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*The Comedy of Errors* and Deleuze’s mad Cogito

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Idiot science for a blue humanities: Shakespeare’s The Comedy of Errors and Deleuze’s mad Cogito

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ABSTRACT
Can we imagine a Blue Humanities that takes the non-relation as a starting point for ecological thought? I believe we can. Following Shakespeare and Deleuze, this essay engages in a thought experiment that, if it is not too absurd, might, like the ship of fools of medieval times, unmoor the Blue Humanities from its current safe harbor by putting the thought of ‘our’ world under erasure. This is not a matter of turning thought around, such that, by turning to the sea, we turn thought away from calculation and instrumental reason and rediscover our true nature. Rather, the image of thought I pursue here is narcissistic. Reading Shakespeare and Deleuze in a minor key, we will see that narcissism not only makes our relations doubtful, but also enfolds the non-relation as the very inside/outside of ecological thought.

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But what goes on in you when you talk about color as if it were a cure, when you have not yet stated your disease. – Maggie Nelson (2009, p. 7)

The old idiot wanted indubitable truths at which he could arrive by himself…. he would doubt every truth of Nature…. The new idiot has no wish for indubitable truths; he will never be “resigned” to the fact that 3 + 2 = 5 and wills the absurd. – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994, p. 62)

Introduction: H2O

A specter haunts the Blue Humanities: the specter of hyper-humanist-oceans, or H2O for short.

The ‘oceanic turn’ as it is sometimes called, or Blue Humanities, turns in the direction of the unfixed, unmoored, and uncharted as scholars of the humanities in dialogue with the environmental sciences seek safe harbor for concepts of care, collectivity, and worlding practices in otherwise uninhabitable waters. Indeed, it is precisely when those waters appear most toxic, in the epoch of the Anthropocene, to humanity’s survival (much less the humanities’ survival) – when, that is, the planet’s oceans have begun to warm due to climate change; when acidification has reached unprecedented levels; and when dead-zones, floating cities made of plastic, and rising seas have begun to visibly mar the deep, making the finitude of marine life a real question of our times – it is precisely at this moment of the Earth’s increasing uninhabitability that some scholars of the humanities and science studies are asking: how blue are you?
Indeed, blue would be an understatement. Confronted with the affective fallout and looming threat of resource wars (Massumi, 2015; Shiva, 2016), which are not only a pre-emptive threat (a cause for military calculation) but also already combine in formerly 'blue states' with ecological racism, urban rust, and neoliberal calculus to produce contaminated drinking water in America’s rust belt, not to mention global desertification (itself a spectral return animated by the fossil economy’s slow violence against the poor in areas ranging from Detroit to the global south [Nixon, 2013]) – confronted with this world of globalized and toxic interconnection, is it any wonder the humanities have the blues? And there are the aforementioned dead-zones, which act as spectral rem(a)inders of the deoxygenated life stretching from the Mississippi river to the Gulf Coast to the ‘too big to fail’ narratives of Deep Water Horizon and Big Oil. Needless to say, those narratives did fail, and the consequence of such grand narratives failing is not just another chink in the wall of the two-cultures divide, but the end of the world as such. Make no mistake: our world, the world of globalized interconnection, driven by fossil fuel dependency and vampiric capitalism (Malm, 2016; Moore, 2015), ends when we realize, when we truly confront the fact that the blue-green globe seen from outer space is no longer hospitable to ‘our’ way of life, that it is no longer for us. The real question now is: was it ever? Who, after all, is the ‘us,’ the ‘we’ that so many humanist and posthumanist narratives of apocalypse and redemption presuppose?

In this essay, I offer no promises of a better, bluer future. I have no answer to Lenin’s question, ‘What is to be done?’ My only claim to scientific method is a certain hyperbolic questioning that sails hopelessly in the direction of the idiot who doubts every ‘we,’ every ‘totality,’ even that these hands and this body belong to me.2

One thing we know for certain about the environmental humanities: despite the ubiquitous talk of trans-material relations, the ‘we’ of the environmental humanities defines itself in the negative – as anti-Cartesian. In other words, the very thing that is not permitted by the relational paradigm of ecological imbrication, namely, the absence of the relation, appears in the guise of an unceasing disavowal of the narcissistic, autotelic, and objectless Cogito. How can this be so? Or rather, how can a model of theory built on the presumption that there is no ‘outside’ to ecological relations find itself in such a bald contradiction that it rejects on the one hand the inhuman Cogito, which makes worldly relations doubtful, only to save on the other hand both relationality and the image of ourselves as open, interconnected, and object-oriented?

In posing these questions, I do not presume a simple opposition: object-relations or the absence of relations. What I propose instead is an investigation into a concept with a complex (some would say saturated) history, one that will lead us to our main foci: Shakespeare and Deleuze, by way of Freud and Descartes. The concept I pursue here is narcissism. By taking narcissism as my object, I obviate the need to resolve the contradiction of a non-relational relation, a problem that has recently been reinvigorated by the anti-correlationism of Quentin Meillassoux (2008) and Object-Oriented Ontology (Morton, 2013), since what sets narcissism apart in the history of ideas is precisely the fact that it posits an objectless relation. In narcissism, that is, what makes the non-relation thinkable – what delivers it (the ‘outside’) home to thought – is the relation.
The oceanic feeling

Writing from the intersections of feminist science studies, posthumanism, and environmental activism, Stacy Alaimo makes the case for thinking relations—‘trans-corporeally’ (2016, p. 8, 112). Hence, Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that ‘Judge Schreber has sunbeams in his ass’ and that, for that matter, ‘there is no such thing as either man or nature,’ ‘only a process that produces the one within the other’ (1983, p. 2), would come as no surprise to Alaimo, whose work draws on the ‘situated knowledge’ practices of Donna Haraway and the post-Bohrian quantum physics of Karen Barad— not to mention an ample dose of queer epistemology (p. 8). In one brilliant essay representative of the Blue Humanities, ‘Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene Dissolves,’ Alaimo begins with an important question: ‘Who is the “anthro” of the “anthropocene”’ (p. 143)? To which Alaimo adds: ‘In its ostensible universality, does the prefix suggest a subject position that anyone could inhabit’ (p. 143)? Alaimo’s answer is no. What’s more, Alaimo suggests that any pretense at inhabiting such a ‘position’ risks reinstalling a suspect Cartesianism (i.e. the blinkered, self-undermining, world-destroying subject of hyperbolic doubt) in the guise of universal humanity. While the term “anthropocene” would seem to interpellate humans into a disorienting expanse of epochal species identity, some accounts of the Anthropocene, Alaimo observes, ‘reinstall rather familiar versions of man’ (p. 143). For instance, ‘To think of the human species as having had a colossal impact, an impact that will have been unthinkably vast in duration, on something we externalize as “the planet,” removes us from the scene and ignores the extent to which human agencies are entangled with those of nonhuman creatures and inhuman substances and systems’ (p. 144). Those ‘substances and systems’ include, for example,

