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Brand on Brandon:

The Author as Narcissus and Echo

By Brandon Jacques Trakman
Of Narcissus tempted by the Bible.
Would find there something to satisfy his passion by the roundabout way of the chimeras. A kind of pleasure in condemning himself and then immediately absolving himself in a flood of tears. Fits of repentance full of promise. Fits of candour allied to collusive phantasms.

The figure lying by the edge of the water is insistent. Today it is leaning over the Book in the guise of a mirror. Discovers in it that his eyes are more penetrating, his nose more delicate, his mouth more thick-lipped. Words in the guise of the silvering of a mirror, words which reflect his splendid image while his carcass is disintegrating and his flesh dangling. He doesn't yet know the power of the Word which restores his illusory youth and incites him to complacency.

Heretical theme. Something is giving, somewhere.
The lies of the Word. He finds himself in many phrases. Is going to be resuscitated by a miracle. Nonsense.

Leans over the Book, then, his ear subtly trained, and leafs through the pages he is listening to, reminiscences, to trace the portrait of his opaque face. Is rewarded with a doubly factitious view. Then he gropes about in the sand, finds his stick, stands up and goes back to the hut which serves as his shelter. He will fall asleep in the company of this phantasmal double, the corners of his mouth turned up in a sneer.

Robert Pinget
Fable
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Abstract

This is an investigation into narcissism and appropriation as manifest in authorship. It draws on literary theory in the analysis of various samples from history and the brand on itself. Its central problem is the incorporation of the self, while simultaneously maintaining selflessness.
Introduction: Procedure

With the title echoing such autobiographical texts as Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo explores its authorship with respect to the character traits presented in the classical mythology of Narcissus and Echo. It looks to its ecology of a consumer culture and art world to identify The Narcissism Epidemic in production at large. Operating at the intersection of art and literature—with a focus on nomenclature, and use of poststructuralist lingo—it conceives of writing as a key facet of the art practice. Therefore this text is interwoven with the objects marketed under its brand name to form a body of work tuned to the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree.

The methodology follows a pathological examination: defining the narcissistic disease through its classical mythology, then diagnosing it via a semiotic autopsy of the deceased author—citing The Death of the Author critique—and finally, as a reconstructive effort, attempting to treat the ailment by way of empathy.

The first short chapter, titled “Definition: Semantics of the Malady,” highlights the particular character traits, illustrated in the classical mythology, that are relevant to the following chapters.

The second chapter, called “Diagnosis: I Told You I Was Sick,”—which uses, as its framework, the criteria for “narcissistic personality disorder”¹—elaborates on the inherent problem of inferring authorial intent. Its goal—taking such difficulties into account—is to diagnose the author’s narcissistic sickness by analysing numerous samples (through various lenses of literary criticism), the last of which fall under the brand on this project.

¹ Listed in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-V.
The third and final chapter, titled “Treatment: Echo,” is written in the first person, and functions as a personal reflection on the preceding chapter’s test. It outlines an altruistic cure for the author’s ailment, and attempts to apply it.
Ch1. Definition: Semantics of the Malady

Narcissism originates from the Greek mythology of Narcissus, with the classical version attributed to Ovid. In psychoanalysis it is “derived from clinical description and was chosen by Paul Näcke2 in 1899.”3 Today it refers to an interest in, or concern with, the self along a broad continuum. Like any term, it is nuanced, eluding fixed meaning and metamorphosing with history.

This project aims to diagnose such a narcissism in a pathological light, as a disease (a malignant and atypical condition). Thus it will avoid mention of the “‘the mirage known as ‘primary narcissism’”:4 a narcissism that is “justifiably... attributed to every living creature”5—echoing the Nietzschean claim that “life itself is the Will to Power.”6 Instead, the usage will correspond to the cultural narcissism outlined in Jean M. Twenge’s and W. Keith Cambell’s The Narcissism Epidemic, which describes the symptoms of vanity, materialism, uniqueness, antisocial behaviour, relationship troubles, entitlement and a selfish approach to religion and volunteering.7 The following paragraph offers further description with reference to the classical mythology.

First, narcissism is often used with respect to conceit. After all, Narcissus’ downfall is at the hand of his own beauty; he perishes because he is unable to steer himself away from his reflection—to him, the image is nothing short of perfection. Thus narcissism can be

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2 A matter of contention; also attributed to Havelock Ellis.
associated with excessive pride. Second, narcissism encapsulates a lack of compassion. Narcissus cannot empathise with Echo, despite her conveyance of her love for him through repetition (consolidating their love interest); he privileges the façade over the other, destroying his admirer in his greedy and venal quest for ideal beauty. Thus narcissism denotes malice. Third, there is a sizable semantic portion of isolation. Narcissus’ love is confined within the walls of the self, and while he addresses his reflection, the flattery is, for all intents and purposes, internal; Echo, reduced to nothing but a voice, is only able to repeat these utterances, further encouraging his obsession with the deceptive image. From Narcissus’ perspective, the whole universe exists in the reflection sitting on the surface of the pool—the depth is the illusion. Thus narcissism drifts into solipsism.

From the abovementioned points, narcissism can be associated with authorship. In the modernist canon, notions of authorship are conflated with original genius, defining the text as a surface reflection of the self and the author as Narcissus: blind to the shared properties of language and the inclusion of the other in the attribution of meaning. Postmodernity heralds The Death of the Author and originality, delegating the artist to the role of Echo: an appropriator whose every utterance is derivate and void of inherent meaning. However, the alleged subjugation of the “author-God” does not mitigate the violence of the hierarchical relationship. The supposedly subordinate appropriator (Echo) is revealed in corporate requisition—“work-made-for-hire”—as the status quo. Thus The Death of the Author critique gives way to brand name authorship, typifying Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism: author-reader interactions are not relationships between people, but exchanges between self-interested socio-economic entities. The text becomes a product—or

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narcissistic reflection—of the brand on it. It is in this milieu that a diagnosis of the brand name author shall be performed. This text is both a reflection and epitaph.
Ch2. Diagnosis: I Told You I Was Sick

A. Significant impairments in personality functioning manifest by:

1. Impairments in self-functioning (a or b):
   a. Identity: Excessive reference to others for self-definition and self-esteem regulation; exaggerated self-appraisal may be inflated or deflated, or vacillate between extremes; emotional regulation mirrors fluctuations in self-esteem.
   b. Self-direction: Goal-setting is based on gaining approval from others; personal standards are unreasonably high in order to see oneself as exceptional, or too low based on a sense of entitlement; often unaware of own motivations.

“I told you I was sick” is a famous epitaph, echoed in this chapter title, describing the condition of an inaccessible individual speaking in the first person. From this phrase a reader may infer multiple authors signing efficaciously, with the most obvious one being the corpse speaking from death. Alternatively it can be understood as an apologetic relative, someone moralising over the grave, or a philosopher describing the human condition. In any case, the author or authors remain incommunicable, speaking in the past tense, from beyond the death imputed by writing—as is outlined by Roland Barthes in his landmark essay, The Death of The Author: “as soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively... the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his

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10 With precedent in Emily Dickinson and others.
12 A frequent habit of the eighteenth century.
own death, writing begins.”14 When a reader posits an intention, they decide its origin—the author ceases to be relevant. Language interposes itself in the epitaph, allowing readers to engage the sentence in a way that no individual author would want it conceived; it is an allegory, introduced by language, highlighting the author’s dilemma. Barthes concludes: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”15

According to Barthes’ poststructuralist critique, this paper cannot perform the basic function ascribed to university theses: to act as a personal explanation of a body of research, elucidating the intentions underlying its brand name to markers—a purely contradictory endeavour. Access to an author’s intentions are ineluctably mediated by the textual form—descendant and separate from the scribe—as posited by the formalist branch of literary theory known as New Criticism.16

