

Getting Next to You: Pardlo and Exhausting the Self

“Negation is a structure that humbles most.”
—Gregory Pardlo

The Dialogues

I first read Gregory Pardlo in a state of high anxiety. I had received a dinner invitation as a new faculty member on campus. I knew that Greg was a visiting professor. I knew parts of his résumé but had no detailed knowledge of his writing. Greg, to me, was the guy with the *Prize*. My initial feeling was that in order to go to this dinner I had to read everything he had ever written. I’m not sure exactly where this feeling came from. My office on campus was in the library, a few steps away from row after row of bookshelves. Between the internet and those shelves, I cobbled together a reading list. That was fall, 2022. I was a baby in the institution and young in my professional life. Trying to read everything Greg had ever written *before* that introductory dinner was my first major failure in the new job. It had occurred to me that only an insane person would expect you to have read all of their published works before shaking their hand or breaking bread with them for the first time. But this realization had no effect on my behavior. I remember being in my empty campus flat at three in the morning, munching dry granola and working through his verses. I watched a reading of one of Greg’s poems that he had given to an online gathering, and found myself staring out the window, saying the phrase “more prosthesis than portmanteau” in my head over and over.

The next evening, I knocked on the Pardlos' door with not one word of Greg's poetry or prose reliably fixed in my head. The little sleep I'd gotten had done nothing but cleanse my memory of everything I'd managed to read. I thought of myself then as a writer who happens to do philosophy, although my academic credentials would probably put things the other way around: my Ph.D. is in philosophy. And philosophers are supposed to be clever. They are supposed to have deep and mysterious capacities that allow them to chew up and digest mere poems with relative ease. Maybe my anxiety had something to do with my own strange route to the philosopher's vocation. I'm from Flint, Michigan, I studied music before philosophy or sociology, and I took my doctorate at the Polish Academy of Sciences, for reasons intellectual, geopolitical, and amorous.

On the right side of the Pardlos' living room was a large bookshelf, and at the end of the shelf was a huge volume of the Platonic dialogues. A big, fat edition with the letters P L A T O screaming across the spine. As I went around the room, shaking hands, learning and forgetting names, I heard this book, from its place on the shelf, mocking me. The *Dialogues* flapped their paper tongues, saying, "You are not special. Everyone knows the Word. You have no secrets." It's possible that in literary life, or in the life of the mind broadly, there are only a few core anxieties, which constantly morph and reiterate themselves. Here are two: inauthenticity, what's sometimes called imposter syndrome, and banality, what we might call the lack of a (distinctive) voice. I remember the conversation I had that evening with Greg's wife, Ginger. She told me about Greg's way of leaving touches of his creative self in whatever he does. Ginger implied that she was a different *kind* of person, one for whom creative work is something to appreciate from afar. As she spoke, the *Dialogues* sprouted legs and walked over to stand beside me. They sipped a cup of hot tea, something herbal, I'd guess. The *Dialogues* whispered

in my ear: “Listen up. She’s talking about the both of you. Only she’s not *pretending* to be a writer, or philosopher, or ‘thinker,’ or whatever you suppose yourself to be.”

The *Dialogues* had a goatee and a manbun. They talked without moving their jaw and slurped loudly at the tea. Their jaw was big and very chiseled and made me think of all the actors who played Batman except Adam West. I tried to position myself so that the *Dialogues* weren’t in my field of vision, but they kept fluttering their pages over my shoulder. I could feel their papery breath on my neck. They kept at me as we all sat down to eat, enumerating my inadequacies. No one else, it seemed, was paying the *Dialogues* any mind. Luckily, Greg was a fairly quiet, observant figure at the table, more interested in what the conversation wanted to be than his own power to dominate it. He did not, after all, quiz me on his works.

I gave my hosts polite hugs at the end of the night, watching the *Dialogues* leer at me over their shoulders. Since then, I’ve had the opportunity to read Greg’s work under less fraught conditions. I’ve heard him discuss his own texts and those of others, including my own, and I’ve seen him interact with university students. I’ve come to the conclusion that Greg’s intellectual practice gives rise to hybrid texts, not unlike the *Dialogues* themselves, that incorporate achievements aesthetic, conceptual, and theoretical.¹ Another, simplified way of putting the claim is that I take Greg Pardlo to be doing poetry and philosophy at just the same time. His poetry is a music that knows and yet seeks beyond the clashing rhythms of American life. His philosophy aims primarily at a theory of the instantiated self as an inexhaustible reality.