The list goes on. Alaimo’s point, however, is that the same Cartesian epistemology that frames Anthropocene ‘man’ as an external and abstract force acting on the planet makes possible the destructive practices listed above. The epistemological positions of the “Gods’s-eye view” that Donna Haraway critiqued in “Situated Knowledges” dominates many of the theoretical, scientific, and artistic portrayals of the Anthropocene, even when those portrayals seek to ameliorate environmental damage (p. 144). The ‘anthro’ of the Anthropocene is, according to Alaimo, mistaken as an abstract ‘force’ (pp. 148–157).  
Now, if this distancing epistemology bears the name of Descartes, whose ‘error’ was to have placed thinking substance (res cogitans) over and against unthinking matter (res extensa), then, in contrast with this view, Alaimo theorizes an epistemology that is, in Bruno Latour’s words, a matter of ethical and ontological ‘concern’ (Alaimo, 2016, p. 41; Latour, 2004). That is, Alaimo situates the ‘knower’ as the very being and becoming of the world. We not only enter the world wet, in Alaimo’s theory, but also remain so: ‘we’ are wetware, ‘trans-corporeal’ assemblages of matter, and for that reason never as complete or detached from the environment as the wandering, errant Cogito would have us think. Specifically, Alaimo argues ‘for a conception of trans-corporeality that traces the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider
material world’ (p. 112). From the vantage of the trans-corporeal subject, the history of the Cogito is not only an error, an excess of reason; it is an obscenity of human narcissism. By examining ‘to what extent trans-corporeality can extend through the seas’ (p. 113), Alaimo – in the tradition of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud – proposes yet another wound to human narcissism by dissolving the human in wetscapes beyond us: ‘I will argue that even though the long evolutionary arc that ties humans to their aquatic ancestors may evoke modes of kinship with the seas, formulations that end with the human as a completed product of that process conclude too soon’ (p. 113).

There is in this last formulation of Alaimo’s a surprising echo with Freud, who could be said to defend a certain Cartesian legacy by positing a ‘normal’ developmental trajectory that ends ‘with the human as a completed product.’ This is the view outlined in the opening pages of Civilization and Its Discontents, where Freud acknowledges ‘a feeling’ or ‘a sensation of “eternity,”’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, ‘oceanic’ (1930, p. 64). Although Freud is quick to add, ‘I cannot discover this “oceanic” in myself,’ he testifies to its subjective pull, framing it as the conciliatory belief that ‘We cannot fall out of this world,’ and speculates that the ‘oceanic feeling’ must be a lasting residue of primary narcissism, when ‘An infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him’ (1930, pp. 66–67). What Alaimo calls ‘trans-corporeality,’ Freud understands as the lasting vestige of early infancy. ‘Or, to put it more correctly, originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world’ (1930, p. 68). On the one hand, Freud’s teleology is at cross-purposes with Alaimo’s trans-corporeal subject, since it denotes the latter to a narcissistic state of early development. On the other hand, as it often the case with Freud, his writing on the ‘oceanic feeling’ is at cross-purposes with itself. That is, Freud and Alaimo, despite their important differences, end up in a similar theoretical space, with the former going so far as to suggest at one moment that the highest achievement of object-relations owes to the sublimated resurgence of the ‘oceanic.’4 This is the experience that Freud calls ‘being in love,’ when ‘the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away’ (1930, p. 66). Despite their competing prescriptive ends – the one ending in externalities, the other in trans-matter – both Freud and Alaimo advocate a certain easing of definitional boundaries resulting in a return to ‘aquatic origins.’ Although it is not my goal here to elide the political stakes of the Blue Humanities – the most important being the toxicity of our relations: trans-corporeality, for Alaimo, means that I incorporate all that I abject (waste, radiation, pollution, extinction) in the flesh – I do want to put pressure on a Blue Humanities that invests its progressive hopes in the future of ‘trans-corporeal’ relations – relations that, even in their toxic articulation, still promise a future world, a posthuman world of care and connectedness. To echo Lacan’s formulation, there is no sexual relation, I would like to pursue the non-relation that narcissism names, and that the environmental humanities abjects: there is no ecological relation.5 Reading Shakespeare and Deleuze in a minor key, the following two sections conceptualize the non-relation as a starting point for ecological thought.
Missed connections: narcissism and Deleuze

Readers of Shakespeare know all too well the power of the narcissus figure to compel characters into a hallucinatory state of doubling, misrecognition, and epistemological confusion. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the narcissistic love imagined by Plato’s *Symposium* and reconstituted by Freud and Alaimo as the ‘trans-corporeal’ subject finds its aquatic equivalent in the forlorn speech of Antipholus of Syracuse, who, in search for his long-lost brother (his twin), states:

I to the world am like a drop of water
That in the ocean seeks another drop;
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself. (Shakespeare, 2017, 1.2.35–38)

Not to be outdone, readers of Deleuze could also see in Shakespeare’s language a fitting analogue to the Deleuzian theory of immanence, the most memorable image of which appears at the end of *Difference and Repetition*, where we encounter ‘the clamor of being’ as an anarchic ocean of preindividual singularities or ‘drops.’ Deleuze writes: ‘A single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, a single clamour of Being for all beings’ (1994, p. 304). In both images, the first from Shakespeare and the second from Deleuze, we find the resurgence of what Freud (though he finds it lacking in himself) calls the ‘oceanic feeling,’ brought about in states of ‘pathological’ love, and giving way to an immersive, Alaimo-esque, ‘trans-corporeal’ experience.