New Critics assert that an author’s intentions are “neither available nor desirable” in the analysis of works of art, and that a “successful” work is imbued with the author’s intention only by way of its form: “if a poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he is trying to do.”17 However, the conflation of the author’s intention and the “successful” work is inaccurate. An art work’s esteem fluctuates with history—what is once deemed a success, may be viewed as a failure in a different context. Barthes explains that the process of signification is ultimately unstable: “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”18 This suggests that signs can be interpreted in innumerable different ways, depending on their relationships

14 Barthes, Image-Music-Text, 142.
16 Derived from John Crowe Ransom’s 1941 publication of the same name.
18 Barthes, Image-Music-Text, 146.
with other signs in their formal structure\(^{19}\) and sign-using agents\(^{20}\)—such as an author or reader.\(^{21}\)

The seeds of Barthes’ poststructuralist thesis are observable in the 19th century writings of Soren Kierkegaard. From his readings of Socrates—through texts attributed to Plato—Kierkegaard maintains distance between the text and its scribe, concurrently authoring numerous pseudonymous and eponymous works. Early Kierkegaardian scholars—notably Theodor Adorno—argue that the entire authorship should be treated as Kierkegaard’s own personal and religious views, but such an approach leads to contradictions that make the author appear philosophically incoherent.\(^{22}\) Since the advent of post-structuralism, it is generally accepted that distinctions between the various pseudonyms and Kierkegaard must be respected.\(^{23}\) The pseudonyms can thus be likened to characters in a novel who have their own beliefs and idiosyncrasies that may or may not correspond to those of their scribe\(^{24}\)—delegating the speaker as unreliable and the text as fictional.

“No ‘factual’ writing is without an element of fiction.”\(^{25}\) “By what means, then, communicate with others except by the prestidigitation of lying?”\(^{26}\) While fictional writing implies a priori that the speaker is unreliable, a text deemed nonfictional is only revealed to be fraudulent in reading, a posteriori—after the fact. For instance, this text is labelled as a serious postgraduate thesis, but it does not escape the aforementioned axiomatic. Barthes

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\(^{19}\) The field of study known as “syntactics.”

\(^{20}\) “Pragmatics.”


\(^{24}\) Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, ix.


describes the author: “he struggled to hear himself, but produced in this effort no more than another aural scene, another fiction.”

Kierkegaard uses the fictional voice to engage in what he calls “indirect communication”—something he views as vital when dealing with insights that bear directly on the self. The maieutic practice aims to avoid overt didacticism by alluding to problems and contradictions that the reader must engage introspectively. The characters, who embody conflicting views of life and the self, force the reader to develop their own unique interpretation, distinct from the text’s author—as is highlighted in the poststructuralist deduction of the author’s death.

The poststructuralist conclusion gives rise to “reader response criticism,” a school of literary theory that epitomises “excessive reference to others.” Such an approach is observable in the theory of Arthur Danto, who declares the modernist grand narrative to have run its course, evident in the fact that art objects are no longer distinguishable from objects that are not art—echoing his encounter with Warhol’s Brillo Boxes. However, a self-proclaimed essentialist, Danto maintains that “it

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28 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, ix.
29 Denoting the Socratic mode of enquiry, which aims to bring a person’s latent ideas into clear consciousness.
is after all a matter of fact whether something is a work of art or not.”31 His solution gives rise to the notion that art is defined by its acceptance into the art community—the “artworld,” a neologism encapsulating the cultural structures of art exhibition, criticism, and so on. Danto switches the criteria from the thing itself—like a Brillo Box—to the audience who consider it to be a work of art, displacing the narcissism of the author to the particular audience member. His approach privileges the judgment of authoritative readers: “to see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.”32 From such a position of authority, Danto proclaims that only members of his stratum are able to bestow the lofty title of art on a thing, and they can do so because they understand its meaning—which is, of course, the maker’s intention: “a candy bar that is a work of art need not be some especially good candy bar. It just has to be produced with the intention that it be art.”33 Danto emphasises that authorial intent must precede art in order to differentiate our experience of it from that of nature; the very fact that the candy bar is presented in an art context—a cultural structure—assumes authorial intentionality.

Danto’s conclusion is echoed as a basic tenet of Neo-pragmatism: language entails an intention—signs created by chance are only “like language.”34 This notion reverberates through the contemporary European movement of “Intentism”—a reaction against the de-emphasis of the authorial intent in the latter portion of the 20th century—which claims that

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the meaning of the work is found in the author’s intention and not the interpretation of the viewer.\textsuperscript{35} Vittorio Pelosi, its founder, states:

“...rejecting authorship would be to treat a landscape by Turner the same as we treat nature itself. We delight in both but we treat the artwork differently... why? Because we are recognising a mind behind it, we see it as a gesture formed through creative thinking or intention.”\textsuperscript{36}

Pelosi ignores the fact that Turner’s landscape paintings are two-dimensional mimetic objects that are clearly very different from nature itself, and continues to highlight Danto’s narcissistic description of the reader: “can you [the reader] really only see your own reflection in every artwork?”\textsuperscript{37} Such “creative thinking” exposes the inaccessibility of authorial intent, and—along with the aforementioned pragmatists—merely echoes Samuel Johnson’s 16\textsuperscript{th} century declaration that “there is always a silent reference of human works to human abilities.”\textsuperscript{38} Such a conflation—of an author and a text—is known as the “intentional fallacy”: the mistake of basing an assessment of a work on an unknowable intention.

\textsuperscript{37} “Rebirth of the Author?,” 18:23.
The problems of inferring intentionality are observable in the parties that are entangled in the production of the work that Danto cites. If the candy bar he refers to—entitled *We Got It!*—is shown with the intention that it be art, whose intention is it? Is it that of the twelve workers from the *Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers’ International Union of America Local Number 552*, involved in the manufacturing of the physical object? Is it that of *Nestlé*, for allowing them “art leave” to do so? Is it that of the non-profit organisation of *Sculpture Chicago*, who hosted the city-wide public art exhibit? And/or could it be that of the artists *Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio*?

While such terminology suggests that the intentions of the “artists” reign supreme, all of the parties are integral to the realisation of the work, and each contribution is ultimately for the promotion of its respective brand—despite that *Nestlé* is the only widely recognised trademark. The structures are of such complexity that pinpointing a single, dominant intention is impossible. Yet the work is formally attributed to the *Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers’ International Union of America Local Number 552*, and is said to have a “focus on representing those often considered irrelevant to the production of fine art.”

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Such a focus is foregrounded in the art practice of Thomas Hirschhorn, who records his consideration for the other “who doesn’t care about or... is hostile towards art—my neighbour perhaps.” Hirschhorn privileges this other as the primary impetus behind his work. Conversely, he labels the artworld—consisting of institution directors, art critics, curators, gallerists, art historians, collectors and art professors—as merely a “spectre of evaluation.” These two groups overlap as a “non-exclusive audience” (an audience that does not exclude anyone). While Hirschhorn’s accepting position is consistent with his Marxist roots, his noble intentions are not exempt from semiotic processes—they are mediated by text—and thus are inaccessible (according to the poststructuralist critique of authorship). This is illustrated when his motto of “more is more” is questioned by Hal Foster in an interview following an artist talk titled “My World in Your World”: “when is your strategy of excess a critique of the given excess that is out there, and when is it just a re-doubling, a confirmation of excess?” Hirschhorn answers: “it’s never a confirmation of the society... because it’s not made with the will to confirm.” Thus the author falls victim to the intentional fallacy.

42 “My World in Your World,” 1:02:35.
In a similar vein, the installation titled *Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo* describes a social situation in which “people strive to create a ‘personal brand’ (also called ‘self-branding’), packaging themselves like a product to be sold.” Its stance, with respect to such contentious subject matter, echoes the dilemma at the centre of Hirshhorn’s work:

without access to
the author’s
intention, the
audience must
decide whether it
represents anything
from resistance, to a
confirmation of the
status quo.