The claim that Gregory Pardlo is a poet and philosopher of the self² can only be explored or defended if we have a

1 I’m inclined to add “political” to this list, but I’m not sure Greg agrees.

2 For formal reasons, I am resisting the reading that there is a philosophical “level” or “interpretation” waiting in the subtext of

notion of what a philosopher is. A poet is a writer of poems. What could a philosopher be? Philosophers are lovers of wisdom. That sounds boring, but it's true. They are not charged with giving an account, a *logos*, of anything. It is not at all obvious what philosophers are meant to study. Similarly, it is not at all obvious *how* poets are meant to write or what they are meant to write about. For a poet, the fields of experience, interpretation, and expression—complete and unabridged—are fair game. In *Totem*, *Digest*, and *Spectral Evidence*, Pardlo writes the sublime into skipped rope, writes the pain of parenthood, writes against the misogynistic erasure of the Black woman, writes his father here and gone, writes his own sobriety, writes Brooklyn, writes a father's love and limitations, writes ectoplasm and bone, spit rum, the policeman's truncheon and descending knee. All of which makes him a poet. All of which he can do *as* a poet. But does any of that make him a philosopher?

Let's take a philosopher to be a participant in a conversation. That conversation can only be loosely defined, but let us say that it is closely associated with something we'll call *wonder*. A philosopher converses from a state of wonder. For me, this wonder is related to a method that attempts to create what Edmund Husserl called a "universe of absolute freedom from prejudice" through an "absolute universal criticism."³ These absolutes are never really attained, but their possibility guides and informs the philosophical work. The rigors of the thinker in the throes of wonder are of a special concern for those who search for philosophy. Wonder helps us avoid the menace of the *Dialogues*.

We'll also need some notion of the self. For this, we could look to Dan Zahavi's *Self and Other*, where he lays out a phenomenology of the self and empathy experience. We could look to Galen Strawson's *Selves*, which asks us if we

Pardlo's work. That's not the claim. I am arguing that the work is both poetry and philosophy at just the same time.

3 See: *Cartesian Meditations*, p. 35.

even know what question we're asking when we ask about the existence of the self. We might look to deconstructionists and post-deconstructionists like Derrida and Homi Bhabha to tell us about the metaphysics of presence, its implications for the self and social struggle. Options abound.

We could look to the lines of "Know Yourselves," a poem in which Pardlo compares the self-inventory prescribed by twelve-step programs with Gramscian theories on critical awareness. The imagination here becomes a "spare self that exists outside of time." Terror and domination become zombifying powers. The self of poetic expression is displaced temporally; it works in an imagined future, resplendent with wisdom, inviting the writer to do better, achieve great depth, to plagiarize freely from moments unborn. The poetry on display is undeniable. What may be less clear is the degree to which "Know Yourselves" is motivated by an explicit theory of the self. The argument in favor of that proposition seems to me decisive. In the poem, Greg asks, "Am I the only person who thinks self-mockery is punching up?" This is not just a clever rhetorical question. The self takes multiple forms, positions, values, and perspectives. The self is also not under our direct control. The self for Pardlo is a historical, political, moral, erotic achievement, engaged in imaginative life, but not constrained by it. Through the imaginative self, other aspects of selfhood can be brought into view, appreciated, discarded, or developed. This makes of the self a structure without a clear boundary, potentially inexhaustible, expanding with the social and cultural fields, quickened and renewed by the dynamism of the imaginative faculty. This is also a self which recognizes the fullness in the other. It is a self that can resist the zombifying powers of racial and gender-based terror, but not alone: to tell our stories, we must "reorient [ourselves] in relation to the stories of others."⁴ But here we have a problem: if our theory of the self makes of it an ever-expanding imaginative horizon, how can anyone ever make *themselves* truly and completely known?

4 *Spectral Evidence*, p. 19.

Motor City

We can think of a poem Greg calls “Problema 3” in the collection, *Digest*. That poem opens by telling us the shoppers at the Fulton Street Foodtown can hear Motown being piped through the store’s speakers. We learn that at least the tune “Baby I Need Your Loving” is played, but is that the only one? Maybe the Temptations’ “Papa was a Rollin’ Stone”; maybe “Mercy Mercy Me”; or “Superstition.” At that first dinner with the Pardlos, there was Motown on the playlist, too. I can’t remember exactly which sounds they chose to match with the evening. Some intuition leads me to dwell on the Temptations’ “I Can’t Get Next to You.” As I read Greg’s poems now, that song rings in my mind’s ear. In the song, the narrator lists all of his supernatural powers. He can turn back the hands of time; he can cause the seasons to change; he can make what is old new; he can buy anything in the world. But despite all of these powers he lacks one ability. He can’t “get next to you.” That impossibility speaks in the driving rhythms of the song, that only relents for a few moments as Eddie Kendricks sings an elongated “I . . .” before the Temptations shout the groove back into being. A thunder-clapping anxiety drives the final section of the tune as it becomes clear musically, and lyrically, that there will be no *resolution* to the song’s multiple tensions. It will end, as it began, with a negation, but a negation that we see enacted right before us, one that is *present*.⁵