Yet since we are called on here to address ‘Minor Shakespeares’ – ‘minor’ being that which does not simply democratize or pluralize totality by presenting a new and distinct view just as globalizing in its particularity, but rather shatters every ‘view,’ every monad or perspective, by detaching an incongruous object, shard, or refrain from the scenography of life, thus giving way to an ‘impersonal life’ unmoored from the actions of the self – it is against this (now dominant) version of the ‘oceanic,’ with its network of relations, that I want to posit a ‘minor narcissism,’ akin to the minor or ‘late style’ theorized by Edward Said (2006). What is ‘minor,’ says Said, in contrast with the relational paradigm of the Blue Humanities, is always late, untimely, and perforce cut-off from its referent. The same holds true in Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s) readings of Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Francis Bacon, and Olivier Messiaen. Indeed, if there is one thing that stands in the way of a ‘minor’ reading of Shakespeare and Deleuze, it is the faith that we, as oceanic selves, cannot fall out of the world of relations and meanings, since it is the nature of every minor style to fall out of a given order of meaning and branch off in nomadic series. The ‘minor,’ let it be said, is not a way back to the world; it is rather an ‘escape’ from the world, a turning away. And because such a statement is sure to raise indignation, allow me to further clarify that by ‘escape’ I do not mean escapism or a return to the existential subject of freedom: abstract, masculine, divorced from the ‘second sex,’ the subaltern. As Deleuze and Guattari attest: ‘The line of escape is part of the machine’ (1986, p. 7). To escape, one does not need a passport, but only to pass through the looking glass. Hence, for Kafka, ‘The problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out, or even a way in, another side, a hallway, an adjacency’ (pp. 7–8).
Although it is commonly said that Deleuzian ‘becoming’ yields a world of relations that are ‘lively’ and other-directed (we can, from a Deleuzian perspective, see ourselves as parts of ‘vibrant assemblages’ of matter – animals, plants, minerals and so on [Bennett, 2010]), what is foreclosed by the relational paradigm is the idea that these relations are always in fact deviations from the world as such. To deviate or turn away from the world: that is the very structure of perversion, which Deleuze says is inseparable from ‘desert sexuality’ or the ‘world without others’ (1990, p. 303). In Michel Tournier’s retelling of Robinson Crusoe, for example, ‘The Other presides over the organization of the world into objects and over the transitive relations of these objects’ (1990, p. 312); but the pervert is ‘someone who introduces desire into an entirely different system and makes it play, within this system, the role of an internal limit, a virtual center or zero point (the well-known Sadean apathy). The pervert is no more a desiring self than the Other is, for him, a desired object endowed with real existence’ (p. 304). Rather, having deviated or diverged with respect to aims, as in the classic Freudian definition of the drives in ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes,’ the pervert unleashes ‘an ethereal double of each thing,’ which serves as the vehicle of radical impersonalization (p. 312). This ‘ethereal double’ is none other than the ‘virtual object’ or objet a, which floats unbound from any referent; it escapes repression through sublimation and affixes itself like a barnacle to the phenomenological object, marking its ‘internal limit.’ Perversion thus names the introduction of this ‘virtual object,’ which, though it is the only true object of desire, is by definition unobtainable, into an entirely different system of objects. Hence, in the famous example from Lacan, we read: ‘for the moment, I am not fucking, I am talking to you. Well! I can have exactly the same satisfaction as if I were fucking. That’s what it means. Indeed, it raises the question of whether in fact I am not fucking at this moment’ (1998, pp. 165–166). At the impersonal level of the drives, any object will do. The mouth that speaks incarnates the virtual object as a satisfying absence, just as the island without others in Tournier’s novel incarnates ‘ethereal doubles’ released from bodies: ‘we are tempted to conclude,’ Deleuze writes, ‘that bodies are but detours to the attainment of Images [virtual objects, ethereal doubles], and that sexuality reaches its goal much better and much more promptly to the extent that it economizes this detour and addresses itself directly to Images and to the Elements freed from bodies’ (1990, p. 313). Despite Deleuze’s preference for ‘desert sexuality,’ we may note that since the sexuality in question here only achieves its goal through the deviance or detour of ‘shipwreck,’ or ‘catastrophe,’ that the elements and images released from bodies are not only aliquid but liquid – borne by liquid sexuality. Indeed, if the ‘Other-structure’ grounds our perception of objects, it is the liquid element that sets us off course. What Deleuze is theorizing here from a perverse angle is the ‘oceanic feeling’ posited by Freud, or primary narcissism. The self-satisfaction that one attains in primary narcissism is unhinged (virtualized) from its object and, through sublimation, repeated without censor (Freud’s famous example in adults is that of the ‘anal character,’ which repeats the infantile eroticism of the anal drive – the retention of feces – through acts of parsimony).

Alaimo’s contention that we are expressions of the world’s becoming resembles Freud’s ‘oceanic feeling’ as well, but only insofar as Freud later repurposed primary narcissism from what it originally was in his writings – a perverse state of deviation and divergence from objects – and redefined it in terms that are patently relational: from the
radically deviational partial drives, the late Freud redefined primary narcissism as the ‘feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole.’ It is this idealized version of primary narcissism that allows Freud to represent object-love as a developmental achievement, at once nostalgic and moralistic, because it restores a prior state of relationality: blue pastoral.

We should recall what Lacan, ever an astute reader of Freud, says about the pastoral genre: ‘The domain of the pastoral is never absent from civilization; it never fails to offer itself as a solution to the latter’s discontents’ (1992, p. 88). If Freud offers the ‘oceanic’ as a solution to civilization’s discontents, that is perhaps only to mask an earlier, and for Freud far more disturbing version of the ‘oceanic feeling’ that contains, in Lacan’s words, the ‘evil’ – that is to say, the nonameliorative and nonredemptive – core of Freudian ethics. Again, Lacan is our guide here:

My egoism is quite content with a certain altruism, altruism of the kind that is situated on the level of the useful. And it even becomes the pretext by means of which I can avoid taking up the problem of the evil I desire, and that my neighbor desires also. . .. It is a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own. That doesn’t cost much. (1992, p. 187)

In Lacan’s retelling of narcissism, the love that causes ‘the boundary between ego and object ... to melt away’ under normal narcissism is achievable only insofar it ‘doesn’t cost much,’ that is, insofar as it preserves the ego ideal, or ‘the good of others in the image of my own.’ This version of narcissism, while it risks a dissolved ego, recovers the ‘good’ of the self in hyper-humanist terms: as both loving and intersubjective. It would not be a far cry to say that the ‘oceanic feeling’ sweeping the humanities today shares not only this same mode of dissolution and redemption, but also the same aesthetic morality. Our narcissism is entirely content with the image of ourselves as bounded together with the environment so long as the image of humanity as essentially loving, caring, and world-affirming persists. On this point, Claire Colebrook lands a decisive blow: ‘To say, as eco-feminists do, that we are essentially world-oriented and placed in a relation of care and concern to a world that is always place rather than meaningless space is to repeat the (masculine) reduction of the world to its sense for us. The problem, despite our protestations, is that we do not care. All the shrill protestations of proper care and connectedness maintain the anthropocentric alibi’ (Colebrook, 2014, pp. 10–11).