Brandon Jacques Trakman
*Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo*
2014, Installation

2. *Impairments in interpersonal functioning (a or b):*

   a. **Empathy:** Impaired ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; excessively attuned to reactions of others, but only if perceived as relevant to self; over-or underestimate of own effect on others.

   b. **Intimacy:** Relationships largely superficial and exist to serve self-esteem regulation; mutuality constrained by little genuine interest in others’ experiences and predominance of a need for personal gain.

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes From Underground* foregrounds similar questions of authorial integrity via the literary device known as the “unreliable narrator”: a storyteller that the reader cannot trust. He echoes the aforementioned epitaph in his opening: “I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man.”44 This character is most often referred to by critics as the “Underground Man”: a narrator who exposes the deceptive nature of the author-audience relationship by way of his isolated account. Through such a voice, Dostoyevsky illustrates a viewpoint that may not be his own—in a similar fashion to Kierkegaard. Often cited as the first existentialist text, *Notes From Underground* implores the reader to consider psychological issues that pertain to the self, via such an alienated speaker (echoing the technique of indirect communication): “I am alone and they are EVERYONE,’ I thought—and pondered.”45

The Underground Man is an image of social disaffection, proclaiming his disdain for the popular beliefs of his epoch, with particular reference to Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?*, which embraces enlightenment concepts, praises socialism and rational egoism, and promises to turn all of society into “a Crystal Palace”—a technologically-advanced utopia.46 The speaker mocks Chernyshevsky’s depiction of the crystal palace, describing it as “an idle dream.”47 This prompts the interpretation of the novella as a critical response to such—ultimately militating—utopian ideology. However it may also be interpreted as a direct response to a much darker philosophy: that of the Marquis de Sade, a radical libertine who lived during the time of the French revolution. Indeed Dostoyevsky’s entire oeuvre may

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45 Dostoyevsky, “Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
47 Dostoyevsky, “Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
be read as an increasingly sophisticated critique of Sade’s philosophy⁴⁸—which itself is a
scathing appraisal of popular enlightenment concepts.

The Sadean worldview is one of militant antitheism and radical egotism, where people are
rendered as self-serving determinist machines.⁴⁹ Rather than ascribing the violence of the
French revolution to civilisation’s imposition on the “noble savage”—like other writers of his
epoch, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau—Sade paints man as evil by nature, innately selfish
and self-serving in all actions.⁵⁰ Contrary to the enlightenment’s objectivity and celebration
of man’s inborn capacity for empathy, Sade remains completely subjective, asserting that
supreme pleasure is utterly selfish—the more it is denied to others through pain, the better
the feeling for the cruel actor: “it is always by way of pain one arrives at pleasure.”⁵¹ Such
viciousness affirms the individual’s potency, placing him at the centre of the universe and
exalting the unfettered ego. An exponent of such extreme freedom, the Underground Man
echoes Sadean narcissism by privileging “one’s own free unfettered choice” as the “most
advantageous advantage.”⁵²

⁴⁹ “Dostoevsky vs. Marquis de Sade.”
⁵⁰ “The Unreasonable Self: De Sade and Rousseau’s Attack on the Rational Individual,” Ricky1871’s Blog,
rousseaus-attack-on-the-rational-individual/.
⁵¹ Marquis de Sade and Joachim Neugroschel, Philosophy in the Boudoir or The Immoral Mentors, Kindle ed
⁵² Dostoyevsky, “Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
Not unlike the authorship of Sade and Dostoyevsky, Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo explores the sadistic conceit of pleasure—but in a contemporary light. The installation is comprised of numerous mass-produced objects with little function outside of personal pleasure—predominantly inflatable pool and sex toys—illustrating the sadistic tendencies of a consumer culture. The component parts are produced in enormous quantity, under horrific factory conditions; the pain caused in the manufacturing process gives way to the pleasure derived from the individual consumer; the canons of the free market liberate the selfish ego through cruelty. This exhibits an “impaired ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others”\(^{53}\) and “a predominance of a need for personal gain.”\(^{54}\)

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\(^{53}\) American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5. 767-768.

\(^{54}\) American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5. 767-768.
Precedent for such an engagement with consumer culture can be observed in the work of Jeff Koons, who appropriates “kitsch”—imagery considered to be in poor taste—from popular culture and reproduces it in a factory setting. The imagery is thus rebranded as Koons and sold to private investors for millions of dollars, demonstrating the Sadean pleasure model in corporate authorship.

Such commercial exploitation echoes the Underground Man’s attempt to use capital as a means of dominance: after persuading Liza—a young girl and former prostitute—to visit his residence, herapes her, and explains that “loving meant tyrannising and showing my moral superiority.”\(^{55}\) Then he maliciously forces money into her hand with the intention of humiliating her. But, unbeknownst to him, she drops the money before departing. Confounded by her noble act, he ponders his relationship to the other: “I might have expected that she would do that. Might I have expected it? No, I was such an egoist, I was so lacking in respect for my fellow-creatures that I could not even imagine she would do so.”\(^{56}\)

Such a lack of empathy echoes Narcissus’ cruel response to Echo, following her proclamation of her love for him: “I’ll die before I yield to you.”\(^{57}\) Echo and Liza are the last hopes of salvation for their stories’ narcissistic protagonists, yet they are dismissed in the

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\(^{55}\) Dostoyevsky, “Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
\(^{56}\) Dostoyevsky, “Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
interest of the ego. As per Narcissus’ response, his fate is sealed: “then still, received into the underworld, he gazed upon himself in Styx’s pool.”

Likewise, Notes From Underground concludes with the narrator pondering whether his authorship constitutes “literature so much as a corrective punishment.”

Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo questions its constitution in a similar manner. The combination of inflatable toys and mass-produced kitsch place it at a crossroads in a dialogue between Jeff Koons and an artist working out of Los Angeles named Paul McCarthy (not dissimilar to the conversation between Sade and Dostoyesky). McCarthy appropriates Koons’ steel balloon dogs by reproducing the referent object on an unprecedented scale, rebranding it under his moniker

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58 Melville, Metamorphoses, 66.
59 Dostoyevsky, ”Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
and bringing it back to the balloon form. The return to such a form—literally full of hot air—exposes the falsity and surface appeal of the referent objects, and the disposal of the reflective quality paradoxically reveals the narcissism inherent in the commodity status of the object and spectacle.

*Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo* is situated in relation to Koons’ engagement with capitalist propaganda and McCarthy’s critique of it. Likewise, it stands near Dostoyevsky’s depiction of the Sadean worldview—through the character of the Underground Man—and the sadistic egoism itself. Whether it represents a critique of the corporatism of contemporary art, or an endorsement of it, is left to the reader’s discretion.

### B. Pathological personality traits in the following domain:

1. **Antagonism, characterized by:**
   
   a. **Grandiosity:** Feelings of entitlement, either overt or covert; self-centeredness; firmly holding to the belief that one is better than others; condescending toward others.
   
   b. **Attention seeking:** Excessive attempts to attract and be the focus of the attention of others; admiration seeking.

The transcendent subject of the “romantic author” is described by Nate Harrison—an American appropriation artist—as “a figure constructed towards the end of the eighteenth century when new European social and economic orders were being born, and ‘art’ was
separating from mere ‘craft.’” Harrison outlines a series of court rulings, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that have prompted a change in scope over what constitutes an author’s work, shifting copyright’s emphasis away from authorial intentionality and towards formalist analyses—echoing Peter Jaszi in that “the ‘work’ displaces the ‘author’ as the central idea of copyright law.” In light of the stipulations of “originality” recorded in the US Copyright Act of 1976, Harrison argues that the law “effaced” the romantic image of the author—revisions, such as those concerning the “work-made-for-hire law,” give way to “corporate copyright.”