But how can this relate to what Greg has written? Between *Totem*, *Digest* and *Spectral Evidence*, he speaks myriad rhythms into being, most of which evade what a lyricist might hope to get into a catchy pop tune. The scope of expression is greater, and categories like exploration and examination—largely absent for structural reasons in even great popular music—drive the poet’s work and become

5 On YouTube, check out a 1969 performance of the Temptations on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Note how hard everyone is working, and the chopping, nervous character of the drum break.

the reader's primary reward. It does no good to search for a more "complex" musical form to compare with his work. We could easily say that the texts are jazz-like, for instance. There is a sense in which this is true. Pardlo's lines sometimes skitter and leap across his pages in the way Clifford Brown plays his trumpet. Listen to Brown, Max Roach, et al. work through "Joy Spring."⁶ Listen to the shifts in intensity throughout Brown's solo, the way he shoots and dances and levitates through the changes. Afterwards, read these lines from "Soundtrack"⁷ in Greg's first book, *Totem*:

Harvey, your car stereo left rhythms tinnitus patting
 My head, a diaphanous afro, as I gathered
 Steam in the glancing shafts of sad and angry light
 Playing about the purblind alley the idling
 Cruiser's fingers drumming alike
 Each wall uniform and alleged offender.

And only a few lines down, we get this: Yet I loved not you
 but your attentions thus I sing / Myself. And how know the
 man but for his rhythms?⁸

From its opening, "Soundtrack" goes on to shudder and sing through the complexities of friendship in mixed meter, a polyrhythmic expression of the profundities and limitations of a brotherhood without ties of blood. The poem's nine sections, marked by time stamps, make for virtuosic music; a flood of energy rushes behind the words, and yet we do not get the sense that it is only rhythm, only passion, only power that Pardlo wants to bring to the reader. He wants us to see Harvey, or at least the relationship

6 See: Brown, C., & Roach, M. (1955). *Clifford Brown and Max Roach*. EmArcy.

7 Cf. *Totem*, pp. 63-72.

8 And perhaps we're onto something with the idea of getting next to you. A preteen Greg Pardlo sings "I Wanna Get Next to You" into a tape recorder in the second stanza, struggling to imbue the words with meaning.

between Harvey and himself, as something true about the world, as something that *really happened*.

The category of the real, and the courage it takes to confront it, is central to Pardlo's artistic and intellectual work. One compromises with the real, hides from it sometimes, especially when it takes the form of a loved one, a family member, even a parent. Few parts of this world can be as real as our fathers and their limitations. Read Greg's memoir, *Air Traffic*. Read even the first paragraph of the introduction, and Greg's commitment to the real, in its bodily instantiation, will be apparent. Here, we might see philosophy, see the *Dialogues*, mocking this kind of work, warbling on about philosophy as concerned with the most fundamental truths, as indifferent to messy human realities. But on this point we must humbly disagree, and the *Dialogues* should know better. Philosophy in Greece has Socrates, the real man, the one who didn't spend enough time with his wife and kids, the one who drank the hemlock without putting up a fuss. Elsewhere, philosophy has figures like Hui Neng, Marcus Aurelius, Simone Weil, Kierkegaard, Zarathustra, Frantz Fanon, Edith Stein and many, many others, all of whom appear as real figures animating the work. Greg has returned to his father's life and death repeatedly over the course of four books. He refuses dissociation, idealization, and hagiography when discussing him. The same man who bought him Matchbox cars and discusses metaphors tells him to "get the stick out of [his] ass" when Greg talks metonymy. The poem "Convertible" recounts an intimacy only possible after death.

Closing the Gap

In "Wishing Well," the reader is given another moment of interpersonal truth, this one shared by relative strangers "[o]utside the Met." The man who approaches the poem's

character may or may not be homeless, but he is certainly ragged, and the effect of his question—"is this a wishing well?"—is the anxiety one feels when fielding pleas for spare change. Greg examines himself here as a middle-class American, one not immune—no amount of poetry, introspection, or care can make one immune—to the biases and habits undergirding class consciousness: pants with ragged hems signify a difference and perhaps an obligation. The revelation of the poem is that the fountain-side visitor isn't there to ask for anything but to give the gift of a wish—two pennies flung to the water, eyes shut tight, and hands held tighter. The gift of a wish becomes an excuse or opportunity to care about a moment spent with a person we do not know at all.