There is, however, a ‘minor’ narcissism. In what is considered a watershed moment in the history of psychoanalysis, ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction,’ Freud dives into aquatic origins to deliver an image of primary narcissism that is not the image of being ‘one with the external world as a whole,’ not ‘trans-corporeally’ attuned to the world’s becoming, but solipsistic and indifferent. Whereas in ‘normal narcissism’ one ‘still retains relations to people and things,’ albeit ‘in phantasy,’ that does not hold true in every case; consider the ‘paraphrenic’: ‘He seems,’ Freud writes, ‘really to have withdrawn his libido from people and things in the external world, without replacing them by others in phantasy. When he does so replace them, the process seems to be a secondary one and to be part of an attempt at recovery’ (1914, p. 74). What Freud is outlining here is a transcendental analysis of narcissism.
Beneath the self and its attachments, Freud reveals an inhuman figure that, while it may resemble the tentacular figure of ‘trans-corporeality,’ turns that figure on its head by formalizing the idea of a non-relational relation:

Thus we form the idea of there being an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to the object-cathexes much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out. (1914, p. 74)

We’ve gotten used to the Actor-Networks of Latour’s socially embedded ANT; to the Whiteheadian prehensile ‘occasion’; and to the endless ‘entanglements’ of the Cthulucene. But do we yet have a framework for understanding Freud’s inhuman amoeba with its pseudopodia? Indeed, what makes this underwater figure inhuman is not only its nonhuman corporeality, but also the fact that Freud’s amoeba, unlike the other aforementioned figures, is not out to remake the world. It is rather Freud’s great discovery that, in the beginning, when all is deep, humanity emerges as but the secondary effect of a primary, narcissistic, and cytoplasmic movement of ‘turning away from the external world.’ Not even the ‘shy, retiring octopuses that squirt out a dissembling ink as they withdraw into the ontological shadows’ in Morton’s Object-Oriented Ontology quite capture the disorientation of Freud’s image (Morton, 2013, pp. 3–4). For it is not merely the case that beings exist in isolation in Freud – as readymade objects; far more radically, Freud posits a non-relation (or the autotelic ‘turning away’ from objects) that only happens via relations: in other words, it is my narcissistic attachment to the object that brings the outside (the virtual object) ‘home’ to thought.

More than any other theorist in the psychoanalytic landscape, Leo Bersani has done the most to clarify the importance of this self-reflexive movement in Freud. I quote Bersani’s reading of ‘On Narcissism’ at length:

The concept of narcissism can be thought of as an extension of [Freud’s] definition [of autoeroticism]. It is as if the inherently solipsistic nature of sexuality – and its correlative indifference to object and to organ specificity – allowed for a development of autoeroticism in which the source of pleasure and, consequently, the object of desire became the very experience of ébranlement or self-shattering. The need to repeat that experience can be thought of as an originary sublimation, as the first deflection of the sexual instinct from an object-fixated activity to another, “higher” aim. “Higher” here, however, would have no connotation whatsoever of reparation or restitution; instead it signifies a primitive but immensely significant move from fragmented objects to totalities, a move taking place at this stage as a form of self-reflexiveness. … In this self-reflexive move, a pleasurably shattered consciousness becomes aware of itself as the object of its desire. To repeat the activity of an eroticized consciousness becomes a new sexual aim. (Bersani, 1990, p. 37)

In primary narcissism, that is, a sexualized consciousness becomes the very object of an objectless jouissance. Or, to quote Bersani again: ‘The ego, at its origin, would be nothing more than a kind of passionate inference necessitated by the anticipated pleasure of its own dismantling’ (p. 38). Freud’s amoeba could thus be called ‘trans-corporeal’ only in a highly restricted sense, since the amoeba becomes so only by turning away from people and things. It is by turning away, by way of cata-strophe, or shipwreck, that one releases an ‘ethereal double,’ Freud’s ‘higher’ aim, which is by definition outside worldly relations – always excessive, errant, and indifferent to the organs and objects of sense.

Freud himself turned away in horror from the implications of his theory of primary narcissism, later revising it as the ‘oceanic feeling’ and substituting a blue pastoral for
the catastrophe of perverse doubles: images without bodies. Deleuze, for his part, remained faithful to Freud’s first theory of primary narcissism and even found evidence in it for a transcendental analysis of time in *Difference and Repetition*:

There is beatitude associated with passive synthesis, and we are all Narcissus in virtue of the pleasure (auto-satisfaction) we experience in contemplating, even though we contemplate things quite apart from ourselves. We are always Actaeon by virtue of what we contemplate, even though we are Narcissus in relation to the pleasure we take from it. To contemplate is to draw something from. We must always first contemplate something else – the water, or Diana, or the woods – in order to be filled with an image of ourselves. (1994, pp. 74–75)

We know what happens to Actaeon. In Ovid’s version of events, the hunter becomes the hunted after he is changed by Diana into a stag and pursued and killed by his hounds. If this is ‘beatitude,’ in Deleuze’s words, then we are a long distance away from Freud’s saccharine ‘feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole.’ Indeed, ‘becoming-animal,’ although it is often embraced within ecological and ‘new materialist’ circles in order to champion a paradisiacal interconnectedness with all things, here refers to a primary masochism of the drives – Deleuze will call them ‘contemplative souls’ or micro-egos, ‘these thousands of little witnesses which contemplate within us’ – akin to Actaeon’s erotic dismemberment and Bersani’s ‘pleasurably shattered consciousness’ (1994, p. 75). We are now in a position to fully appreciate Freud’s mandate in ‘On Narcissism,’ that with respect to early human development, ‘we are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed’ (pp. 76–77). We are (and will be) bound, and yet also wildly unbound. Freud states: ‘The auto-erotic instincts … are there from the very first; so there must be something added to auto-eroticism – a new psychological action – in order to bring about narcissism’ (p. 77). This ‘new psychical action,’ according to Deleuze, is none other than ‘habit,’ the habit of saying ‘I.’ Throughout Deleuze’s vast body of work, he will insist on this new psychical action (in *Cinema 2*, for instance, he critiques Andre Bazin’s definition of Italian neo-realism, which posits ‘a new form of reality,’ by stating that it is ‘rather at the level of the “mental,” in terms of thought’ that the new upheavals in cinema are to be addressed [Deleuze, 1989b, p. 1]) as the habitual *binding* of the autoerotic drives: ‘Underneath the self which acts are little selves which contemplate and which render possible both the action and the active subject … [It is always a third party who says “me”]’ (1994, p. 75). Going beyond Freud’s interest in human development, Deleuze will extend the ‘new psychical action’ of primary narcissism into the furthest reaches of deep time, all the way to the very composition of the elements: ‘What organism,’ Deleuze asks, ‘is not made of elements and cases of repetition, of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby intertwining all the habits of which it is composed’ (p. 75)? In the epoch of the Anthropocene, when deep time presses inexorably on the present, Deleuze’s ‘intertwining’ of organic and inorganic repetitions (‘habits’ of contemplation) appears uncannily in season.