This slant is revealed in the last sentence of the US Copyright Act of 1909: “...the word ‘author’ shall include an employer in the case of works made for hire.”

Harrison’s interpretation of the law illustrates an unconventional approach to the poststructuralist deviation of appropriation art of the late 70’s—particularly Sherrie Levine’s reproductions of Edward Weston’s modernist photography and Richard Prince’s cowboy photographs lifted from Marlboro advertisements:

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61 Harrison, “The Pictures Generation.”


63 Harrison, “The Pictures Generation.”

64 “The Copyright Act of 1909.”
“Read through the lens of copyright’s de-individuation of the author... Levine’s and Prince’s gestures invite a reading at odds with a poststructuralist ‘death of the author’ critique... Rather than undermining any romantic notion of authorial originality in a culture of the copy, the works reasserted the very productive core of the romantic authorial mode—one premised on private ownership through labor.”

With Minerva’s owl well into flight, Harrison asserts that Levine’s and Prince’s appropriations affirm their status as romantic authors, using “the very process legitimised by copyright law through its work-made-for-hire clause.” In rebranding work accrued through labour, artists like Levine and Prince reveal the only accessible facet of authorial intentionality within the corporate framework: self-interest.

The dominant intention is observable in the most unlikely of sources. Published two years after The Death of the Author, at the height of its influence, Michel Foucault’s essay What is an Author? echoes Barthes’ popular conception of the author’s death, yet still manages to ascribe a title of enduring influence to writers of historical significance (specifically referring to Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud). The prototypical poststructuralist disposes of the repressive name of authority, instead labelling such figures—polemical authors like himself—as “founders of discursivity.” Such a neologism is curiously reminiscent of the “great man theory,” a 19th century conception of history as shaped by the impact of great men, who use their power in a way that has a decisive—or “discursive”—historical impact.

65 Harrison, “The Pictures Generation.”
66 Referring to the Hegelian epigram stating that it is only possible to understand a historical epoch in hindsight.
67 Harrison, “The Pictures Generation.”
69 Foucault, “What is an Author?”
Thomas Carlyle, the author who popularised the theory, reflects on the author’s death in a magnificent light:

“... with his copy-rights and copy-wrongs... ruling (for this is what he does), from his grave, after death, whole nations and generations who would, or would not, give him bread while living... few shapes of Heroism can be more unexpected.”\( ^{70} \)

Speaking from the nineteenth century, Carlyle proclaims an enduring connection with the text, extending his intentionality across time and past death, as a master of language itself, who transcends its unstable and communal nature. The explicit declaration of a continuing exertion of power exceeds an “excessive attempt to attract and be the focus of the attention of others.”\( ^{71} \) Such a description—of the “man of letters”—is further elucidated under Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio (John the Silent):

“... to be able to fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime and the pedestrian—that only these knights of faith can do—this is the one and only prodigy.”\( ^{72} \)

Despite the distance maintained through the pseudonym of Silentio, Kierkegaard manages to elucidate universal motivations of authorship. Under the pretence of heroism, and in the most grandiose manner possible, he exposes the author’s unreliability and narcissism.

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71 American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5. 767-768.
The romantic—ultimately narcissistic—subject is depicted in *Flogging a Dead Horse*. Using appropriated text, it can be described as an “ironic painting”: a “celebration of surface, complicitous with consumer spectacle.”

Brandon Jacques Trakman
*Flogging a Dead Horse*, 2013
Acrylic and oil paint on canvas
182 x 137 cm

C. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual’s personality trait expression are relatively stable across time and consistent across situations.

“Both the author of these Notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these Notes not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society is formed. I have wished to bring before the public, somewhat more distinctly than usual, one of the characters our recent past. He represents a generation that is still living out its days among us. In the fragment titled ‘Underground’ this personage describes himself and his views and attempts, as it were, to clarify the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst. The subsequent fragment will consist of the actual ‘notes,’ concerning certain events in his life.”74

This epigraph, first printed in Dostoyevsky’s Notes From Underground, explains the fictional voice driving the novel. It is echoed in Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho,75 extending the device into the literature of the 1990’s. Ellis’ career, more than any other author of his generation, highlights narcissism as the defining feature of the “American Dream.” Will Self elaborates on Ellis’ output in a blurb, describing its narcissistic quality as social disaffection:

“The Informers shows the work of a writer at the peak of his powers, deeply concerned with the moral decline of our society. The book takes us from the first to the seventh circles of hell, from Salinger to de Sade.”76

Echoing Dante’s Inferno, Self situates Ellis within a tradition exploring egoism and cruelty, stemming from the infamous Marquis. But the penchant for authorial narcissism is even

75 Ellis, American Psycho.
observable in the lesser of the two evils. In an interview conducted at Cornell University, the literary critic Michael Silverblatt describes J. D. Salinger’s master work, *The Catcher In The Rye*: “the book was designed to make you want to meet a man who didn’t want to meet you.”77 Con-conviviality is the narcissistic paradox of the author-audience relationship.

The New York based artist Sean Landers highlights such a dilemma: “I cry out, Love me! Love me! Somebody please! And I receive no reply, not even an echo.”78 Readers have no way of reciprocating the author’s faux-friendliness. Landers’ performative diarising—of his burgeoning career as an artist in New York—exudes an apparent amiability; in ballpoint pen, on cheap yellow legal pads, he outlines hilarious encounters in the art world, under the pseudonym of Chris Hamson. The writings are riddled with spelling errors, crossed-out words, crude drawings and coffee stains. Christy Lange describes the author’s unreliability:

“His prolific disclosures, literally scrawled across his canvases, reflect deep self-doubt, even while they reach new levels of self-aggrandisement, leading us to question the authenticity of his admissions.”79

78 Sean Landers, *Art, Life and God* (East Hampton, NY: Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, 2009), 158.
Landers’ performance echoes the “staged self-presentations”\(^8^0\) of Egon Schiele in that it “is essentially dramatic. It obeys an aesthetic of the *mise en scène* [placing on stage], whereby the artist is at once director and actor.”\(^8^1\) As such, Landers frequently employs the form of a script to include multiple speakers—co-opting others as performance pieces. In doing so, the “author-God” echoes Carlyle’s aspiration to rulership, and Picasso’s statement that “God is really an artist, like me... I am God, I am God, I am God.”\(^8^2\)

Fittingly, the collection is titled *Art, Life and God*.

Such a God-like disposition evokes a literary tradition of metafictional self-indulgence. Franz Kafka’s *Description of a Struggle* incorporates elements of *mise en scène*—principally for the author’s pleasure: “since I like gazing silently up at the stars, the stars appeared slowly in the sky...”\(^8^3\) This reverberates through Ellis’ *Lunar Park*: “look how black the sky is, the writer said. I made it that way.”\(^8^4\) Thus authorial narcissism is “relatively stable across time and consistent across situations.”\(^8^5\) Louis-Ferdinand Céline summarises: “In truth nothing has


\(^{8^1}\) Schröder, *Egon Schiele*, 34.


\(^{8^5}\) American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*. 767-768.
changed. They go on admiring themselves, that’s all. And that’s not new either. Words. Even the words haven’t changed much!"86

The impairments in personality functioning and the individual’s personality trait expression are not better understood as normative for the individual’s developmental stage or socio-cultural environment.