The empathy on display isn't the result of a deep analysis or the slow unfolding of a lifelong friendship. The two figures beside the well move next to one another in a flash that the ephemeral character cannot detract from its profundity. And of course, it's the *poet* who wants to hold on to the hand offered, as a means of extending the moment, in something like the way that writing the poem is an act of recognition allowing the moment to flow slowly through you once again. Writing becomes what Fanon called pursuing "something other than life" as part of a fight "for the birth of a human world . . . a world of reciprocal recognition."⁹ The moment is neither etiolated nor sharply delimited; it is vivified, dignified, greased up and sent running, become now less graspable, but truer and more inspiring than the unwritten events might have been.

Everything reads as true *and* bound to the concrete pains of human social life. In this way, Greg distinguishes himself from much of the surrealist poetry that has influenced his senses of rhythmic and imagistic possibility. Like Aimé Césaire or Paul Éluard, Pardlo has the ability to arrange images—visual images, sound images, scents, tastes, feelings—in complex and challenging sequences *but*

9 Cf. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 193.

at the same time to give the reader a story, a narrative, a meaning-structure which asserts itself as something more than just a musical experience or an evocative metaphor. Take the following line from “Giornata 10,” the closing poem of *Spectral Evidence*: Eluard writes, “the Earth / Is blue like an orange.” Watch it tremolo[.]

This paradoxical comparison, a translation of the title to Éluard’s *La Terre est bleue comme une orange*, confronts the reader with an impossible image but in the most overt of ways. As Éluard’s poem unfolds, we are treated to striking and sophisticated surrealist imagery—“wasps bloom green”—all of which is put to work in the service of an accomplished but straightforward love poem, a song sung to praise a woman’s beauty. In “Giornata 10,” Greg, in only a few lines, would give us a world that tremolos, a world that shakes *musically* as it spins, perhaps like a basketball on the finger of a Globetrotter. The “famous Negro athlete” he refers to in the opening of “Giornata 10” is almost certainly Kyrie Irving, who “doubts the planet is round and ripe,” and who perhaps stands in for a particularly social phenomenon, the contemporary move toward a mystical contrarianism, a paranoia taking hold in many cultural spaces shaped, in part, by a feeling of exclusion. A woman appears in the poem but late in the game, as the counterbalance to Kyrie. Pardlo’s woman does not enter like Éluard’s; she does not have “all the solar joys” lighting up her paths of beauty. Rather, she comes into the frame holding the butt end of a cigarette she wants to be free of. The final image of the poem (the book as well) is a sound-image, the smooth-on-the-ear swish of a basketball gliding through the net.

We can see *Totem* and *Spectral Evidence* perhaps as points of orientation, lodestars, in a poetic project that seeks revelation of a self that is in constant motion. We begin in *Totem* with an examination of a unique Black masculinity. We—for the moment—end with *Spectral Evidence*, a work

of recognition, almost a prayer, honoring femininity, with a focus on the Black woman. In the middle, we have *Digest*, a book so multifarious that it could only be inspired by the vertigo of family life (in Brooklyn). The book's title is appropriate in multiple senses; here are two: *Digest* takes inspiration from a wide variety of topics; *Digest* uses and demonstrates the human capacity to pull the world apart and make it nutrition.

Taking these three books together, we might see the overall project of the poet as roughly exhibitionist in character, a plea to be known, if not to be accepted. We are reminded that Pardlo has claimed that it's through rhythm that you might know a person. Yet, who knows better than the poet himself that there is *always* another rhythm to try out, always another degree of emphasis or twist on a phrase. It is for this reason that finishing a poem, or even a sentence, is inevitably an act of resignation or a recognition of an aesthetic mystery. One never says there's nothing more that could improve a line or that no possible changes could be made. One says "This is working," or "That's gorgeous" or (droopingly) "That's good enough." Another rhythmic possibility always lurks in the background. This is as true for a musician¹⁰ as it is for poets and philosophers. The question then becomes, if rhythm is infinite, and it's only through rhythm that the person-as-artist is known, how to ever completely know the person?

I take this last question to be at the heart of Gregs' praxis, and it determines his contribution as a poet/philosopher of the *self* and of *empathy*. You never get right next to anyone else, and no one gets right next to you, but you keep trying.