What should be clear is that this ‘new psychical action’ (the self-reflexive movement described by Bersani) is anything but human, lest we fear a return to mind-body dualism. The mind that binds excitations in primary narcissism is the same mind that contracts ‘water, nitrogen,’ and ‘carbon.’ If there is dualism in Deleuze, it is elsewhere: between repetition that binds (Eros) and repetition that unbinds (Thanatos). If the first repetition finds its mythic avatar in Narcissus, that is because ‘We must always first contemplate something else … in order to be filled with an image of ourselves.’ To endure the masochism of the drives, or
rather to repeat (as Bersani suggests) the pleasurable masochism of the drives, primary narcissism intervenes to provide ‘an image of ourselves’ as surplus satisfaction or ‘ethereal double’; this image will persist in the absence of any object and will inaugurate a perverse detour: adventures in object-land, where each new object is but a simulacrum (albeit an exalted one) of past pleasures. Whereas Eros ‘makes its presence felt’ in experience, ‘Thanatos, the ground-less, supported and brought to the surface by Eros, remains essentially silent and all the more terrible. Thanatos is; it is an absolute’ (1989a, p. 116). What is Thanatos, exactly? According to Deleuze, it is the empty form of time, time that is unbound and ‘no longer “rhymed”’ – splintered by ‘caesura’ (1994, p. 89). We encounter the empty form of time in Hamlet’s phrase, ‘The time is out of joint’:

It is as though time had abandoned all possible mnemonic content, and in so doing had broken the circle into which it was lead by Eros. It is as though it had unrolled, straightened itself and assumed the ultimate shape of the labyrinth, the straight-line labyrinth which is, as Borges says, “invisible, incessant.” Time empty and out of joint, with its rigorous formal and static order, its crushing unity and its irreversible series, is precisely the death instinct. (1994, p. 111)

At the height of repetition, one finds that one’s images and all the various doubles, personas, and masks cast in the role of embodying those images are contaminated by a crack, ‘silent and . . . terrible.’ It is the same crack that, in primary narcissism, detached a ‘virtual object’ from its referent. For Deleuze, what matters is not the ‘circle,’ not the endless finding and re-finding of objects by Eros, since more doubtful than the status of the ‘object’; rather, it is the ‘broken . . . circle,’ a kind of ‘static order’ or denarrativized temporality, that defines the ‘death instinct.’ The death instinct, or crack, always stays in its place, despite the many figures that come to occupy it. This is not an accidental crack, one that could be repaired in time; but a world cracked to its foundations by time: Earth shattered.

The names associated with this empty form of time are several. Deleuze summons Freud, Hölderlin, Marx, and Proust to explicate the inexplicable ‘caesura.’ The one name whose thought catalyzes and makes possible the insights of all the others, however, is Descartes.

It is as though Descartes’s Cogito operated with two logical values: determination and undetermined existence. The determination (I think) implies an undetermined existence (I am, because “in order to think one must exist”) – and determines it precisely as the existence of a thinking subject: I think therefore I am, I am a thing which thinks. The entire Kantian critique amounts to objecting against Descartes that it is impossible for determination to bear directly upon the undetermined. The determination (“I think”) obviously implies something undetermined (“I am”), but nothing so far tells us how it is that this undetermined is determinable by the “I think.” (pp. 85–86)

The problem is one of time: how can thought catch itself in the act of thinking? It is rather like a dog trying to catch its own tail, only worse: the ‘I’ has no point of reference, neither subject nor object, but only a groundless ground of pure difference. We’re back to the ‘new psychical action’ of Freud. Everything comes down to how we interpret the interval in Descartes’s famous formula, ‘I think therefore I am.’ According to Kant, Descartes’s mistake was to leave time out of the equation; he took an undetermined existence (‘I am’) and made it into an absolute cause (‘I am a thing that thinks’). Kant’s Copernican Revolution was to see the ‘I am’ as an effect of time. The consequences of this are extreme,’ Deleuze writes. ‘My undetermined existence can be determined only
within time as the existence of a phenomenon, of a passive, receptive phenomenal subject appearing within time. As a result, the spontaneity of which I am conscious in the “I think” cannot be understood as the attribute of a substantial and spontaneous being. ... Here begins a long and inexhaustible story: I is another (p. 86). Just as every object of thought is marked by an invisible caesura, so too must the self be constituted in this way, as nothing more than a ‘passionate inference’ built on the disjecta membra of time. Although Descartes tried to ground the ‘I think’ on the plane of the indubitable, his greatest contribution to modern thought is the catastrophe of an ‘aborted cogito’ (p. 110), one that not only turns thought away from the constituted world by doubting every appearance but, when pushed to its limit, thinks its own self-fracture. Descartes makes the experience of being shattered by time the originary and perhaps highly pleasurable movement of thought. Mad world, meet a mad Cogito.

Let us return once more to Alaimo’s question, ‘Who is the “anthro” of the “anthropocene?”’ Dipesh Chakrabarty raises a similar question regarding abstract man. In ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses,’ Chakrabarty asserts the importance of ‘species thinking’ for framing the consequences of climate change, consequences which make sense only if we think of humans as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life on this planet (p. 213). Chakrabarty concludes his essay by acknowledging the difficulty of intuiting the terms of his argument. For not only is the ‘biological-sounding talk of species’ worrisome to those concerned with the social aspects of history, it also ‘stretches, in quite fundamental ways, the very idea of historical understanding’ (p. 214, 220). Thus Chakrabarty asks:

Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. ... Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept. (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 220)

I would like to consider briefly Chakrabarty’s claim, that against all intellection, ‘one never experiences being a concept.’ For, in some strong sense, what I want to say in this paper is precisely the opposite, or rather the inversion of what Chakrabarty says: that if the history of the Anthropocene (and not only what goes under the name of anthropos) teaches us anything at all, is that ‘we’ experience ourselves above all as a concept, detached by our ‘virtual objects’ and set off course from the world – a world that has never been ‘one.’ This is Deleuze’s basic point about narcissism: that behind every object, there is a virtual object or double animating ‘our’ desire – a desire that is split, fractured, and riddled by error. The question is not, nor has it ever been, how to overcome Descartes’s error. Instead of theorizing Cartesian man as a tragedy, one that befell life, it might be better to approach the history of the Cogito obliquely, in the manner of Shakespeare and Deleuze: that is, as a comedy of errors.