Nicholas Bourriaud aims to avoid the shortcomings of text-mediated discourse by continuing Danto’s tradition of art defined by its community. Bourriaud champions Relational Aesthetics as a way of understanding and locating “art of the 1990’s.” He describes such art as “the invention of models of sociability,” like when “Rirkrit Tiravanija organises a dinner in a collector’s home, and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup.”87 It is “open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, often appearing to be ‘work-in-progress’ rather than a completed object.”88 The art critic Claire Bishop explains relational art’s circumvention of traditional semiotic concerns: “Such work seems to derive from a creative misreading of poststructuralist theory: rather

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86 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Journey to the End of the Night (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2012), 7.
87 Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics (France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998), 7.
88 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52.
than the interpretations of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art itself is argued to be in perpetual flux.”

The relational interpretation of poststructuralist theory presents numerous problems. The most pressing, for the purpose of this project, is that it ignores the author-work-reader relationship, confusing the notion of a stable text that can be analysed using the canons of literary theory. However, *Relational Aesthetics*—as a text—is easily analysed in such a light. Being “summonsed to talk about things around a duly priced drink, as a symbolic form of human relations” may be interpreted as the command of an unreliable narrator, whose stake in the art world extends far beyond a humble beverage.

Bishop observes that instead of steering away from the commodification that plagued high modernism, the “laboratory paradigm”—promoted by relational aesthetics—highlights the “ease with which [it] becomes marketable as a space of leisure and entertainment.” Readers are invited to “microtopias” that are reflective of “an ‘experience economy’, the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences.” Bourriaud affirms Bishop’s claim by disclosing that “anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish”—elucidating the compliant nature of relational aesthetics within the sphere of capitalism. He pontificates that the goal of art is no longer to challenge the current “system of human relations,” but rather to exist amicably with it, exploring “ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.” In doing so, Bourriaud privileges authorial intent and endows

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89 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52.
91 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52.
92 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52.
traditional art world structures with their star figures. He even expands the criteria by emphasising the “artist/curator pairing” as an “intrinsic part of the institution,”95 creating new stars—and perhaps meta-artists96—in the process. In response Bishop notes:

“An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas of artist-as-designer, function over contemplation, and open-endedness over aesthetic resolution is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience.”97

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Bourriaud is not only a writer, but a prominent curator and director. Bishop echoes an unheeded caveat: “As Hal Foster warned in the mid-1990s, ‘the institution may overshadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star.’”98 Perhaps this is “normative for the… socio-cultural environment.”99

**D. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual’s personality trait expression are not solely due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., severe head trauma).**

Narcissism is a universal sub-text—an author’s only inferable condition barring death. Even the marque heralding the author’s demise is marked by it. Olivier Richon states that

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97 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 53.
98 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 53.
Barthes’ essay isn’t aimed at self-destruction—it is attacking the critic; it provides refuge for the vulnerable author beyond the limits of language, using the tools of postmodern deconstruction; The Death of the Author paradoxically immortalises Barthes’ brand of poststructuralist discourse. However, such a branding is ultimately unreliable, as is observable in discourse preceding the publication. Céline asserts that “paper is a tombstone… here lies the author.” He highlights the anxieties of the intentional fallacy in his 1932 novel, Journey to the End of the Night:

“…you wish you could retrieve the words certain people said and the people themselves, so as to ask them what they were trying to tell you… But they’re as gone as gone can be!… We weren’t educated enough to understand them… We’d like to know if maybe they’ve changed their minds… But it’s much too late… It’s over and done!… Nobody knows anything about them any more. So we just have to go on alone in the night.”

Céline continues to outline the shortcomings of the academic text—perhaps preventing his authorship of The Death of the Author: “I do not want to narrate, I want to impart FEELING. It is impossible to do so with conventional academic language… Language is like everything else, IT DIES ALL THE TIME, IT MUST DIE.” While Céline’s statements are inevitably derivative of others, they expose The Death Of The Author as an appropriation, a repetition, an echo.

Far from Carlyle’s description of a text as an extension of its heroic scribe, this paper is yet another reverberation of its sources. This narration conceals the author beyond the limits of

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102 Céline, Journey to the End of the Night, 306.

103 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Death on Credit, (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2008), iii.
language using the critique attributed to Barthes. In doing so, it provides shelter from the survey of narcissism. The individual scribe avoids sincere introspection by pointing to the ecology.

Such an approach to contextual analysis begs a comparison with the discourse surrounding Schiele’s “staged self-presentations.”\textsuperscript{104} While his “work can be read as the authentic psycho-physical self-expression of the artist,”\textsuperscript{105} his “narcissistic self-depictions” are also “the result of an ego-cult,”\textsuperscript{106} “an artistic reflex of the crisis of the age”\textsuperscript{107}—\textit{The Narcissism Epidemic} of the waning Austro-Hungarian empire.

Such a macrocosmic approach is also observable in the writings of Herbert Spencer, who attempts to counter Carlyle’s assertion of the “great man” by way of a communitarian argument: “you must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences... before he can remake his society, his society must make him.”\textsuperscript{108}

\textit{Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo} echoes Spencer’s refutation of Carlyle’s heroic proposition, but in a polemical manner—it uses the negative concept of “narcissism,” in place of the positive one of “heroism,” to highlight a dominant trait attributable to its socio-economic ecology.

Such an ecology could include the pedagogical: the norms of graduate research projects. After all, the primary aim of the MFA is to attain the degree,\textsuperscript{109} and in order to do so one must promote one’s output; this thesis must exhibit passable—but preferably exemplary—qualities to the examiners; Brandon must be marketed as the brand on this project. But such

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] Schröder, \textit{Egon Schiele}, 34.
\item[106] Schröder, \textit{Egon Schiele}, 34.
\item[107] Schröder, \textit{Egon Schiele}, 34.
\item[108] Herbert Spencer, \textit{The Study of Sociology} (New York: Appleton, 1896), 34.
\item[109] As outlined in the tutorial on thesis structure.
\end{footnotes}
a conception of brand name authorship has been shown to be a “self-staged presentation”—a superficial performance that is ultimately unreliable and self-serving. As such, human beings are rendered into selfish automatons—socio-economic constructions. After all, the corporation is an autonomous person, not even accountable to its shareholders. Authorship thus equates to branding. Such an equivalency inevitably reduces society—and by extension, the author and reader—to the narcissistic machinery embodied in Dostoyevsky’s avaricious character of Prince Valkovsky:

“Love yourself, that’s the one rule I recognize. Life is a commercial transaction, don’t waste your money, but kindly pay for your entertainment, and you will be doing your whole duty to your neighbour. Those are my morals, if you really want to know them, though I confess that to my thinking it is better not to pay one’s neighbour, but to succeed in making him do things for nothing. I have no ideals and I don’t want to have them; I’ve never felt a yearning for them.”

The Dostoyevskian personality may be examined through contextual analysis: “even if his characters spoke only for themselves and not necessarily for Dostoyevsky, they nevertheless represent the vision and spirit of their time, their people, and their leaders.” This conclusion can be reached using the tools of New Historicism: a school of literary theory that opposes the claim—from New Criticism—that analysis should be focused on the text alone. New Historicists assert that without biography, one cannot grasp the situational motivations of the author in a socio-historical context—echoing Spencer in that the analysis

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110 Schröder, Egon Schiele, 9.
of a work of art should be conducted around its broader framework. While a text imbued with its author’s specific intention is a fallacy, an absence of ecology is also fallacious.

The contextual approach pays dividends in the analysis of Dostoyevsky’s letters: “if anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth.” In contrast Barthes summarises *The Death of the Author* as “…in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.” Dostoyevsky’s opposition to the atheism at the heart of Barthes’ critique compliments the epigraph for *Notes From Underground*, and allows the reader to perceive the spirituality of an author who does not subscribe to the detached notion of *The Death of the Author* or the narcissism personified in the Underground Man and Prince Valkovsky, yet who spawns such characters as caveats against the eternal damnation that he conflates with their views.