Pardlo, Parmenides, Levinas

Among the Presocratic philosophers, Parmenides is often invoked as representing an ontological perspective. Ontology means roughly an account or understanding of

10 Compare *Kind of Blue* to *Bitches Brew*.

being. Parmenides' most important and famous ontological doctrines were recorded in the form of a poem and are sometimes reduced to a single line from his *On Nature*: "For you cannot know what is not—that is impossible—nor utter it."¹¹ Parmenides represents at least two basic notions within the history of ideas: (1) there need be no sharp distinction between philosophy and poetry, and (2) knowledge is positive; we know about the world through experiencing and asserting what is, as opposed to what is not. The second of these doctrines has been the target of innumerable argumentative attacks over the last three thousand years or so. Thinkers from Plato himself to Jean-Paul Sartre have attempted to trouble or problematize Parmenides' ontological positivism and its apparent implications. Greg's poetry gives us a special insight into both Parmenidean doctrines. All three books deliver a highly personalized philosophy of human experience, which is positive in the sense that Greg always has an image, always an example or lapidary metaphor to engage the reader, especially when discussing "negative" phenomena like death, loss, and pain. One can look, in *Totem*, to the poem "On Emptying His House," in which the loss of a father, this pure negation, becomes a search through a closet of old suits. A flood of associations and reflections is set in motion with these lines, and we are left with the perennial reflection that death is not only the end of a life, it is a felt absence for those who remain, as well as the strangely and mysteriously meaningful acts that accompany honoring what once was.

Pardlo's works can be viewed as a response to philosophies of nothingness and nihilism, if not negation all told. This is important for us because, as Fanon says, "man is an affirmation," but "man is also a negation." No matter how affirmational our method becomes, we must maintain a "[n]o to man's contempt. No to the indignity of

11 Cf. Burnet, J. (1930). *Early Greek Philosophy*. A. & C. Black. pp. 172–176.

man. To the exploitation of man.”¹² As a Parmenidean poet, the author of *Totem*, *Digest*, and *Spectral Evidence* insists on bringing even the most abstract-seeming references and concepts right next to us, making them *present in the text*. His presentism registers as a *lust* for images. How does one improvise on the violence of quotation and Alfred North Whitehead simultaneously? Conjure a “Venetian carnival mask that obscures in order to license.” How about sex, multitudes, Deleuze, and Guattari? Produce “Quaker Parrots” in Brooklyn public spaces, make sure that “they’re chattering lines from Emma Lazarus; they’re trading fours on ‘Salt Peanuts,’” etc. Perhaps a bit of Augustine on the metaphysics of time? Discuss Prince and Corvettes, vehicles that are more “prosthesis than portmanteau.”¹³

Even when he begins a piece from a place of almost purely abstract interest, one in which “Self-effacing, the number zero stands” as a “window onto Nature’s abhorrent force,” we are still treated to images, concrete realities, *present feelings*, as in the creeping horror that ascends when a protagonist discovers that “the call is coming from the house.” Indeed, much of the work in *Digest* counsels us to see nothingness and nihilism as scary stories, spine-tingling distractions for the mind, elements of the psychic life that can take us out of presence only to remind us to keep searching for it. For, behind every nihilism, every adduced nothing, waits “Zeno’s arrow stitching the sky across a battlefield” or, most pitifully, a “pinball in the void between two bumpers of denotation.”¹⁴ Our experience, especially our aesthetic experience, always lands somewhere, giving us a deeper, enriched, or at least modified understanding of the world represented and the artistic self. These elements of method, which amount to a kind of aesthetic positivism,

12 And as always with outdated, gendered translations, we’ll substitute “human” for “man.” Cf. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 197.

13 Cf. “The Clinamen Improvisations” in *Digest*.

14 Cf. “Ghosts in the Machine: Synergy and the Dialogic System” in *Digest*.

lend themselves well to an artistic practice that resists marginalization and dehumanization in all of its forms. In seeking an honest expression of the self, Pardlo embraces a vivid and dignifying conversation with the other. This facet of his overall project is most overtly represented in the latest book.

Spectral Evidence is a haunted text. The spectral evidence referred to in the book's title was a form of testimony, admissible in late-seventeenth-century courts, that allowed for visions of devils and other spirits, even if—especially if—those giving the testimony were gifted with unique powers of spiritual sight. A witch, once aligned with the Devil in a certain way, would be given a specter, an evil and powerful double who could move through the world and serve the witch. Spectral evidence was seen as reliable in part because God's providence would not allow an innocent person to be represented by a specter. Spectral evidence stands as a metaphor for a social difference-making that has affected Black people and women throughout the history of America to the present day. It says, *If you were really good, you would not appear to be so evil*. Greg ends his prologue to the book by pointing a finger at himself: "As an African-American male, I have benefitted from the unearned privileges of patriarchy. . . . This book attempts to survey the damages of patriarchy from the perspective of one who is both its accuser and its perpetrator."

With this announcement, the text identifies itself as serious about the problems of domination and difference, as well as the hidden potentials that inhere in acts of self-discovery.