Narcissus unbound

Thomas H. Luxon has written persuasively on the dangers inherent in the ‘trans-corporeal’ unity of twins in Shakespeare’s The Comedy of Errors. And while ‘trans-corporeal’ is not Luxon’s turn of phrase, he uses the nearly identical language of ‘one flesh,’ derived from
Genesis, to illustrate the binding unity of self and other that Renaissance humanist writers believed defined the relationship between husband and wife. In marriage, that is, husband and wife are made ‘one flesh,’ and this ‘flesh’ becomes the vehicle for self-knowledge and narrative resolution in Shakespeare’s comedies. Or not: what Luxon shows in fact is that nothing is less certain than the supposed resolution of identity by marital flesh. Adriana’s misdirected speech to Antipholus of S. makes this point perfectly clear: both scholarly and comedic by turns, Adriana upbraids Antipholus of Syracuse, whom she mistakes for her neglectful husband, Antipholus of Ephesus, on the grounds of their ‘one flesh’:

Ay, ay, Antipholus, look strange and frown:
Some other mistress hath thy sweet aspects;
I am not Adriana, nor thy wife.
The time was once when thou unurged wouldst vow
That never words were music to thine ear,
That never object pleasing in thine eye,
That never touch well welcome to thy hand,
That never meat sweet-savoured in thy taste,
Unless I spake, or looked, or touched, or carved to thee. (2.2.116–124)

The conceptual chiasmus of Adriana’s rhetoric is stunning, and for several reasons: not only does a ‘strange’ or unfamiliar ‘look’ on the part of Antipholus provoke the possibility of self-negation on the part of Adriana (‘I am not Adriana, nor thy wife’), who should, by the logic of the flesh, command the same ‘sweet aspects’ that were once apparent on Antipholus’s face, and that, being missing, could perhaps be with ‘Some other mistress’; but also time becomes important both as nostalgia (‘The time was once when’) and as a condition of self-reflexivity: such mirror play suggests that ‘ear,’ ‘eye,’ ‘hand,’ and ‘taste,’ which are only grammatically Antipholus’s, were once indistinguishable from the voice, look, and touch of Adriana. The ‘one flesh’ theory of marriage makes each ‘one’ the being and becoming of the other. However, as we saw with Descartes, so too with Shakespeare: time splinters the mirror-play of Adriana’s language along so many cracked edges. Do we not hear in Adriana speech a wish, beyond the manifest argument for self-sameness, for that something more that has no home in the other, or in the self? There is, in Adriana’s speech, a prescient account of the Lacanian theory of the partial object: the ear, eye, hand, and mouth (each a little objet a), which float between ‘I’ and ‘thine’ and make a mess of her lover’s discourse. Or do we not detect Deleuze’s revision of the Lacanian partial object as ‘ethereal double,’ which, being lodged in the other, derails any clear separation of what ‘in’ the other ‘I’ enjoy? After all, it could just be myself. The point I want to make is that despite the ‘transcorporeality’ of Adriana’s speech, or rather because of it, the ‘sweet’ narcissism we’re given (what could stand for ‘normal narcissism’ in Freud’s sense) risks the very shipwreck, or failure of identity, that Adriana seeks to avoid. And this is not only so because Adriana is mistaken about the identity of her husband. Mistakes can be corrected, errors fixed. No. Shakespeare’s understanding of the madness at play here runs far deeper. The real risk is that of primary narcissism, which, though it binds individuals in ways that could be called ‘oceanic’ (witness the binding of Egeon, his wife and twins at the start of the play: ‘My wife, more careful for the latter-born,/Had fastened him unto a small spare mast,’ ‘To him one of the other twins was bound’ [1.1.78–79, 81]), does so only to break those bonds asunder. Hence, although Adriana, in this early and important speech, seeks to set wrong to right, and to make sense of her ‘one flesh,’ the image we’re given is not one of self-knowledge (even in
its nostalgic aspect); the image is that of an objectless jouissance, precisely the image that Shakespeare’s marriage plot is supposed to prevent. Or is it?

‘Shakespeare’s comedies,’ Luxon writes, ‘often appear to promote heterosexual marriage as the quintessential comic remedy for, or harmonic resolution of, whatever chaotic topsey-turveydom the world may dish out’ (2001, p. 47). Luxon erects this ‘accepted orthodoxy’ only to knock it down a few lines later. ‘Not everyone,’ he objects, ‘is prepared to agree that all of the comedies fully resolve or contain every disturbance or threatened subversion with marriage’ (p. 47). It may be just the opposite: marriage, and the ‘one flesh’ theory it posits, may in fact be an elaborate way of sustaining, through the errors and delays of the marriage plot, the highly pleasurable (if also intolerable) ‘subversion’ of identity by other means. That is to say: marriage may be a tautology for the narcissistic masochism outlined above. What if marriage, for all of its postponements of ‘harmonic resolution,’ provided the detour (and by no means the only one) traveled by these plays to get to the other side of the ‘one flesh’ relation, to the perverse non-relation of an objectless jouissance? To put this in Deleuzian terms, marriage (Eros), though it may govern the binding operations of Shakespeare’s comedies, disclosing the self through the ‘trans-corporeality’ of the flesh, does not (nor can it) master all of the ‘chaotic’ energies repeated in these plays; it may even prolong them (Thanatos).