The value of such a contextual approach is further explicated in the discourse surrounding the sculptural balloon dogs. While Jeff Koons maintains that there are no hidden meanings or critiques in his work,¹¹⁶ the declaration is often read as suspect. Given his past employment as a Wall Street commodities broker, the work is not attributed to the surface of its signs, but rather the economics underlying it. This contradicts his assertions, which are aimed at creating “an insurmountable contradiction between the basic cunning of the

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technical sales rep and the exaltation of the ascetic."\textsuperscript{117} Thus Koons’ authorial role is one of unreliability and deception.\textsuperscript{118} This stands in contrast to common perceptions of Paul McCarthy’s work: his background as a member of the Los Angeles counter culture prompts the attribution of contrarian meaning. While his balloon dog is a spectacle that is also geared towards the promotion of its respective brand, his references to Koons are commonly read as critical.

Therefore contextual analysis is an important facet of a pragmatic understanding of an author relative to a work. This chapter acts as an exemplification of such a reading apparatus: a synthesis of New Criticism and New Historicism supplemented by an awareness of poststructuralist critiques. Close reading is accompanied by analysis of the author’s socio-historical disposition, as a way of gauging authorial intent while being careful not to enshrine it with too much importance.

Ch3. Treatment: Echo

“An American (or positivist, or disputatious: I cannot disentangle) student identifies, as if it were self-evident, subjectivity and narcissism; no doubt he thinks that subjectivity consists in talking about oneself, and in speaking well of oneself. This is because he is a victim of the old couple, the old paradigm: subjectivity/objectivity. Yet today the subject apprehends himself elsewhere, and “subjectivity” can return at another place on the spiral: deconstructed, taken apart, shifted, without anchorage: why should I not speak of “myself” since this “my” is no longer “the self”?119

The previous chapter tracks my engagement with the tenets of capitalism and the poststructuralist critique of authorship over the first three semesters of my MFA candidature. “In my isolation, searching for a way to punish man’s universal egoism, it’s true that I was jerking off my imagination, looking for punishment everywhere, even in death.”120 Louis-Ferdinand Céline summarises the virulence of my hypocritical moral diagnosis of a supposedly deceased author. (Who am I to judge?) In my critique, I, as an author, project many of the narcissistic qualities that I purport to condemn; my preoccupation with the self is overtly manifest in the document. I wilfully ignore my supervisor’s astute observation that my increasing efforts to “kill myself off” in my art practice—under the pretence of The Death of the Author critique—only succeed in injecting more of my personality into the output. Emil Cioran explains the futility of my efforts:

“How escape the absolute of oneself? One would have to imagine a being without instincts, without a name, and to whom his own image would be unknown. But everything

119 Barthes, Roland Barthes, 168.
120 Céline, Journey to the End of the Night, 308.
in the world gives us back our own features; night itself is never dark enough to keep us from being reflected into it.”

Far from an ironical joke, my reflective titling is accurate: I am sick. Perhaps this explains my interest in *Notes From Underground*. The ailing narrator personifies many of my concerns; many of his “contradictions and sufferings” are my own; my capacity for empathy only extends as far as a figure who shares certain facets of my ailment; the fictional speaker becomes a narcissistic reflection—an ultimately unreliable image.

Just as the unreliable narrator hides behind the fictional text, *The Death of the Author* critique provides my concealment. Céline describes such circumstances: “when you start hiding from people, it’s a sign that you’re afraid to play with them. That in itself is a disease.” The Underground Man, like most of Dostoyevsky’s characters, is an extreme example of certain human qualities—such as isolation. His dialogue expounds a contradictory claim of a yearning for freedom—as is explained by the Dostoyevskian scholar, Irwin Weil: “you can read *Notes From Underground* as an essay in freedom. The problem is, how can you have freedom and love at

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113 Dostoyevsky, “Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
114 Echoing any number of deluded types, such as *Don Quixote* or *Madame Bovary*.
115 Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 306.
the same time?” Love is embodied in the character of Liza, but the narrator cannot see this, as he is preoccupied with his selfish quest for absolute personal freedom. Jacques Derrida outlines the narcissistic dilemma: “to see only oneself is a form of blindness.”

Such blindness characterises my initial reading of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In viewing Echo as subordinate to the story’s beautiful male protagonist, and her echoes as pathetic attempts to respond in the face of such perfection, I affirm the hierarchy. Indeed Echo is not the singularly lonely party in the love triangle that involves Narcissus and his reflection. After all, a visual reflection is tantamount to an aural echo, or “Echo”—exemplifying the Derridean concept of “différance,” which highlights semantic drift in speech as compared to text. Narcissus clearly loves Echo—or an “echo”—but is blind to the difference. Furthermore, despite Juno’s curse—“only to repeat, as best she could, the last for many words”—Echo heroically transcends the limits of her affliction, as is explained by Derrida:

“...what’s extraordinary in this scene... is the moment when Echo traps Narcissus...

Echo, in her loving and infinite cleverness, arranges it so that, in repeating the last syllables of the words of Narcissus, she speaks in such a way that the words become her own. In a certain way, she appropriates his language. In repeating the language of another, she signs her own love; in repeating she responds to him; in repeating she communicates with him. She speaks in her own name by just repeating his words.”

127 Derrida’s neologism “différance” is indistinguishable from the French word “difference” when spoken.
129 "‘Speech Is Blind’ - Jacques Derrida,” 0:42.
Echo’s method of appropriation allows her to rise above the limitations of her curse and communicate her deepest emotions; she alters the substance of Narcissus’ words by selectively appropriating—or echoing—them: “’Keep your arms from me! Be off! I’ll die before I yield to you.’ And all she answered was ‘I yield to you.’”\(^{130}\) Echo inverts the signification through selected fragments.

A. D. Melville asserts that “it seems likely that Ovid was the first to combine the stories of Narcissus and Echo, to their mutual enrichment,”\(^{131}\) highlighting the co-dependency of the fictional characters in the mythology. Likewise, their qualities merge in the notion of authorship as a synthesis of individuality and appropriation; cultural production is at once unique and derivative; in my authorship “I’m acting as both Narcissus and Echo at one and the same time.”\(^{132}\) An author always appropriates from a culture, while simultaneously placing it in an original context—a time and place. From such placement, a reader may infer, as accurately as possible, the underlying intention that overlaps with the meaning. So while


\(^{131}\) Melville, *Metamorphoses*, 392.

\(^{132}\) “’Speech Is Blind’ - Jacques Derrida,” 0:37.
one might say that “conveying intent and motivation is the author’s job, not the reader’s,” reading requires an active engagement on the part of the latter, and one cannot be isolated from the wider ecology.

Contextual analysis has been explored vis-à-vis New Historicism in critical dialogues—particularly between Dostoyevsky and Sade, and McCarthy and Koons—but authorial intent is not limited to a harsh egoism and an equally egotistical (dogmatic) critique of it. Friedrich Nietzsche presents an apt caveat: “he who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster.” The binary moral compass outlined at the end of the second chapter is fallacious. In an effort to avoid the adoption of monstrous traits, the possibility of cultural production stemming from altruism is currently being explored in many areas of the culture, as David Foster Wallace extrapolates:

“It seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It’s got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved. I know this doesn’t sound hip at all... But it seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do... is ‘give’ the reader something. The reader walks away from the real art heavier than she came into it. Fuller.”

Intentional fallacy notwithstanding, Wallace, as an author, imagines an alternative motivator to narcissism—he conceives of art as a gift. While Derrida is sceptical of the

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134 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 52.

135 The disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others.

possibility of the gift—the central paradox is that a genuine gift cannot be understood as such—Wallace believes that art has the capacity to unite the author and reader in altruism, rather than maintain their separation. For him, the author’s gift prompts reciprocation: a reader’s empathetic response.

