typescript page of “The Fire Sermon.” The lines quoted above come from the second page of the typescript.
7. Actually, Wayne Kostenbaum has also suggested we read the Fresca passage as a disavowed self-reflection on Eliot’s part. Wayne Kostenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 2017), online.
8. Stephen Hebron, *John Keats: The British Library Writers’ Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 91.
9. Josiah Conder, unsigned review, *Eclectic Review* (September 1820), in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 237. Conder also proceeds to find unwitting self-critique in the “Beauty is truth” couplet, which he cites and tops off with “That is, all that Mr. Keats knows or cares to know.”
10. Anne Enright, *The Green Road* (London: Vintage, 2015), p. 150.

11. Robert Lowell, prefatory note to *History*, in *Robert Lowell: Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 1074; emphasis added.

12. Quoted in Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 420.

13. As Kant so lucidly argues, judgments of natural beauty and of art may take on objective appurtenances, but when one drills down, the universality claimed in statements like “this is a great poem” is not a matter of the speaker’s estimation of whether the text in question possesses the necessary attributes of a member of the class “great poem.” In Kant’s words, “Whether a garment, a house, a flower is beautiful: no one allows himself to be talked into his judgment about that by means of any grounds or fundamental principles” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], p. 101). One can’t just tabulate the poem’s possession of essential ingredients and leave it at that, because the judgment is only about the object inasmuch as said object has the effect of inducing a “free play of the imagination and the understanding” (p. 103) in the subject, or not. As for the universality of the statement “this is a great poem,” it pertains to the somewhat political implication that anyone else with taste in that speaker’s shoes would, or at least should, be similarly affected. No wonder one feels the need, however persuasive the critic, to “submit the object to his own eyes” (p. 101) to confirm the truth of their claims, a situation worlds away from other realms of thought and practice, where our preparedness for whole disciplines to have knowledge for us is more or less the price for our admission into modernity. No wonder too that we allow and even like our critics to be as vividly personal and even partisan as Eagleton (as well as insisting on the disinterestedness of their judgment in any given case): if you are going to listen to a judgment produced “without a concept” (p. 104) but with the implication that all others should feel likewise, you probably want to get a measure of the character generating it.

14. Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 42; hereafter abbreviated *TSS*.

15. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (Dent: London, 1975), p. 12.

16. Terry Eagleton, “Count the Commas,” *London Review of Books* 32, no. 12 (June 24, 2010), online; emphasis added.

17. For Coleridge, see the passage cited above; Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 327; Michelle Borzi, review of Dianne Fahey, *The Wing Collection: New and Selected Poems*; and Mark Tredinnick, *Fire Diary*, in *Southerly Journal* 73, no. 1 (2013), online.

18. Richard Schechner, “Magnitudes of Performance,” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 37. Cumming quotes this same sentence (*TSS*, p. 35), but she omits Schechner’s reference to “the ‘center’ of the performer.” She also ignores the way, on that same page, that Schechner describes this locus of control, or “center,” as the third of “the performer’s three halves,” which itself evokes Schechner’s earlier reference to Olivier’s “knowing half,” quoted above. So

the performer possesses a knowing half, a feeling half, and an observing/controlling half. I think the reason Schechner resorts to this incommensurable figure is to suggest something integral, and by the same token immaterial, about the nature of the third term. Note, too, those scare quotes around “the ‘center’ of the performer.” Cumming will, quite rightly, critique the Cartesian presuppositions of Schechner’s recourse to the “I” to explain performative consciousness. It seems from these peripheral materials that he is, all the same, trying to head in something like her direction, but lacks the vehicle.

19. Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 90.
20. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, in *Penguin Freud Library 11: On Metapsychology*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 362.