His work becomes explicitly empathetic in the broadest sense and partakes of an ethical concern in the deepest sense. It comes to resonate with the work of phenomenological philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, freedom, goodness, ethnicity, and the face-to-face encounter with the other are all linked, as is anxiety.

The encounter with the other means that I can honor, aid, degrade, or even destroy the other. All of these possibilities come into being with that encounter. This is freedom, but the cost of that freedom is an ethical awareness that manifests as anxiety—sometimes as haunting or even the Devil’s work.¹⁵ At its most ennobling, the Levinasian perspective teaches us that freedom, responsibility, and empathy are part and parcel of all we can know of goodness. At its most incriminating, the Levinasian ethic can, like a Dickensian or Morrisonian ghost, remind us of our many failures to answer the ethical call. The empathetic turn is vital to Greg’s overall artistic project because one cannot become known as a single disconnected entity; there are no monads in communicative life, or at least none that write legible poems. Thus, in singing himself, Pardlo will continue to sing with and through the other. The song of the other—be they the racialized, sexualized, ethnicized, classified, ableized, or otherwise differentiated or dehumanized other—is a song in an existential key. It’s a song that accepts the world as it is and pushes through, with fierce love and affirming curiosity, to find the truth in its music.

We can recall for a moment that Parmenides’ poem is a travel poem. Parmenides begins his text describing the break of day in a horse-drawn car. Before getting to the ever-so-deep questions of being and non-being, Parmenides takes the time to describe the sound of an axle and the sight of its frictional glow in the waning night. This mechanical introduction gives way to the introduction of the entity Parmenides is searching for, the entity who is the real *subject* of the poem: she’s a goddess. Parmenides is in fact surrounded by women, for he is led to the goddess by “maidens” who convince the deity to see him. It is from the goddess that Parmenides receives his doctrine against nothingness. The poem doesn’t stop there, however; many

15 We recall James Baldwin here, writing, “I could not, out of hand, arbitrarily sneer at the notion of demonic possession.” *Collected Essays*, p. 567

fragments exist and seem to exemplify early attempts at cosmology, epistemology, embryology, and so on: “Thou shalt know, too, the heavens that surround us, whence they arose and how Necessity took them and bound them to keep the limits of the stars.”

Levinas gives the feminine aspect a privileged place in the development of our subjectivity. *Totality and Infinity* opens a line of philosophical inquiry into social and ethical experience, taking the other as an infinity I can encounter but never finish or fully subsume. The other can never be totalized by a theory or understanding, never seen from every possible angle or known to the last bitter particle of their being. For Levinas, the openness of our relation to the other, the way we experience the other, is fundamental to our experience of *anything*. The ethical situation that comes with our encounter with the other is a condition of our having experience *as such*. And since the first encounter is with the face of the mother, the feminine aspect of our subjective lives is foundational not only to a kind of knowledge, as the goddess is for Parmenides (and Diotima of Mantinea is for Socrates), but for an experience of dwelling in the world. It’s not clear from the pages of *Spectral Evidence* the degree to which Pardlo is Levinasian, but he is certainly something *more* than Parmenidean. The experience of getting next to the other and getting the other next to you is one that depends in profound ways on what is feminine, construed historically, phenomenologically, psychically, structurally, institutionally, and spiritually.

How then are femininity and the concrete concerns of womanhood under the sweep of patriarchy understood in Greg’s latest work? Take the following excerpt from “Occult,” a poem ostensibly about the Salem Witch Trials, but which focuses on Tituba, the woman and slave whose difference and subjection became cast spells over her enslavers:

bird-watcher. Dear Nemesis, let her feed the court
a few names from his register—a taste of her
truth, her *mise en abyme*, her one hell that calls forth
another. With no standing on her own behalf,
let her sit in judgment.¹⁶

Greg is talking about much more than the historical significance of the Salem Witch Trials, more than the spooky character of social contagion, more than the overlooked power of the invisibilized other. He is writing about a woman caught in our history whose marking as the exoticized and demoniac other is precondition for the incitement of the witch trials in Salem. Tituba is a slave whose split essence menaces the dominant, the slave-making, social imaginary. Tituba is human, but as a slave she is profaned, having a kind of inverted humanity, like a living death, which requires that she do work only a human could do—caring for the young—while simultaneously being denied the recognition afforded any human being. We can interpret Tituba's position as like that of the unborn spirit, the conjured or invoked entity, without lineage, without familial bond, valued as a trapped djinn, but no more. This is, perhaps, an interpretation in line with the social imaginary of a young modernity, a period and place in which the hauntings of capital were adolescent and those of the monotheisms were more than mature. If so, so. Pardlo prays to Nemesis, the three-headed Hecate, to Mami Wata that this subject position of Tituba's, bloody and traumatic as it is, engender a dialectical movement, a pandemonium making ultimately a god of a slave. A god whose truth is in the ethical power of a killing curse. We can look here at Greg's use of the term "*mise en abyme*," which means something like "put in the abyss" and which refers to recursive formations, infinite series, Droste effects, copies within copies within copies.