Relational art is grounded on a similar premise—interactivity requires participants to function. Its pragmatic value can be observed in research conducted in a collaboration between Stanford University and Cornell University, questioning “are two narcissists better than one?” The conclusion is phrased as follows:

“...to capitalize on the narcissists in our midst, we should collaborate with them and encourage them to collaborate with each other. In so doing, groups could turn what is often considered a decidedly negative trait into a valuable source of creative tension.”

The inquiry ultimately echoes the tenets of capitalism: competition breeds excellence (socio-economic Darwinism). However, according to such data, narcissism is irrelevant in practical affairs. Collaboration—as proposed by Bourriaud—yields positive results, regardless of the narcissistic constituents. Even Claire Bishop acknowledges that the “artist-curator pairing” is not the only relationship bolstered under relational aesthetics, as “many of the artists Bourriaud discusses have collaborated with one another, further blurring the imprint of individual authorial status.” But such a communal slant does not transcend traditional moral or semiotic concerns—it only makes for more complicated structures.

139 Goncalo, et al, “Narcissism and Creativity.”
140 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 55.
Epitomising the anxieties of the alienated individual, Kafka elucidates a deep concern with authorial narcissism. “For Kafka the ego is the moi haïssable [the hateful self].”\textsuperscript{141} Like Schiele—his Viennese counterpart in the twilight of the Austro-Hungarian empire—his work “functions on the surface of its signs,”\textsuperscript{142} as a theatrical display. But for whom? Walter Herbert Sokel uses excerpts from a letter, from Kafka to his close friend Max Brod, to elucidate the author’s trepidation with respect to his writing:

“...onanistic, as the continuation of Kafka’s self-condemnation makes very clear, for he finds ‘the properly diabolical’ element of writing in its ‘vanity and lusting for pleasure which perpetually whirls around and enjoys one’s own figure, or else another—in that case, the motion merely multiplies; it becomes a solar system of vanity.’ Kafka condemns his writing because it is narcissism.”\textsuperscript{143}

In Kafka’s “solar system of vanity” the positions of author and reader are not mutually exclusive; in the act of writing the narcissistic author simultaneously occupies both spaces; the text becomes a reflection wherein semiotic processes engulf the subject in orgasmic fashion. This is observable in the aforementioned metafictional indulgence of Description of a Struggle (and Ellis’ derivative novel, Lunar Park). Kafka echoes Schiele’s aesthetic of mise en scène\textsuperscript{144}—“whereby the artist is at once director and actor”\textsuperscript{145}—but goes further, also delegating the artist as the audience. Such a vision of artistic production echoes Narcissus’ self-indulgent engagement with his reflection: authorship becomes a conversation between an individual and a surface-oriented image.

\textsuperscript{142} Deleuze, Gilles, Félix Guattari, and Cochran Terry, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xi.
\textsuperscript{143} Sokel, Essays on Franz Kafka, 167.
\textsuperscript{144} Placing on stage.
\textsuperscript{145} Schröder, Egon Schiele, 34.
However, despite Kafka’s issue with the narcissistic aspect of cultural production, his intense dedication to it is indisputable. Even on his death bed, while persuading Brod to burn his manuscripts, he corrects proofs.146 This blatant contradiction holds the treatment for authorial narcissism: “‘Writing,’ says Kafka, ‘is a form of prayer.’ Kafka defines writing as an appeal to something beyond the writer’s self.”147 Furthermore, as a Jew, his view of God is “wholly other.”148 Thus, his writing, while narcissistic, simultaneously represents his dedication to otherness. The tension between such opposing “functions of art was enormously fruitful for Kafka’s work... it makes it possible for him to use writing as the antidote to itself.”149 This tension is observable throughout his oeuvre. In his most famous novel, The Trial, the protagonist, frequently referred to as “K.,” witnesses the savage and unjust beating of a former policeman named Franz—following K.’s official complaint concerning the officer’s conduct in his arrest.150 The narratorial voice hypothesises:

“...K. would have taken his own clothes off and offered himself to the whip-man in the policeman’s place. The whip-man would certainly not have accepted this substitution anyway, as in that way he would have seriously violated his duty without gaining any benefit.”151

The individual prerogatives are highlighted in the different characters. The author’s use of personal apppellations—first name and last initial—illuminates the conflict between narcissism and empathy, leaving guilt in its wake. William Hubben asserts the religious view

146 Sokel, Essays on Franz Kafka, 168.
147 Sokel, Essays on Franz Kafka, 168.
149 Sokel, Essays on Franz Kafka, 168.
151 Kafka, The Trial, 64.
that “Kafka’s main theme... is an ever-present sense of guilt, perhaps sin, and this guilt is being revenged on those who are unable to recognize their moral burden.”\textsuperscript{152} Sokel questions: “has life become unbearable for some among us who are too sensitive and sympathetic to the sufferings of our fellow men? Can we ever be too sensitive to the sufferings of others?”\textsuperscript{153} In answer, Cioran states:

“The man who managed, by an imagination overflowing with pity, to record all the sufferings, to be contemporary with all the pain and all the anguish of any given moment—such a man—supposing he could ever exist—would be a monster of love and the greatest victim in the history of the human heart.”\textsuperscript{154}

Sokel continues to insist that “to understand the connection between narcissism... and art, which is crucial for Kafka, it will be useful for us to turn to Freud’s concept of narcissism.”\textsuperscript{155} Following such a direction, Sigmund Freud conflates narcissism and masturbation in the opening lines of his landmark publication, \textit{On Narcissism}:

“The term narcissism... denotes the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities.”\textsuperscript{156}

\textit{Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo} echoes Freud’s masturbatory description of narcissism, and Kafka’s conflation of it with authorship. The installation likens my experimentation with materials to masturbation. However, like Kafka, I will attempt

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{152} Hubben, \textit{Four Prophets}, 143.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Hubben, \textit{Four Prophets}, 137.
\item \textsuperscript{154} Cioran, \textit{A Short History of Decay}, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{155} Sokel, \textit{Essays on Franz Kafka}, 167.
\item \textsuperscript{156} Freud, et al. \textit{On Narcissism: An Introduction}, 3.
\end{itemize}
treatment for such a condition by way of an “an appeal to something beyond the self.”

The Freudian characterisation of narcissism lays the basis for my approach:

“We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance... that in their later choice of love-objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed ‘narcissistic’.”

Freud describes the withdrawal of the object libido from the mother, and its subsequent direction towards the self, as the psychological process underlying the development of narcissism. Therefore I must use my mother’s status—as the quintessential other—to counteract my authorial narcissism. This is done by way of a collaboration with her. As she is an avid quilter, my task is to appropriate her hand-made quilts as components in a larger installation. Tags sporting my brand are sewn onto the blue and yellow quilts, which sit on top of poppy red ribbons spaced vertically along the wall to form striped patterning. My mother’s objects hold the space traditionally reserved for paintings. Thus, rather than

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157 Sokel, Essays on Franz Kafka, 168.
employing her expert craftsmanship as work-made-for-hire, I collaborate with her, using materials traditionally associated with sewing and quilting.

Such a collaboration echoes Boston artist Clara Wainwright’s practice of “community quilting.” Wainwright works with various groups—from troubled teens and fisherman’s wives to Tibetan immigrants—to produce a wide array of quilts.\textsuperscript{159} In doing so, she strengthens community bonds and brings people together. Similarly, I aim to build a relationship with my mother via the cooperative artistic endeavour.

The recombinant tradition of the craft provides my treatment. In quilting, the constructive process generally entails the juxtaposition of pre-fabricated fabrics within a grid-based system; the craftsman echoes Echo’s approach to speech in the selection and appropriation of materials. The fragments are combined to produce a unique object with its own signification—related to, but distinct from, its sources. “How can I manage to keep each of these fragments from never being anything but a symptom? —Easy: let yourself go, \textit{regress}.”\textsuperscript{160} A quilt holds motherly associations: warmth, protection, and most importantly, convalescence.