We need only think of Egeon’s speech at the start of The Comedy of Errors, wherein the seafarer’s quest to find his lost wife and lost son dovetails with the wish ‘to procure’ his ‘fall./And by the doom of death end woes and all’ (1.1.1–2). It is as if Egeon, having failed to reunite his ‘one flesh’ by the play’s beginning, turns to the next best option – the all-inclusive marriage with death: ‘Yet this my comfort: when your words are done,/My woes end likewise with the evening sun’ (1.1.26–27). When words are done: nothing in Egeon’s speech suggests that this happy ending – the end of language – is soon to come, since it is the very nature of storytelling to leave things unsaid. As Egeon exclaims shortly thereafter, ‘O, let me say no more!/Gather the sequel by that went before’ (1.1.94–95). The Duke, however, demands more; as figure of ‘law’ in the play, the Duke echoes the sadistic logic of Deleuze’s philosopher in the bedroom, i.e. Sade, whose impossible demands showcase the perverse underside of a law whose only imperative is to repeat without self-interest. Thus, the Duke responds, ‘Nay, forward, old man; do not break off so’ (1.1.96). But he already has broken off, and will continue to ‘break off so,’ artfully splitting ‘fall’ into ‘all,’ and ‘happy’ into ‘hap,’ breaking words open and ‘seek[ing] delays’ in the narrative of his quest (1.1.74). Egeon repeats in this way the scene of a shipwreck: not just the one we all know, the one he recounts, when ‘Our helpful ship was splitted in the midst,’ but a language wrecked – constitutively so – on the ‘rock’ of ‘griefs unspeakable’ (1.1.103, 101, 32). Egeon’s ‘comfort,’ put differently, has as little to do with the ‘all’ of encompassing death, when the ‘words are done,’ as it has to do with the ‘all’ of marriage, when two parts are made ‘one flesh’; Egeon’s true ‘comfort,’ as the Duke only half sees, is the detour by which each ‘one,’ each object of desire, is repeatedly cracked open: ‘f/all,’ for example, or ‘hap/py.’ This is not the end of language, but language brought to a stutter (what Deleuze calls ‘inclusive disjunction’). Read in this way, in the minor style of Deleuze, Shakespeare’s The Comedy of Errors suggests a radical alternative to the unifying ‘flesh’ of the marriage plot: it demands that we read the ‘one flesh’ tortuously, as a way of cracking-up.
One of the ways Shakespeare’s comedy delays the ‘harmonic resolution’ of chaos is through the twin plot. Like the ‘one flesh’ theory of marriage, twins proposed a similar unity of self and other, or self and ‘second self,’ and much of the dramatic tension of Shakespeare’s play derives from the twins being ‘two in one.’ Twins ‘are linked by birth and blood, even sprung from the same ovum,’ Luxon writes. (p. 51). Although Shakespeare’s play begins narratively with Egeon’s story of shipwreck and family dispersal, the twin plot begins retrospectively in the amniotic space of the mother’s womb, where the twins are literally ‘two in one’ flesh. As Egeon relates, ‘the one [twin] so like the other/As could not be distinguished but by names’ (1.1.51–52). The play’s shipwreck narrative, then, is already the second of its kind, the first being the separation and departure of the twins from their original ‘trans-corporeal’ and sea-like state. Yet because of the twins ‘one flesh,’ their narrative of shipwreck also serves to dramatize the extreme ambivalences of marriage. As Luxon explains, ‘Shakespeare’s The Comedy of Errors borrows the structure of a Plautine twin comedy – Menaechmi – to probe the contradictions and uncomfortable corollaries implied by these competing discourses of the other selfhood’ (p. 50). These ‘contradictions and uncomfortable corollaries’ are none other than those we have theorized under narcissism. In other words, what is made thinkable in the twin comedy is a non-relational relation, or a relation of supposed equals (one and one) in which there is no relation at all. ‘Identical twins present another sort of extreme case,’ Luxon observes, and ‘offer a limit case of the concept of a second self’ (p. 51). To be clear: the ‘second self’ promises two selves in one flesh, each reciprocally bound to, and bounded by, the other. The twin comedy pushes this doctrine of inter-subjectivity ‘to the asymptotic limit of absolute sameness; an absolute sameness that threatens to expose some of the problematic of identity’ (p. 51). Luxon writes:

At what point does loving one’s twin friend become exactly like loving one’s self? Does similarity of body guarantee similarity of soul, or virtue? Won’t such a friendship slide inevitably into narcissism? The more completely one’s friend meets the requirements of similarity and other selfhood, the more friendship risks appearing as a kind of sanctioned narcissism. (p. 51)

True: Shakespeare’s play courts this risk. And nowhere more so than in the exchange between Adriana and the ‘Good Doctor Pinch’:

Courtesan [to Adriana]: How say you now? Is not your husband mad?
Adriana: His incivility confirms no less.
– Good Doctor Pinch, you are a conjuror:
Establish him in his true sense again,
And I will please you what you will demand.

Pinch: Mistress, both man and master is possessed:
I know it by their pale and deadly looks.
They must be bound and laid in some dark room.

Adriana: O, bind him, bind him! Let him not come near me! (4.4.46–50; 93–95; 107)
Of course, we need not be Foucaultian to recognize that the ‘Good Doctor Pinch,’ whose name is linked etymologically to ‘pincer,’ thus conjuring the image of tools used to torture the flesh (in this case, to put the flesh back in its proper shape as ‘one’), is a cross between the medical gaze (though an odd one at that – ‘conjuror’?) and disciplinary apparatus, with Antipholus of Ephesus (Adriana’s husband) being a kind of proto ‘Damiens the regicide.’ Only the king in question here is what we might call inner sense. Pinch is called on to restore Ephesus’s ‘true sense,’ and thus we are reminded of a certain lesson from Foucault: that ‘the soul is the prison of the body’ (1995, p. 30). Pinch, as his name would suggest, proposes to manacle ‘both man and master’ – ‘They must be bound’ – and so reminds us of at least two things: (1) that we’ve been here before (Antipholus of E. and Dromio were ‘bound’ to a ‘mast’ at the start of the play); and (2) that the risk of ‘sanctioned narcissism’ is precisely bound up in this return to ‘true sense.’