16 *Spectral Evidence*, p. 15.

Hell and Structure

What is slavery if not a hell, an abyss? And what is slavery meant to do for the master and his family? Create paradise. The plantation is, for the master, an earthbound heaven, like Jefferson's Monticello, a realm of production and delight, of endless pleasure for body, mind, and spirit. One is served there, on the plantation. One's concubines are also one's cooks. One's cooks are also the cleaners of one's latrines, the harvesters of crops, the teachers and wet nurses of children. One builds structures indicative of one's semi-divine station. Here is a partial description of the Atkinson-Smith plantation house in Johnston County, North Carolina:

The center hall, thus interrupted, is an impressively spacious one. Centered in the ceiling is an elaborate plaster medallion, a swirling composition of acanthus and other sinuous foliate and floral motifs. This is framed by a square outline of egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel plaster moldings, and anthemions appear in each corner. A wide molded plaster cornice outlines the entire hall ceiling, and the anthemions recur at the corners and where the stair well interrupts the molding. . . . An unusual mantel occurs in the front west room; it is a three-part one, with a tall frieze area. Upon the end blocks and center tablet are faceted panes in very high relief, rising to points like pyramids. . . . To the rear of the house are a number of outbuildings, including a barn and several tobacco barns. The somewhat-altered barn is said once to have housed race horses.¹⁷

It sounds nice. What is not mentioned in this architecturally faultless description is what other kinds of "outbuildings"

17 See: <https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/nr/JT0001.pdf>.

may once have populated the grounds, and who—besides racehorses—may have been housed there. Tituba’s power, as invoked and described in Greg’s poetry, is to turn such plaster-molded heavens into abysses, earth-bound expressions of hell. Tituba becomes a god whose divinity is given through her speech. This is what happens when the Black woman speaks. For those of us who are interested in the sociopolitical condition of the United States of America, we might want to reflect on how often Black women have saved the country, and just why they might be inclined to continue doing so. We can recall from Pardlo’s lines that Tituba’s situation was one in which she had “no standing on her own behalf.” What became of this position of social invisibility—an anoptic vantage, a sniper’s nest from which the vulnerabilities of a slave-owning population, the blood-stained perpetrators and the complicit—might be exploited. And yet, we must acknowledge that Tituba was beaten into her confession, and that we know very little about her ancestry. Was Tituba a Native woman, a Black slave, from Barbados, from Haiti? Tituba was imprisoned, lived through a period of sadistic questioning, and promptly left Salem and the historical record. Maryse Condé’s novel takes an ironic stance with respect to the *history* of a figure like Tituba. For her book, Tituba needed to be a mixed-race woman, the product of an English sailor’s act of rape. The historian, when treating Tituba’s ancestry and ethnicity, is left with little more¹⁸ than erudite shrugging. Philosophers can do something more than this; poets still more. Greg’s work recognizes the invisibilized population as rich, multidimensional, given in moments of intense specificity, but also as defiant in its condition vis-à-vis the dominant power structure. So that, if the master’s house is in need of haunting, we are here to call up the ghosts.

In *Spectral Evidence*, there are three poems named “Theater Selfie,” two named “Nunsplotation,” and three named “Erasure.” The “Erasure” poems are fascinating

18 Although this “more” *matters*.

in that they contain no apparent erasures. They function as found art objects whose positions on the page and in the collection invite the reader to reflect on erasure and invisibility in various ways. Two of the poems are bracketed—the titles appear within square brackets—and one is not. This bracketing is perhaps a nod to the phenomenological epoché, the deliberate act of eschewing previously gathered knowledge about the world to engage in more open and more radical forms of description and analysis. The epoché is methodological wonder. Such an interpretation draws our attention to the un-bracketed “Erasure” poem. Why should it be un-bracketed when the others are bracketed? The poem is a page of text beginning with the fragment “ing.”¹⁹ The page discusses the condition of pre- and post-emancipation slaves from the perspective of George Winston, writing in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* in 1901. Winston talks about the industriousness and utility of the slaves of his former household, slaves whose effort paid for his father’s education (they worked in the college dining hall while George’s father toiled over his books). One of these slaves, Emily, was once caught wearing her master’s suit, examining herself in the mirror. Winston describes the incident as an example of the family’s permissiveness and gentle treatment of the slaves: Emily was not punished. In fact, Winston continues his anti-confession by asserting that his father’s slaves were never punished, or at least he did not remember any punishments. Except for the children, as of course is *natural*, right? Aren’t all children treated to the switch?