The title of the installation is constructed in a similar fashion to the physical object. Given that my mother’s name is Dawn, the work is shown under the banner of \textit{Brand on Dawn}:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{160} Barthes, \textit{Roland Barthes}, 172.
\end{flushright}
The Author as Narcissus and Echo (Mother’s Quilts)—exemplifying the Derridean concept of différance: my mother’s name is identical to the last syllable of mine when voiced; the variance between the two is only discernible in the written appellation. This mirrors the condition of the work relative to its moniker: the entire installation is subsumed by my brand—only the title points to the subjugated level of authorship. Such nomenclature is intended to acknowledge the other as the subject of the work, echoing Thomas Hirschhorn’s belief that “I am the equal of the other.”

However, while Brand on Dawn: The Author as Narcissus and Echo (Mother’s Quilts) may appear to represent a synthesis of my mother’s perspective and my own, it is a violent hierarchical relationship—illuminated in the colour choices: the blues and yellows of my mother’s quilts clash with my selection of pungent poppy reds. While the work can be justified as an altruistic enterprise, it can just as easily be construed as exploitation. Indeed the Oxford dictionary defines “collaboration” as “the action of working with someone to produce something,” but the second definition is “traitorous cooperation with an enemy.” The most telling attribute of the title of Brand on Dawn: The Author as Narcissus and Echo (Mother’s Quilts) may not be in the names that it lists, but those it omits—as is explained by the poststructuralists:

“Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the

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other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.”

“...silence as defined by Barthes, like many of the figures he presents, does not conform to our likely expectations. Silence... is not a passive condition but rather one voluptuously active, so active in fact that it refuses to settle into or onto a singularly readable position... an active silence, as Barthes puts it, is what lies at the heart of all rigorous discourse.”

There are levels of authorship in Brand on Dawn: The Author as Narcissus and Echo (Mother’s Quilts) that are not alluded to in the name. Only silence describes the anonymous individuals beneath my mother in the hierarchy of authorship—such as the factory workers who produced the various threads and fabrics on mass. So while I assure the reader that the work is born of altruistic intent, it may also be interpreted as a narcissistic effort in corporate requisition. In addition to my name, the tags bear the words “narcissistic elation”: “the narcissistic situation of the primal self in narcissistic union with the mother.” Rather than purporting to promote relationships in the tradition of relational aesthetics, Brand on Dawn: The Author as Narcissus and Echo (Mother’s Quilts) merely echoes the early 20th century Austro-Hungarian artists in its “joyless conviction that mankind has been and is always at the mercy of the other—in whatever form and whichever context.” Thus my reconstructive effort—to cure my narcissistic disease—ends in failure. Such a deduction reinforces the findings from the historical analysis in the first portions of the second chapter: the disease is not so much an epidemic, as a ubiquitous facet of cultural production

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166 Schröder, Schiele, 8-9.
that transgresses historical epochs, traditions, and of course, particular individuals. Cioran explains that “out of all he has undertaken to be healed of himself, a stranger disease has been constituted: his ‘civilization’ is merely the effort to find remedies for an incurable—and coveted—state.”¹⁶⁷ Despite the dismissal of an omnipresent—“primary”—narcissism at the beginning of the first chapter,¹⁶⁸ I finally echo such a sentiment. “The man who does not adore himself is yet to be born.”¹⁶⁹ The epidemic is, in fact, a fundamental condition of nature. (Who am I to judge?)

“Therefore the animals proceed directly to their goal, man loses himself in detours; he is the indirect animal par excellence.”¹⁷⁰ The circumlocutory failure of this investigation is observable in its foundations: the diagnosis is itself antinomical in concept—according to The Death of the Author critique. The deduction of any facet of intentionality—no matter how insulting or polemical—implies some manner of connection with the subject. For instance, a reader may construe the narcissistic brand on this project as its author. Indeed the extensive introspection illuminates my vanity, the impudent criticism highlights my dogmatism and malice, and the impersonal style reveals my isolation. At the same time, the present tense paradoxically challenges the author’s death: it is intended to emphasise my presence in the text. I aim to create a situation in which, as Montaigne declares: “my book and I are one.”¹⁷¹

But I “tried in vain.”¹⁷² “Told in vain! Done in vain!... stumbles at every step with fresh doubt...”¹⁷³ This multivalent narration failed to dissolve the boundary between itself and a

¹⁶⁷ Cioran, A Short History of Decay, 26.
¹⁶⁸ “…justifiably... attributed to every living creature.”
¹⁶⁹ Cioran, A Short History of Decay, 62.
¹⁷⁰ Cioran, A Short History of Decay, 26.
¹⁷¹ Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, xii.
¹⁷² Houellebecq and Bowd, The Map and the Territory, Kindle ed.
particular author. It merely echoed innumerable narcissisms—notably the copious authors cited, and the numerous individuals involved in its production. The second chapter began with the declaration that it could not possibly perform the basic function ascribed to MFA theses, and such a deficiency was—intentionally or unintentionally—echoed throughout.

174 “...to act as a personal explanation of a body of research, elucidating the intentions underlying its brand name to markers.”
Conclusion: Failure

While this thesis incorporated practical approaches to a problematic view of narcissism and authorship, all of its initial goals resulted in failure. The first chapter sought to define narcissism in a pathological light, and failed—it loosely described a condition of nature. The second chapter sought to expose that condition in particular texts, and again, failed—it merely demonstrated a pragmatic reading apparatus. The third chapter sought to treat the narcissistic condition, and yet again, failed—it displayed subjugation under the pretence of altruism. Therefore this project was a description of its own failures—a distant echo of the branding of the unfinished text that was left on Roland Barthes’ typewriter on the day of his death: One Always Fails to Speak of What One Loves.175

“Perhaps Gertrude Stein was right when she wrote that ‘a real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.’ The end of all ends.”176 “We are ourselves only by the sum of our failures,”177 and as such, this project’s failure was its raison d’être.178 It best elucidated that “I am so clever that sometimes I don’t understand a single word of what I am saying.”179 “Although he makes the statement with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, he confesses the secret of meaningless work: even frustrated art making itself can be successful artwork if it acknowledges its own failings.”180 Thus the pretentious and repetitious jargon, copious references, erratic turns through alleys of tenuously related

177 Cioran, A Short History of Decay, 61.
178 Reason for existence.
180 Christy Lange, “Bound to Fail,” Failure, 134.
ideology, and polemic of the *moi haïssable*,\textsuperscript{181} mark a trace\textsuperscript{182} of success—according to such “a slightly transposed, amiably oblique... argument...”\textsuperscript{183} It was not research “so much as a corrective punishment.”\textsuperscript{184} The castigation did not lie in self-abasement,\textsuperscript{185} but rather its futility:

“Each of us is a supreme dogma to himself; no theology protects its god as we protect our self; and if we assail this self with doubts and call it into question, we do so only by a pseudo-elegance of our pride: the case is already won.”\textsuperscript{186}

The author now disapproves of the sometimes blasphemous tone of this book.

Robert Pinget

*Fable*

\textsuperscript{181} Hateful self.
\textsuperscript{182} In Derridian deconstruction the meaning of a sign is generated from the difference it has from other signs, especially the other half of its binary pair, therefore the sign itself contains a “trace” of what it does not mean.\textsuperscript{183} *Céline, Journey to the End of the Night*, 355.
\textsuperscript{184} Dostoyevsky, “Notes From The Underground,” Project Gutenberg.
\textsuperscript{185} Brandon Jacques Trakman, *Brand on Brandon: The Author as Narcissus and Echo* (Sydney, Australia: The University of Sydney, 2014).
\textsuperscript{186} Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, 62.
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