The binding of the play’s chaotic energies, which Adriana herself clamors for (‘O, bind him, bind him!’), depends not only on a return to ‘true sense’ but on a return to aquatic origins, which the play figures repeatedly as a kind of narcissistic interconnectedness, from Antipholus of Syracuse’s ‘drop of water’ speech to Adriana’s:

How comes it now, my husband, O, how comes it,
That thou art then estranged from thyself?
‘Thyself’ I call it, being strange to me
That, undivisible, incorporate,
Am better than thy dear self’s better part.
Ah, do not tear away thyself from me!
For know, my love: as easy mayst thou fall
A drop of water in the breaking gulf,
And take unmingled thence that drop again
Without addition or diminishing,
As take from me thyself, and not me, too. (2.2.125–135)

The beauty of Adriana’s speech is commensurate with its impossible logic: ‘undivisible’? On the one hand, the Adriana who later shouts (sadistically) ‘O, bind him, bind him’ is the same Adriana who, in the lines above, reminds her husband of the ‘undivisible’ nature of their ‘one flesh.’ Being ‘undivisible’ is (paradoxically) the route to self-knowledge (‘me’ = ‘thyself’). On the other hand, this ‘self’ contains multitudes. If Adriana and her husband are ‘one flesh,’ so too are Adriana and her sister, Luciana, Egeon and his wife, Emilia, and the twins, Antipholus of S. and E., all one flesh. Undivisible? The binding of Ephesus seems little more than a path toward further division. What’s more, Adriana’s admonition, ‘For know, my love’ echoes the very same point we observed above, that nothing is less certain than object-knowledge in matters of love; Adriana’s love-object, by her own logic, is endlessly (narcissistically) divisible – without her knowing it. Whereas Luxon sees the threat of this division avoided, the ‘specters of incest (both hetero- and homoerotic) and narcissism’ finally, if ‘only just barely,’ put to rest by the end of the play, we are inclined to disagree: the true threat haunting Shakespeare’s play isn’t narcissism, at least not the minor narcissism we’ve excavated, but rather the pinched or pincerlike subject, who, like Adriana, like Pinch himself, binds differences into ‘one,’ ‘undivisible,’ ‘trans-corporeal’ flesh.

With Deleuze, we can see these binding operations, reflected in the play’s unities of action, place, and time (Aristotle’s rules for drama in the Poetics, which, of all of
Shakespeare’s plays, only *The Comedy of Errors* follows), as little more than *pleats, folds,* or ‘drops’ accumulating at the edges of a thought that ‘comes from outside,’ that addresses itself to an ‘outside,’ to that ‘impossibility of thinking which doubles or hollows out the outside’: madness (Deleuze, 1988, p. 97). In his *Foucault* book, Deleuze reads the ship of fools as exemplary of this inside/outside paradox, of the non-relation at the heart of thought. Deleuze writes: ‘in all his work Foucault seems haunted by this theme of an inside which is merely the fold of the outside, as if the ship were a folding of the sea’ (p. 97). Let us conclude by comparing the additions and subtractions of Adriana’s ‘drop of water’ speech to the foldings of Antipholus of S.’s:

\[
\text{I to the world am like a drop of water}
\text{That in the ocean seeks another drop;}
\text{Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,}
\text{Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself. (1.2.33–38)}
\]

The desire for return, for an end to wandering, to error, takes many different forms in Shakespeare’s play depending on the character: death in the case of Egeon, reason in the case of Adriana. Antipholus of S.’s speech, however, though it resounds with melancholy, contains nothing of Adriana’s belief in the indivisibility of objects, nor does it suggest the related belief that (in the words of Freud) ‘We cannot fall out of this world.’ For what Antipholus of Syracuse shows, unwittingly perhaps, is that, in narcissism, or in love, we are always ‘falling’ out of the world in our own fashion, ‘Unseen,’ and confounded. Antipholus of S.’s speech gives witness to an impersonal narcissism in which the relation between self and other is folded around a non-relation, lapse, or fall, what Deleuze, writing against ‘the sedentary distributions of analogy’ (the pinched subject), calls ‘the extremity of difference’: ‘This “Everything is equal” and this “Everything returns” can be said only at the point at which the extremity of difference is reached,’ Deleuze writes (1994, p. 304). ‘A single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, … on condition that each drop, each drop and each voice has reached the state of excess [emphasis added]’ (p. 304). This ‘excess,’ or this difference in-itself, is what keeps the world of univocal matter (including the world of each ‘drop’) from closing in on itself, and what sets each ‘drop’ on its perverse course of ‘falling’ in/outside the world, one object at a time.

I began this essay by asking what a Blue Humanities would look like that took seriously the non-relation as a starting point for thought. If this all sounds like cold comfort, a dash of cold water, that is because the idiot of Cartesian science, like Freud’s narcissus, Shakespeare’s twins, and Deleuze’s pervert, repeats a fundamental absence as his true source of satisfaction.\(^7\) Disappointment, in other words, is integral to pleasure. We are all Actaeon, Deleuze tells us. So while I do not wish to advance a Blue Humanities devoid of satisfaction (far from it), I do see it as vital to the ecocritical endeavor that ‘we’ see our entanglements with loss, negativity, and self-fracture and recognize those experiences as primary, not simply the unfortunate accident of the dialectic of reason. Because like it or not, ‘we’ are always calculating on loss: how much can I waste, or how much can I consume before ‘the end of the world,’ which has always already happened, catches up with me? For a Blue Humanities worthy of being ‘blue,’ that calculation begins in the absence of ‘our’ world, with the idiot who, uncertain of his existence, his future, wills the absurd.
Notes

1. For representative works in the Blue Humanities, see Alaimo (2016), Brayton (2012), Deloughrey (2017), Duckert (2017), Joy (2013), Mentz (2015), Probyn (2016), and Yaeger (2010). I would like to acknowledge the shipwrecked and melancholy ecocriticism of Mentz and Joy, without which the present essay would be unthinkable.

2. I am referring to Descartes’ method of radical doubt in the Meditations, in which even the philosopher’s body is subject to the thought of inexistence.

3. Barad: ‘In this radical reworking of nature/culture [i.e. agential realism], there is no outside of nature from which to act; there are only “acts of nature”’ (Barad, 2012, p. 47).

4. Freud: ‘The highest phase of development of which the object-libido is capable is seen in the state of being in love, when the subject seems to give up his own personality in favor of an object-cathexis’ (Freud, 1914, p. 76).

5. To clarify: Lacan does not deny the ubiquity of relations, only the presence of sexual relations. In other words, what sexuality pertains to in the other is a nonobject, and that can only be achieved through a non-relational relation, epitomized by Lacan’s statement: ‘I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the objet petit a – I mutilate you’ (1998, p. 268). I pursue a similar line of thought with regard to ecological relations and Deleuze.

6. See Foucault’s lengthy description of the torture and execution of Damiens in Discipline and Punish (pp. 3–6).

7. As Freud argues in ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ the melancholic repeats the relation to the lost object not with any goal in mind of repairing or letting go but because he derives unconscious satisfaction from the repetition of loss.

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Notes on contributor

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