Winston’s text (the reader will recall that *all* of this happens within a single page) goes on to discuss the state of the “Negro” after emancipation, how the plow and hoe could be left idle, how meetings “in the streets” could be had by former slaves, who could spend their days in

19 This invites us to reflect on the concept of *continuation* as the text develops.

frivolous talking, dancing, fighting, and so forth. The reader of *Spectral Evidence* is left to imagine how Winston might have continued elaborating on how easy it was to live in the South, how mild the climate was, and so on.

The text makes for an interesting and provocative reminder of the White imaginary during and after emancipation, of the rationalizing and self-congratulatory onanism common to that time. There are moments of erasure here almost too glaring to point out: the erasure of the cruel treatment of enslaved people; the rotten, unintentional irony of calling two slaves “exceedingly privileged characters,” whatever physical punishment was actually inflicted on Emily for wearing her master’s clothes; the extraordinary precarity of post-emancipation slaves and the cruel pressures of a labor *market* newly formed.

But we can go back for a moment and think of Emily. I am not willing to take Winston at his word that she wasn’t punished, but whichever beating or scolding she received could only be an addendum to the torment one undergoes in being *found out*, discovered in the exploration of an impossible desire.²⁰ This is not to assert that Emily wanted to *be* her master, or even that she was *playing* master. We can see the symbol of the suit, the drape of the tails, the cut of the lapels, as incidental to the act. What matters here is the erasure. The moment of play in front of the mirror is a moment of viewing oneself gone, of seeing the world without an Emily. The “new sensation” Emily “enjoys” is a picture of a world without slaves like her. The shame of it, and the truest punishment for the act, was that to find such an erasure she had to dance in her master’s clothes.

Progress

I once gave myself the following question to chew on: What is philosophy made of? This might be called a mereological

20 In this sense, the poem is an interesting companion to the second piece in Pardlo’s “Essay on Fidelity.”

question, because it involves the theory of parts and wholes. I worked on this for some time, and I ultimately came to the conclusion that philosophy is made of philosophers. And this distinguishes it from other disciplines, perhaps even from poetry. If there is a greatness to philosophy, something to be held onto despite everything—despite its waste and grinding difficulty and foolishness—that greatness lives somewhere in the instantiated wonder, somewhere in the value that wonderment both generates and confirms in human beings. In Greg's work, one is continually reminded what not only words can do but what ideas can do, that the sound of a cigarette in a puddle can be the same as a basketball through a net, that one's father might also be Darth Vader (and that's . . . okay), that a set of endnotes can provoke laughter or revelation, that sometimes the most profound erasure hides the very mark of concealment, that holy women float, that ecstasy is earthly and not, that the family is a field of tender trying, and much more besides. These ideas are philosophical at the levels of theory, praxis, and constitution. They are ideas that describe being human while simultaneously developing and enriching our humanity. I'm not sure that Greg would call that progress, or that he would be comfortable with any proposition that suggests a strong relationship between art and political change. But something is happening here. There is a movement, even if its scope and sweep are impossible for us to grasp completely. There may be no progress in the social or political fields, but if a discipline is made of us, when we move, it moves. That may not be "progress," but it's not nothing.

The reading that I've tried to provide of Pardlo's work speaks not just to his creative contribution, but also to what philosophy's aspirations ought to be. A poet can be a philosopher, can be a musician, can be a conjurer, can be an explorer of the outer reaches of human concern. A philosopher can take the clearing of the mists of empathy-

experience as an intellectual struggle. This writing can, then, in a small way, act as a call to the humanities, to put empathy at the forefront of our intellectual and cultural endeavors. A filling of our relation to the other is required, as well as resisting the reductionist urge to nihilate and exclude the other, so that they are present for us. Are these mere acts of projection? No. The other is never totalized, never complete or completely understood.

I recall the *Dialogues* in their menace. Our human world has belched up millions of lovers of wisdom since they were written. There's no shortage of philosophically minded persons. They walk our streets and haunt our archives. Even in the formal academic sense, untold numbers of readers have searched the *Dialogues* for meaning. I've always thought, like many others, that as Plato aged he became less interested in his teacher Socrates and more consumed with abstract theoretical discussions. If this is true, then I do not take it to be progress. And perhaps it's true that Plato might have written for another thousand or ten thousand years and never gotten quite perfectly *next* to his character Socrates—even if Socrates was only, in the end, a way for the philosopher to explore himself. So now we read Greg Pardlo, recognizing that he is in the middle of his career, and ask how much self is left in store. A lot, I'd guess. Given his own reading of the self, there should be much more to come.

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